

The background of the cover is a dark blue gradient. In the center, there is a stylized city skyline composed of several dark blue buildings of varying heights and shapes. Some buildings have small white squares representing windows. A single red dot is visible in the upper right portion of the sky.

# Milieu

A Step by Step Tutorial

An Exciting Approach  
to writing

by Tom Gnagey

Follow the author as he develops the novel  
Big Guy and Little Bro:  
The Mystery of the Barina Ruby

# **Milieu:**

**A setting driven approach  
to writing novels and short stories**

[Including a min-novel,  
*Big Guy and Little Bro:*  
*The Mystery of the Barina Ruby*

by

**Tom Gnagey**

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## **Dedication**

To writers,  
young and old,  
who want to explore  
a different approach  
to writing.

- Tom Gnagey

## PREFACE

This is a tutorial on writing a book using what I call the *Milieu Method*. In it, I will write a short, short, novel and explain most every step along the way – how I come to do what I do. We'll look at what decisions need to be made and how I go about making them. It is my intention to let the reader follow what goes on inside my head as I begin a project and work through the process of writing. You will experience the questions I ask myself as I craft characters, descriptions, and the form sentences should take. You will hear me through the process of choosing the 'best' words for various situations and places. You will see how I struggle to find the best modifiers to succinctly create the meaning I intend. You will witness how I go about establishing characters and maintaining them true to themselves in the things they do, the language patterns they use, and the ways through which they relate to each other. You will feel my distress when I choose to delete passages or phrases that I clearly love but which I realize are unnecessarily redundant or are not exactly right to produce what is needed. You will watch as I work to make the piece flow easily for the reader. This always involves parsing unnecessary words that tend to increase the reader's effort. You'll see how I systematically vary sentence length, structure, and voice, and the devices I invent to segue from passage to passage. You will come to understand that *writing is mostly revising* and it is in the quality of the revisions that a good story can become great (or at least, greater!).

Writing is not just sitting down with pen in hand or laptop in lap and writing. Each word must be THE word. Every description must be THE description. Every piece of dialog must be in THE right form – structure and vocabulary and degree of clarity or ambiguity – for the specific character.

I fully intend to have a wonderful time. I hope this excursion into the working mind of writing will be instructive and enjoyable. (I tend to take undue pleasure in my mistakes and personal foibles. I hope you will join me.)

- Tom Gnagey,

Pennames include:

Garrison Flint (mysteries)

David Drake (children and teen)

Bonnie Brewster (family romance)

Marc Miller (Ozark ghost stories)

Grampa Gray (fun for seniors)

G. F. Hutchison (psychology)

**SECTION ONE:  
The Necessary Background.**

**And We're OFF!**

*As he entered the small pawnshop, Carl's focus was clear for the first time; he would find the ruby ring and return it to its owner.*

And there you have it – the full and sufficient starting place for a short story, a lengthy novel, or anything in between when approaching your writing with the Milieu Method. Informally I have explained the approach as laying out at least one character's backstory (what led up to the current story), knowing the outcome (usually, at least sort of), putting that character into a setting (milieu), and letting him go at it with other characters – added as needed – in the search for the story's *end*.

I know many writers who go to great pains to outline every aspect – chapters, even paragraphs – of a piece before they begin writing. For many, that works and may, in fact, produce a higher quality product. It runs contrary to my temperament, I guess. As a writer I enjoy experiencing a story unfold as I write it – just like I enjoy experiencing it unfold as I read a story. I like to see the characters define themselves, take on lives of their own, and then do what such characters have to do on their way to the finish line. Do I sometimes set up outlines to assure an orderly progression? I do, though only in very general terms and only after I have placed the character into the setting (milieu). In writing a mystery, for example, I plan (outline) backwards from the conclusion twist – the final clue – through the essential progression of clues to the beginning. Then, I begin writing from the 'front'.

More formally, I stipulate several typically necessary aspects of the Milieu Method (which we will revisit and expand during the course of this book):

1) *Starting place:*

Describe to yourself *one primary character* and his backstory. (In the example presented in the opening words above, this would be Carl with his

story still to be determined. Although we already know it has something to do with his returning a ruby ring to someone.)

#### 2) *Outcome:*

How the situation that develops will be resolved. It is the point in the story where you will leave the reader. Initially this may be just the kernel of an idea, which will develop as the writing proceeds. For now let's say Carl returns 'the ring' (still a nebulous item) at which point some wonderful twist must happen. We will keep thinking to create that special moment. [An alternative ending could be that Carl can't find the ring and must face its owner with the truth – whatever that may be. I sort of like that angle.] We'll keep both possibilities in mind and see in which direction the story grows.

#### 3) *The Setting (Milieu):*

The physical setting must be established. This may be as confining as a mansion as is the case in many of my Raymond Masters Mystery novels – penname Garrison Flint (see *The Butler Did It! Or The Case of the Cryptogram Murders*) or as expansive as the whole world (as in another of my novels (*The Box*), or Europe and the Mediterranean (*The Strap*), or Brazil (*The Map*).

You may set your story *primarily* in one place (the café in, *Crossroad*) while allowing characters to roam the surrounding area as required.

Initially define the setting quite specifically in your mind and then work to keep the story within those confines. It creates a snug story, which is comfortable for the reader (and *reader comfort is one of the keystones for a writer's success*).

In the case of this story let's set it in a fairly well circumscribed district of a large city, which buffers between the poor section and the middle class section. My initial thought is to have the pawnshop become the focus with the surrounding area used as needed. We'll see what develops.

#### 4) *Characters:*

Begin with one, clearly defined character with a backstory which is strongly relevant to what will transpire in our new story. Let's give Carl a minimal backstory at this point so we can begin writing this new piece. (More below) To do this you will need to ask yourself some questions:

*Age:* Let's make him thirty. It's a good age for a character in general fiction. (This is *not* set in stone as you see what the developing story requires.)

*Personal traits* (outstanding personality characteristics): Let's make him quiet and reserved so if he should need to become a hero in the story we can add some intense drama. Let's make him kind, otherwise he probably wouldn't be on a quest to return a ring to someone. So, he is quiet, reserved, and kind. Smarts help a searching character like this so let's make him smart – but uneducated – always an interesting set of poles for a character. We decide to put him to work – undercover, so to speak – in the pawnshop so we need to know how he can come to do that – leave his other work or does he have other

work? Here's an idea that would add an interesting twist to the plot. Make him a second story robber so he doesn't have to punch a time clock. It also gives him a background for knowing the value and such of jewels and other frequently pawned items, which helps him get his job at the shop. (Or, maybe the reverse. He has worked at the shop since he was a kid so he learned about item values thereby knowing what to steal and what to leave behind. We'll wait and see how the story develops.)

SO, he is quiet and reserved (as many second story burglars actually are), and kind (not into violent crime and may steal to support somebody special – that can be worked out later), smart, and a thief (which often implies the mentality: "They have so much and I have so little I deserve to have some of their stuff.") Those provide enough basic personality pillars with which to begin. We may decide to add more traits later or we may see that the story is requiring us to modify one or more of them.

*Backstory:* How did Carl get to the point of wanting or needing to retrieve this particular ring? It must have belonged to somebody who is or becomes special to him in some way, or somebody who has the power to really hurt him if it isn't returned. I dislike violence (says the author of twenty some murder mysteries – hmmm?). Let's make it an old lady – an *eccentric* old woman who fancies herself *Lady Hamilton* of some royal bloodline. Delusional, but harmless, perhaps! Keep that in mind for a possible twist at the end. How does Carl become a thief? There are so many possibilities we just have to choose one – make it one that does not run contrary to his basic personality traits. That is, he can't be robbing because he hates people in general or likes to see people suffer. That wouldn't fit with the guy we have described. He could have come from a poor home – no father, so has had siblings to help support. (I like that for the inner tension it could create between the 'nice guy' and 'thief' concepts.) We need something to define him physically, which often relates in some meaningful way to a character's personality. Ah! An idea! He could have fallen from a building he was trying to enter and rob – as a young teen – and was crippled as a result – walks with a limp from a stiffened knee. With no education he had a difficult time getting jobs because of the handicap – couldn't do day labor or stand at assembly lines for long periods. I'm beginning to think that having him younger may fit things better as they are developing. Consider making him early twenties. It gives the possibility he still has siblings to support – a major motivator that can become a point of struggling within himself if he begins having second thoughts about the ethics of his profession. Why might that be? Let's say he entered Lady Hamilton's apartment by mistake thinking it was the rich, snobbish, widow next door. He stole the ring. Later, discovering that Lady was poor and then finding out how precious the ring had been to her – a hand me down from mothers to daughters for generations in her family – he decides he must find it and return it.

THERE, we have a pretty good backstory – something I *didn't* have twenty minutes ago. As we write, some aspects may need to be altered but we will cross those bridges when they loom on our horizon. You might try this exercise. Go through the past paragraphs and change the decisions so you have the makings for a very different story. You must keep several elements: the missing ring, the pawnshop, and Carl. Other than that go at it! *Here*, we will continue to develop the story from the elements described above. As we write this story, *you* can write a very different one based on the same milieu, if you want to.

What have we accomplished up to this point? We have defined the general limits of the setting and placed our main character into it. We have established Carl's backstory and have two possible end goals for the story (can return the ring or can't). As in life, we all have end goals. Sometimes we accomplish them. Sometimes we don't. In this case we will just wait and see how things materialize – how the characters work things out.

Now we need to consider auxiliary characters. The pawnshop will need an owner. Gender? We need to describe his or her one or two outstanding characteristics. If this person comes to play only a minor role the character can remain shallow and even one dimensional. If it moves into a bigger role it will need to be rounded out with several dimensions.

What if we make the owner a man to balance out Carl's mother, sisters, and the old lady's influences? He needs a name – make it easy to form, comfortably pronounced, possessives - Jasper (Jasper's) rather than Jess (Jess's) or Cortez (Cortez's). I'll settle for Jasper at this point. Let's make him a no-nonsense, shotgun under the counter, take nothin' from nobody, sort. (A powerful contrast to the Carl we have described.) In stature let's make him big and contrast that to Carl's small stature, which I'd think would be an asset for a second story guy. Age? Middle aged (at least as our starting point.)

So, we have Carl and Jasper. The ring's owner is an old lady we'll call Lady Hamilton because that is what she calls herself (smile) and the supposed royal connection gives us things to play with along the way. Not even sure what they might be at this point. It will become yawn-producing boredom if we always refer to her with that *entire*, long, name – Lady Hamilton – so let's form a convention to often refer to her simply as Lady or The Lady. 'Ham' and 'Ton' (*Ham-il-ton*) both seem out of place. They might *not* be for a chubby nine year old boy, however. (See how it fits, feels and sounds, as you write, but be consistent to avoid confusion for the reader.) At the risk of offending AARP, we may, sometimes, refer to her as 'the old lady' – provided she is the only significant older female character. (Who knows who may show up? I love it!)

I think we now have our three main characters. There will undoubtedly be other 'momentary' characters as we go along. Those are the folks that play a necessary role in a moment of the story – waitress, cop, customer, shop keeper, etc – but don't require careful characterization. Carl's mother may or may not



come to be such a momentary character. In fact, she may never appear except by reference. (By 'appear' I mean enter into dialog.) We'll see. In the milieu approach there needs to be lots of dialog so the characters can work things out with each other and demonstrate who they are. Therefore, Carl needs somebody to talk with in a personal way so there will be a voice for his thoughts. Maybe that will be Jasper, although if Carl is talking about thieving it wouldn't be a good idea to use his boss at a pawnshop as a sounding board. He may need a new character – a girlfriend or a fellow thief. Perhaps, Lady. Hmm? This will be one of those wonderful surprises that just pops up when we trust our story to the Milieu Method.

We now have our main character and two subordinate characters. As yet we have given only bare bones characterization to Lady. Not to worry. That will come as we play with her. It may end up being the stereotypical, eccentric, old lady. Depends on how much thinking we want the reader to have to do. Stereotypes make for easy – if something less than enthralling – reading. We have our major and minor settings in place. We have the backstory. It is essential to present that backstory early – immediately and succinctly in a short story and almost immediately in a short novel (150 to 225 pages). It can linger on into the story a bit further in a long novel. In novels, I typically head for 200 pages – a one or two evening read – unless they are special purpose novels like *The Box*, *The Strap*, and *The Map* (wide-ranging, philosophic, romps, between 350 and 450 pages).

*We will soon be ready to begin writing and see what happens. What fun!!!!* (The excitement, by the way, needs to emanate naturally from the phrases rather than being added artificially by four exclamation points!!!!)

First, let me describe one variation on the Milieu Method. Rather than pre-establishing a *character* to be thrust into a situation (milieu), the writer can begin by establishing a *situation* into which characters will be inserted as required. The opening paragraph presented at the beginning of this chapter would necessarily be different in the case of a *situation*. It could read something like this:

*The key to the loss and recovery of the personally precious antique ring would be discovered within the walls of the small pawnshop at Ash and South 22<sup>nd</sup> Avenue.*

[Compare this with the first rendering. See how it is situation-heavy where the first is character-heavy.]

Then, the author goes on to determine what characters are necessary to execute the developing course of the story. It is a subtle difference and the writing proceeds in essentially the same way once started.

Let me provide an example: I once came upon a wonderful little waterfall

cascading gently into a secluded pond in a large woods. It was surrounded by tall old oak trees several of which overhung the pond. There was a high, gradually receding, rock ledge along one side and a gentle grassy slope opposite it. I was taken by the setting and began thinking what characters would be a wonderful fit to the scene. What kind would you choose? I chose boys in summer using it as their swimming hole and their private place to talk, share ideas, and dream together about the future. It was, you see, story material *led* by the setting – the milieu. It could have been the special place an old man and his grandson used for their private, happy times together, fishing. I could have fantasized a cave behind the waterfall and made it into a pirate’s hide-a-way in the mid 1700s. Any of those ideas would be situation or setting driven stories. (Eventually, with some modifications from the real place, it became a novel for middle grade readers, *Secrets of the Hidden Valley* (David Drake).

During much of the rest of this book I will inter-mix the actual writing and the thoughts I have that drive the words and phrases and story. **The story will be set in boldface type.** My thoughts will be in regular face. I hope this format makes it a simple matter to reread entire book passages for flow and content without having to be interrupted by my thoughts, and to search my thoughts without having the story copy get in your way.

Let me now ramble on just a bit concerning my writing style. I hope you will establish your own. I try to write dialog the way I believe each character would speak it. That often means writing in phrases or run-on sentences or statements punctuated with question marks because a question was implied in the speaker’s tone. I attach identifying speaker’s names to phrases (“Bla, bla, bla ,” *Jerry said.*) *only* as frequently as is necessary to keep the parties straight during the conversation. Dialog phrases may be exchanged a half dozen times without names attached so long as the flow logically indicates the speaker. It saves the reader a lot of time and reduces the boring, if not aggravating, repetitive ‘*he said, she said, Garfunkle said*’ problem that hinders the easy flow. By the way, ‘he said’ and ‘she asked’ are as fancy as you typically need to get. Identifying speaker phrases such as, ‘he alleged’, ‘she proposed’, ‘Betty uttered’, and ‘Sam articulated’, wear poorly and are strictly “B” level writing. An occasional use of some other phrase may be appropriate if it necessarily adds meaning, clarification, or intent to the phrase. Just don’t get *uncomfortable* about using the tried and true, “Gary *said,*” Gary says.

A writer friend of mine calls me, “Dasher,” (affectionately, I assume). The reference is not to the famous companion of the red garbed, jolly little old elf, and in my mid-seventies now it surely does not describe the wild clip at which I speed along the sidewalks. It refers to my frequent use of the dash (-). I intend that my reader will soon come to understand that information between dashes is a signal for them to say, “Here’s an explanation that will make my job as the reader, easier.” It is a device I use to set off clarifications and related information

or reminders of things previously presented. I know, commas and semicolons were invented to serve those very functions, but there are so many of them used in a variety of ways sprinkled about on every page that I prefer the dash to perform this *special* function.

(As to the *Dasher* thing: I *did* recently beat an Earth-bound, baby, robin down six sidewalk squares! I danced with joy! Well, at least I *thought* about dancing with joy – from my seat on the park bench – recuperating from the ordeal – as the fiendish, insufferable, little bird, pecked – vulture like – at my shoe as if knowing I wasn't about to expend the necessary energy to swish him away. Can it be there is some universally recognized aroma attached to 'old'?)

The words in italics in that last paragraph suggest another preference of mine. From time to time (some would say, *often*) I put words in *italics* when that clarifies the intonation or emphasis or intention of a phrase – suggests *my* intended meaning. Examples will riddle the text that follows so I feel no compunction to further illustrate the point here. Well, maybe one. "He said he was a policeman." "He *said* he was a policeman." My intent in the second rendering is to suggest some doubt that he may be a policeman, which is far less easily evident in the first.

In some pieces I use the grammar of my intended reader rather than that found in textbooks. Usually it is employed to give a passage a more pleasant or comfortable ring or feel and (Shudder!) often involves dangling a few unsuspecting participles and ending the occasional phrase with a preposition – for which on more than one occasion I have been teased *about*.

I began writing professionally by preparing scripts for the old radio dramas (Paladin, Gun Smoke, The Lone Ranger, Space Cadets). In that kind of writing we used *lots* of commas to help actors read the scripts with proper phrasing. The performers often had not looked at the scripts until live air time so they needed all the help they could get. So, when you find an extra comma (or seven) write it off to an old man's early career training – HI HO, SILVER, AWAY! (Historical note of possible interest: Those radio scripts were written in all CAPS.)

One more and I'll let it go. I use the standard quotation marks (“”) to indicate speakers' words. I use what I call the single quote mark – the apostrophe (') – to indicate both a special use of a word and private thoughts a person is having. 'I sometimes wonder,' he thought, 'if the ghost of Adam is 'really' my friend.'

As more *Tomisms* surface I will point them out. (I also enjoy creating new words when they bring humor or clarification. They become like a secret code – a bond – between author and reader.)

A book critic who once reviewed one of my novels wrote me a personal note. It said, "Once I gave up the idea that all writing has to conform to *my* grammar and expectations for style, I relaxed about it and thoroughly enjoyed the flow and easy *readalibility* of your book. Even 'bitter old' critics – like 'me' –

can learn a thing *or two* – I guess.”

I place this final concept at the end of the introduction to underscore its absolute importance and necessity. *Always begin with the philosophy.* Know the underlying, value-based, message you want to convey. People are good. People are bad. People must be helpful to each other. Think only of yourself. Destroy all enemies. Turn enemies into friends. Take revenge. Life is hopeless. Life is hope-filled. And so on.

Your philosophy WILL come through, so make a special point of getting to know yours ahead of time. If it is inconsistent in your writing, the story will become strained, disjointed, and uncomfortable. When you become momentarily stumped about how to proceed in your story, just recall your philosophy and you will soon be on your way again. (You simply ask: *How does my philosophy have to handle this?*)

My underlying philosophy, for example, begins with the proposition that human beings have the potential for both good and evil. Unlike any other known species in the known universe, however, mankind can choose to live according to his good side. Doing that, helps create a positive, growth producing, quality life for all of us and *that* is essential if mankind is to survive as a species in safety, comfort, and stature. I believe that life is all about neighbors altruistically helping neighbors.

This doesn't mean I don't have bad guys, but they never win in my pieces. When my good guys win they take no pleasure in inflicting revenge against their foes – *that*, says my philosophy, never solves problems or improves the quality of life for mankind as a whole. (Two things that are very important to me).

So, I say this to you: Know the underlying philosophy you intend to demonstrate in your writing *before* you even begin thinking about plots, milieus, or characters. (If stipulating such a personal philosophy poses an initial problem you might want to read books such as, *How to be Deep Down Forever Happy* or *Ripples* – two of mine. There are lots of others out there that deal with establishing personal philosophies.)

One final story and I'll lay this chapter to rest. As a junior high age boy, one of my foster sons once found himself snowed in at home for a long, four day, weekend. He decided it was time he found out what this guy wrote about so he came into my study and selected a half dozen of my books more or less at random. He cloistered himself in his room for the next ninety or so hours only surfacing for food and Mountain Dew. (It would have been *really* nice if he had taken time to work in a shower!) At the end of his read-a-thon he returned the books to me. His very insightful comment was this: “You know, Tom, you've only ever really written one book; you've just written it in lots of different ways.”

He was, of course, tuning in on the underlying philosophic message I try to convey. My respect for him grew measurably that morning.





## SECTION TWO: Writing the Novel

### Part One

As we begin to write this new short novel, three major decisions remain to be made: the book title, the length of each finished chapter, and how to handle chapter headings – just numbers or numbers and titles. It is important to set a typical chapter length. It helps the reader establish their reading plan – one chapter a night – four? There is no magic formula. Chapters are usually shorter for younger readers. This is not for young readers. I'm going to head for 10 to 12 pages which will make it an easy book to pick up as time allows and still not cause problems for the reader who wants to cozy into a comfortable big chair and finish it off in one long evening.

We don't have to know either of the other things at the outset – book title or chapter headings (or not). If a good chapter title pops to mind during the writing we may go back and fill it in tentatively. We need a working title to simplify the process of saving copy on the computer (or in the good ol' manila file folder if you prefer the old fashioned way of *really* 'writing' your novel). Since a catchy title has not yet emerged for me, I will simply call it *Carl*. As possibilities come to mind, I'll add them to the upper left corner of the first page (where you always put your name, copyright © notice, and starting date for your protection. At least it feels like protection!) As to copy style, most publishers prefer 1 ½ inch margins all around and double spacing. In this era of computer word processing it is less important since all that can be changed to meet individual requirements in a flash.

Let's begin writing. I'll use the opening lines suggested earlier. They may be changed or even replaced in later revisions. Remember, *writing* is mostly *revising*. Unlike Shakespeare (who is fabled to have never changed a word once it hit the paper – which may explain a whole lot to high school literature students!), in *my* first drafts I only intend to lay in the story. From time to time I

belabor a phrase or paragraph to ‘finish’ it – ‘polish’ it – but such stops often interrupt the story flow for me. I don’t dawdle over the precision of words the first time through, either. Time for that later. (Praise be to *MS Word’s* thesaurus! Who’d have thought Bill Gates knew that many words!)

While revising, look for and delete *all* the unnecessary words and phrases regardless of how much you love them. One of a writer’s top technical jobs is to make reading easy – to make the words flow in almost predictable, structural, fashion for the reader. Of course, each writer wants to establish his own style but even so, make a conscious effort to make the vocabulary, word flow, and rhythm, comfortable.

So, what were those opening phrases?

## CHAPTER ONE

**As he entered the small pawnshop, Carl’s focus was clear for the first time; he would find the ruby ring and return it to its owner.**

What have we accomplished so far? We have provided the main character’s name, the setting (in at least a general sense – I think I’m going to broaden that) and have suggested the gist of the plot. The ‘store’ becomes immediately ‘cozy’ with the addition of the modifier, ‘small’. Had we wanted to establish a colder atmosphere we could have used ‘cavernous pawnshop’ or ‘unpleasantly musty pawnshop’ instead. We have also indicated some inner problem for Carl by talking about how – as the story opens – his focus had become *clear*, which suggests that for some reason it had *not* been clear in the past. Not bad for essentially one sentence. In order to specify the setting more precisely I’m going to try the addition of a few words that will give the reader the sense they are somewhere deep inside a city. Readers like to know where they are. Let’s try it again.

**As he entered the small pawnshop at the corner of Ash Boulevard and 72<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, Carl’s focus was clear for the first time; he would find the ruby ring and return it to its owner.**

See how that little addition suggests ‘city’ without just coming out and saying ‘city’. The word ‘boulevard’ and making the Avenue a high number provide depth to the part of the city with which we are immediately concerned. Had we wanted to indicate a small, Midwestern, town we might have selected, *Main and Maple*, instead.

Next, we need to expand – give some meat to the bones – we established at the outset. We move to a second paragraph.

**The three concrete steps leading down to the store presented some problem for Carl and his stiff right leg, the aftermath of a three-story fall**



**when he was twelve. As he inserted the key he glanced inside through the large windows where a variety of newly pawned products were on display. The morning sun was just beginning to bath the area from between the tall buildings to the east, giving a special gleam to the large, golden, letters on the door – Jasper’s Pawnshop.**

Let’s examine that paragraph to see what we tried to accomplish and what modifications may seem appropriate. We have begun to expand the physical description of the shop’s exterior – sunken a bit from the sidewalk (a city feature familiar to most readers), large glass windows, a gaudy mien. We have concisely introduced – four things about Carl. First, we describe his physical handicap and a glimmer about its origin – in a way, a tease. Second, that he clearly works at the pawnshop or he wouldn’t have a key. Third, that it is probably not *his* place, being named *Jasper’s*. Finally, I took the opportunity to telegraph his age with the addition to the paragraph as rewritten below. We have also set the general time of day through the sun reference and have expanded the concept of ‘city’ by alluding to the tall apartment buildings. As I was writing, I added the modifiers, ‘*gaudy*’ and ‘*iridescent*’ – replacing the original term ‘*golden letters*’ to further characterize the tone of the shop as not being a high class spot that was run by a ‘cultured’ owner. I replaced the phrase ‘*were on display*’ with ‘*lay scattered on display*’. That further develops a feel for a less than tidy, well organized, store and suggests some basic personality traits of the owner who is yet to be introduced. The term ‘*newly pawned*’ serves the purpose of suggesting it is a relatively thriving – or at least a relatively active – business. (To suggest the opposite we might have said, “the long seated, gently dusted, items . . .”) I also added ‘*apartment*’ in front of ‘*buildings*’ to expand the milieu to include the thief’s actual territory (This is a *bases builder* to legitimize later developments.). I changed the word ‘*east*’ – referring to the sun’s position – with the phrase, ‘*set low in the sky behind him,*’ in order to set the store into its geographical niche – its orientation in the expanded milieu. At this point, all these things are interest peaking hints that should whet the reader’s appetite for more information. [In a short story you have no more than two paragraphs to grab and hold the reader’s attention. In a short novel the writer is given the luxury of several pages. Still, I prefer no more than three paragraphs even in a novel.]

I’m happy enough with the paragraph to move on without further changes at this time. Let me insert the ‘finished’ paragraph here.

**The three concrete steps leading down to the store presented some problem for Carl and his stiff right leg, the aftermath of a three-story fall ten years earlier when he was twelve. As he inserted the key he glanced inside through the large windows where a variety of newly pawned products lay scattered on display. The morning sun, set low in the sky behind him, was just beginning to bathe the area from between the tall apartment buildings, giving a special gleam to the large, gaudy, iridescent, letters on the door –**

### ***Jasper's Pawnshop.***

I suddenly don't like the phrase, 'giving a special gleam to'. It suggests a classy aura that spoils the over-all tone I'm trying to develop. I will replace it (for now) with the single word 'highlighted'. That sentence will now read:

**The morning sun, set low in the sky behind him, was just beginning to bathe the area from between the tall apartment buildings, highlighting the large, gaudy, iridescent, letters on the door – *Jasper's Pawnshop.***

I also tussled a bit with the word *scattered* in the line before, wondering for a fleeting moment if '*strewn*' might be better. I didn't go that way because '*strewn*' gives me the impression of even less care and organization than I want to suggest.

[NOTE: In an effort to make this process easier for *you* (I say, really meaning *me*), I've decided to keep the final form of the novel together as a unit in the last section of the book. You can bookmark it and keep abreast of the changes, there, where they will better fit into the overall flow of things. I suggest that you NOT read ahead of what we are doing up front. It will spoil what I am trying to do for you here. Also, since we may make changes later on, even in what we think is a good representation of the final work at this point, that back of the book rendering may vary in some ways from what we have established here. (Can you find the subtle change I made in the second paragraph? See *Final Copy* in the final section.) Typically, understand, the author will finish this first draft we are working on and *then* re-read it a dozen or more times on its way to becoming a finished product. I am doing much of that re-reading and re-writing as we move along, here, which compresses the process in the service of clarity.]

On to paragraph three. Remember, I like to have the reader hooked by the end of the third paragraph, certainly by the end of the second page. How can we assure *that* at this point? We can fill the paragraph with fascinating questions, the answers to which, are promised to come later on. What device shall we use? How about having things Carl sees inside the store remind him of things that will become important elements in the story. This is a fascinating juncture because much of what we invent at this moment will drive the story for the next 199 pages. I also like a sprinkling of humor so that aspect of the writing needs to be inserted early on. How do the memory triggering objects come into view? They might be covered with clothes for the night and he begins removing and folding them. I like that. What things shall be connected to which events or people or feelings?

Possible events: The theft of the ring. Hearing about Lady Hamilton's heartrending reaction to the loss. Who took it? (With some hint that Carl at least thinks he knows who.) Something about Carl's home situation and his responsibilities. How he came to work at the pawnshop. Maybe something about his relationship with Jasper (How he accepts the man's exterior gruffness and bitterness, understanding that inside he's different.)

“Hooking” a reader involves more than just laying out the potential story line. It involves the vocabulary and how words are used. It involves texture – a variety in sentence length and structure. It involves building a milieu or character with which readers can become immediately enthralled. It involves the tone of the piece – quiet, active; peaceable, rough; acceptable, offensive; description driven or dialogue driven; edified or base. There are other aspects, most of which refer to enhancing the comfort of the reading process.

My book, *Crossroad*, won a prize for the best opening among short novels in the year it was published. Knowing that, a member of the audience at a Question/Response session I was giving had two very interesting questions for me.

Q1 – “How long did it take you to write the book?”

R1 – “Six or eight weeks.”

Q2 – “How much time did you spend writing the opening paragraphs that merited the special recognition?”

R2 – “Three, maybe four days.”

This illustrates the degree of importance I give to getting a story off to a reader-hooking start. The same was true for this one (Milieu), even though it is not, strictly speaking, a novel. Here is a sample of the opening lines I discarded:

“As we begin this journey together . . .”

“Writing a story is a fantastic adventure, especially when you have virtually no idea where you’re going!”

“If you see a likely looking character out there, invite him in for evaluation.”

In the end I opted to use the opening lines of the story on which we would be working. In the least I hoped the reader would ask, “What in blazes kind of a kick-off is this for a how-to book?” My hope, of course, was to draw the reader into the *story* immediately, giving him something to evaluate or study right from the *git go*, as we say here in the Ozarks. Then, I provided a glimmer of how things were going to precede – the reader of a how-to book should be privy to that immediately. That was followed by briefly presenting parts of the process - those which I have found fascinate most ‘want-to-be-writers. It won’t win an award but it does seem to have kept you on course this far!

Back to paragraph three. Shall Jasper be inside at the outset or not? In some way, we need to get the dialog flowing. It could be inside Carl’s head, of course. I think I prefer an initial interaction, which will suggest the contrast in personalities and style. In that way the reader will have met the two men and can begin to make judgments and form questions relative to them. That becomes our ‘new’ basic purpose for this paragraph then. Let’s try something. The idea of a paragraph becomes irrelevant, of course, as we move immediately into a sequence of dialog. Refer to it as a *section*, if you like.

**“You’re almost late,” came Jasper’s opening remark.**

**He was a large boned man in his early fifties. The store had been his**

life for the past thirty years.

‘But I wasn’t late,’ Carl thought, keeping the response to himself. He was as small and frail in stature as Jasper was large and rugged. He spoke.

“Good morning, Jasper. Looks like it’s going to be a pretty day – hot maybe.”

“If that’s a hint to turn on the AC forget it. Too expensive. Anyway, we’re underground here. Patrons coming in from the hot sidewalks will think it feels great in here.”

It had not been what Carl intended. He knew better than to make outright suggestions to Jasper. As if having re-set the roles for the day, Jasper continued.

“How’s your sister, Mary, doing? Due any day now I suppose.”

“She’s fine. Doctor says due in a week. Mama says it’ll be sooner.”

“Your Mama should know, I suppose, having had an even dozen of her own.”

Let’s call time here and see what has happened. Whatever it is, it certainly didn’t follow the initial plan, did it? How simply wonderful! See how the characters are already driving (guiding) the plot, the approach, the word choice.

There are things that need fixing immediately, however. Remember, we are going for quick initial characterizations and when needing to do that I dislike having what I call ‘naked nouns’ – nouns (or verbs) without useful modifiers that can establish or enhance the meaning in a flash.

To that end, I’m going to try adding the word *predictable* before ‘*opening remark*’. It immediately implies Jasper’s well ingrained style. To further build this characterization I’m going to add a sizeable phrase to the end of that first sentence: *as he took out his large, gold, pocket watch as if to emphasize his point*. In addition to suggesting his bent for playing the guilt card, it presents his need to be in control and gives just the hint of an old fashioned air about the man – pocket watch.

In the next sentences two things pop out at me. First, that I have wasted precious words to repeat the obvious fact of approximating Jasper’s age. Both *early fifties* and *past thirty years* are not needed. I think it would be well to remove the age reference and slip in a bit more physical description early on. Below, you’ll see how I added, *made larger in appearance by his chubby cheeks and ruddy complexion*. He is rapidly beginning to gain character.

In Carl’s response, which follows, we again have a chance to solidify one of the young man’s basic traits by adding, *as was his style*, at then end of the first sentence. (It may read too awkwardly, however, so we’ll think about that later.) As the first hint to the reader that Carl has Jasper’s number regarding the gruffness thing, I’m going to add *smiling* as a part of his ‘inner’ response. In Carl’s oral response he refers to the man as Jasper. I’m getting the sense that

Jasper is the kind who young people don't call by a first name. I will change Jasper to Mr. somebody. We need a last name. Let's go for alliteration – Jones, Johnson, James? I like the feel of James – *Jasper James* – again an old, established, sounding name with more character than the common Jones or Johnson. James it will be. [Interesting to me that a subordinate character gets fully named before the 'star'. See what fun this is?]

I feel the need to change two things in Jasper's AC response. First, to clarify that the store really isn't in a fully subterranean basement let's see if adding the modifier, *mostly*, before underground clarifies that issue. I believe it does. We could have tried, *half-way*, but that seems awkward – amateurish to me. Second, the last several words are unneeded, excess baggage. So, we remove the words, *in here* – where else would it be? Also, the word *here* was used just a few phrases before. Repeating significant words that close together produces a cacophony – like an unpleasant reverberation. Occasionally repetition can be used successfully for emphasis but usually it's good to avoid it. I feel the need to get more specific about temperatures. I made an addition to provide that (*even if it's eighty*). I toyed with temperatures between eighty and ninety opting for the lower one so our city can realistically be in the north rather than the south if that becomes an issue. I like the seasonal possibilities of the north.

In the sentence, "*He knew better than to make outright suggestions to Jasper,*" I don't like the feel of the repetitive *Jasper* in the section, and will replace it with *the man*. It avoids the confusion that might follow from already referring to him as Jasper and Mr. James. It becomes a more important issue, here, because we are writing about what *Carl* is saying about the man and Carl seems to be calling him Mr. James, which would really seem cumbersome there, I think. The use of *the man* also suggests some required social distance, which I see growing.

In Carl's response to Jasper's inquiry about Mary, it feels right to add the word *Sir*, after Carl's opening words. It further establishes that distance even if it turns out to be only on the surface, as Jasper's very inquiry itself implies may be true.

In the final sentence that we have written so far, I see an opportunity to let the reader know that Carl is the oldest in his large family – a basis setter for his later to be revealed financial responsibilities. Here's what I want to try: "*Your mama should know, I suppose, having had, what, eleven more after you?*" That position in the family also suggests a possibly well developed sense of responsibility. It will be interesting to see if that becomes the fact.

Most of the changes we have made in this third 'paragraph' work to add essential substance, while adding very few words, and maintaining a comfortable flow of phrases. Let's see what we have, now. (You will notice that even during this re-write I made a few more changes. Examine the first sentence and explain

what I tried to accomplish. Revise, revise, revise!)

**“You’re almost late,” Jasper grouched, predictably, as he took out his large, gold, pocket watch as if to emphasize his point.**

**He was a big boned man, made larger in appearance by his chubby cheeks and ruddy complexion. The store had been his life for all of his thirty some, adult, years.**

**‘But I wasn’t late,’ Carl thought, smiling and keeping the response to himself, as was his style. He was as small and frail in stature as Jasper was large and rugged. The young man spoke.**

**“Good morning, Mr. James. Looks like it’s going to be a pretty day – hot maybe.”**

**“If that’s a hint to turn on the AC forget it. Too expensive. Anyway, we’re mostly underground here. Patrons coming in from the hot sidewalks will think it feels great even if it’s eighty.”**

**It had not been what Carl intended. He knew better than to make outright suggestions to the man.**

**Feeling he had effectively re-established the roles for the day, Jasper continued.**

**“How’s your sister, Mary, doing? Due any day now I suppose.”**

**“She’s fine, Sir. Doctor says she’s due in two weeks. Mama says it’ll be sooner.”**

**“Your mama should know, I suppose, having had, what, eleven more after you?”**

Suddenly there is a very pregnant sister. (I didn’t see it coming. Did You?) She entered, of course, as a means for ‘gruff old’ Jasper to demonstrate his softer side early on. I also used it to recognize the long established mistrust of professionals, within the ‘lower class’, when, what the more learned one’s say runs contrary to a social group’s more respected lore. It brings up additional questions: Is she married? Does she live at home? Is it her first child? Father? What will Carl’s role be in helping to provide for her and the baby? We will just add those questions to the list – the growing backlog of things with which the story will need to deal. It is just such things that will become the meat of this novel.

*I’m serious about the list.* Always keep one and add to it each element you need to develop further, or explain, or account for before the story ends. Also, as they pop into mind, keep a list of things to possibly include in the story – wonderful phrases, plot ideas, characterization ploys, and so on. At my age it becomes a necessity. At younger ages it just makes good sense. Even wonderful ideas get lost during the processes of creation.

[An Aside: Early each morning I walk along the same section of winding blacktop on my way to and from my favorite, little, café – *Rick’s Iron Skillet*. I often have wonderful ideas during those few minutes of solitude. Many of them

are still not with me when I get back home – unless I have taken time to jot them down on the folded piece of paper I carry in my shirt pocket just for such occurrences. (It assumes I also remember a pencil!) *This* becomes an *aside* not because of any of that but because as I was mentioning ‘wonderful ideas’ in the previous sentence the kernel of an idea for a short story popped into my mind. It has to do with all the creative ideas I have lost on that stretch of road and where they go and what might happen if they all managed to get together and . . . do something? Never let such an idea escape your written notes. Later on I will certainly have a wonderful time trying to whip that concept into a short piece of some kind. It could be strictly humorous or it could become a terrifying sci-fi piece.]

Go to the final copy now and read what we have written so far (lines 1-41). You may find things you still wonder about changing. We don’t change just to change, of course. When the choice of a word becomes an even heat between what I wrote first and the possible substitution, I usually find that sticking with my first inclination is best. I can’t emphasize too strongly however that every word needs to be the right word – meaning, character appropriate, a good fit to the sentence, and properly placed within the sentence. Splitting an infinitive often provides the easiest way to ascertain meaning. (More later when we come across another such situation.) Having a good editor work through your ‘finished’ piece is of inestimable help when it comes to choosing words and sentence structure.

Matching vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure to each character is also important. From the personalities as they are developing I think Carl’s sentences will tend to be short and to the point. Jasper’s will be longer and more cumbersome. Jasper probably finished high school. Carl probably didn’t. That may tend to make Jasper’s grammar somewhat better than Carl’s. We’ll see what happens.

Moving on. What main element have you and I mentioned but not yet introduced? Humor, right? *That* is where we will begin in Part Two.





## PART TWO (Chapter One continues)

I find there are three main ways to introduce humor. It can occur in the give and take between characters (See my book, *The Clairvoyant Kit, a Raymond Masters Mystery*); it can occur just inside the head of one of the characters (*Sanity in Search of Peter Alexander*); or it can be added by the author, all quite apart from the natural tendencies of the characters. It can, of course, be any combination of the three. The humor, such as it has been, in *this* piece has been author initiated, aimed at spicing things up at potentially dry spots and providing brief breaks from information heavy sections.

Two aspects relating to humor have begun to emerge in our piece. First, Jasper doesn't sound like a humor-oriented character. Second, it has already been telegraphed that Carl speaks to himself, 'inside his head', and he was able to smile at his boss's initial grumble that first morning. Perhaps we will explore this latter approach – develop an inner sense of humor for the younger man. When he finds his 'confidant', the humor thing may expand or otherwise be modified. (Why do you suppose I used the fully unbeautiful phrase *humor thing* in that sentence? Right! *Conservation of words* where an expanded, prettier, version would not really improve 'things'. And why did I just use the word 'things' instead of . . .?)

Humor serves several purposes. It lightens a piece. It can be used to provide relief after or during intense passages. We want to engage our readers' passions, but not wear them down. Humor can, of course, be the central theme of a piece (read Erma Bombeck, Harry Golden, Peggy Trieber).

The novel we are creating can still go several directions, though being primarily a humorous piece is not my intention. The idea that quiet, reserved, Carl has an inner humorous bent intrigues me more and more. We can only begin to imagine the many problems he has had in his young life. One of the mechanisms he uses to cope is to see the humor in things (not a bad piece of advice in general, and certainly fits with my own basic, positive, philosophy as a

writer.).

That leads us back to the basic point of any written piece – the philosophic, value based, message the author wants to convey. When you've been writing as long as I have, the philosophy just pops into the piece all quite automatically. Here, though, you and I need to be on the same page. I'm going to begin by specifying the basic philosophy and two guiding themes that will follow from it.

*Philosophic element:* Being kind, generous, and honest with each other works to build a better life for all of us.

*Themes:* (1) Intentions often more accurately describe a person's character than do his behaviors. (2) Sometimes there seem to be no best or even good answer to a problem or question – no good way out of a negative situation.

It may not be immediately obvious, but rubbing these three elements up against each other gives us the possibility for a powerful drama – shades of right vs shades of wrong, one individual's intentions vs other's assumptions, surviving vs honesty, 'sins' of commission vs 'sins' of omission ('sin' being used generically rather than religiously). There will be more.

We are ready to begin a next paragraph or small section of our story. [I promise I won't make you endure the construction of every sentence in the novel, but here at the outset I want you to gain a good grasp of the processes I use. Eventually, you will modify those to fit your own style and comfortable procedures. I believe it will be useful for you to have a clearly defined starting point from which to go your separate way].

I'm going to try to accomplish several important things in this next short space: Establish Carl's interest in jewelry, suggest his expertise, further develop his penchant to see things humorously, and continue characterizing the relationship between the two men.

**Carl began removing and folding the white sheets they used to cover the merchandise at night. It was an old building that seemed to take pleasure in dusting the shop each and every night.**

**"What's new in the jewelry case?" Carl asked as Jasper continued setting up the cash drawer.**

**"Just before closing last night a guy brought in a half dozen rings and several bracelets. Said he bought them at an estate auction. Take a look, here. Tell me what you think. I paid three hundred for the lot."**

**Carl studied them carefully for a few minutes.**

**"I'd say you got quite a bargain – maybe worth three thousand when sold separately. Two of the rings are junk but this one is a diamond – small but certainly not junk. Doesn't seem reasonable they would have all come from the same estate – varying so much in value like that."**

**"Not bad for an amateur," Jasper said.**

**'You're learning fast,' Carl heard. He had to wonder if the man's**

**tongue would fall out of his mouth if it ever uttered an outright compliment. He smiled as he took the sheets into the back room.**

Aside from the outline and a few interesting phrases that passage has few redeeming characteristics. The up side to that is that it gives us a good look at a fairly typical initial draft – the first laying in of the story line – and an opportunity to do some interesting re-writing.

Let's begin at the top. The word *folding* stands there naked as can be. It provides a wonderful opportunity to help grow Carl's personality by inserting the word *carefully* in front of it.

The next sentence is a mess. It suggests a topic but just doesn't fulfill its mission. See the word *pleasure* just standing there naked as a jaybird? As long as we're anthropomorphizing the building, let's make the most of it and add the modifier *impish* before pleasure. [I like buildings with an impish disposition. My place, for example, is the impishist – not a word you would ever want to force on a reader. Every time I pass through a doorway, the place dependably erases all memory of why I entered the other room!] The phrase *each and every night* is useful in the consistency it suggests (which was my intention) but it is just plain uninteresting. I think we can salvage the phrase by changing *night* to *evening*. It extends a three part alliteration, *each and every evening* – still functional and much more interesting. That accomplished, however, it could be taken to suggest an inch of crud falls to cover the place drawing a picture that I don't want – filthy. I want it to be more like a place run by two guys rather than by two women. How can we fix that? I'll try an addition at the end – an addition after a dash suggesting an important clarification. How about something like: - *just an imperceptible hint over night but unpleasantly noticeable over a week's time.*

The next sentence seems to work well. Move on to the next. See the word *auction* – estate auction? Would estate *sale* serve the purpose better? I'm not sure. An auction implies a gathering. A sale could be just between the buyer and the estate lawyer. Hmmm! I'm going with the more private feeling – maybe it will build a question of impropriety. Maybe not, but I like it better at any rate.

In the next sentence I am trying to shore-up Carl's level of expertise as compared with Jasper's. I also want to further imply that Carl is *careful* – a word I used there but think it would be better to illustrate it rather than say it. What if we replace *studied them carefully for a few minutes* with *took his time studying them*. It is an improvement but doesn't add any flair or real reader interest. Let's try this: *lingered over them for some time*. How would that read? *Carl lingered over them for some time*. That implies both interest and careful procedure. I like it and I'm glad we took the time to fight with it. We now have a much more polished phrase. We moved it from 'C' level to 'A' I believe.

The next sentence presents Carl as being too tentative in the faith he indicates in his own appraisal. I think we can easily fix that by replacing *maybe* to *will be*. At the end let's add *for sure* just before the dash.

I love the next exchange both for its staccato brevity and the major concept it emphasizes – Carl’s understanding of the ‘real’ Jasper. But, I think we can do better, so, out with the beloved phrase – always a difficult thing to do.

In the, *Not bad for an amateur* sentence I think we have the opportunity to stretch Jasper’s personality a bit. We can do this because the phrase is short. Let’s turn it into, *“Not bad for an amateur,” Jasper said breaking the faintest glimmer of a private smile.*

That leaves us with *what* in terms of Carl’s response? *‘You’re learning fast,’ Carl heard.* I think we may be able to salvage more than I anticipated. Let’s just add the words, *was what,* before *Carl heard.* How will that read? *‘You’re learning fast,’ was what Carl heard.* I will use that sentence structure despite its somewhat clumsy read. I want the *idea* out front – *You’re learning fast.* Otherwise it gets lost in the necessary mechanical aspects of the sentence. That will be fine for now, at least.

In the final paragraph I will delete one short phrase (out of his mouth – from where else would a tongue fall?) and add one short phrase that should add helpful depth to the passage. Let’s re-read the entire section and see if we have, in fact, improved it. I has grown from 21 to 25 lines. Was it worth expending all those additional words?

**Carl began removing and carefully folding the white sheets they used to cover the merchandise at night. It was an old building that seemed to take impish delight in dusting the shop each and every evening – just an imperceptible hint over night but unpleasantly noticeable after a week.**

**“What’s new in the jewelry case?” Carl asked as Jasper continued setting up the cash drawer.**

**“Just before closing last night a guy brought in a half dozen rings and several bracelets. Said he bought them at an estate sale. Take a look, here. Tell me what you think. He took three hundred for the lot.”**

**Carl lingered over them for some time.**

**“I’d say you got quite a bargain – will be worth three thousand when sold separately. Two of the rings are junk but this one is a diamond for sure – small but certainly not junk. Doesn’t seem reasonable they would have all come from the same estate – varying so much in quality like that.”**

**“Not bad for an amateur,” Jasper said breaking the faintest glimmer of a private smile.**

**‘You’re learning fast,’ was what Carl heard. He had to wonder if the man’s tongue would fall out if it ever uttered an outright compliment. He smiled at that image as he moved with the sheets into the back room.**

I for one like what happened to that section both technically and in terms of story and character development. It must be time for a fresh mug of Maxwell House. [Some writers get paid for such plugs. I’ll likely just get angry letters touting other brands. Can you imagine have nothing better to do with your life

than things such as that?]

You will notice that upon that re-write, in the first paragraph I changed 'pleasure' to 'delight'. It forms a 'backdoor alliteration' with 'dusting'. Near the end of the third paragraph I changed, *I paid*, to, *He took*. It released Jasper from taking advantage of the seller by giving him what he wanted – a subtle but important change I believe. Jasper is gruff, not dishonest.

After you have re-read the book to date, we'll move on to section four. Does it all flow together? Are we maintaining and growing reader interest? We now have completed the first two pages of our novel. I'll go through one more section intensively and then we'll move on to larger issues.

I think it's time to deal with Carl's dual identity – mild-mannered store clerk by day and fearless, building climbing, thief by night. We have a ticklish bit of characterization to pull off with this guy. He must remain loveable, somebody the reader will root for, and yet we must not condone his illegal – many would say immoral – behavior. This should be fun. (The forces of good and evil all wrapped within one psyche!) At the outset, at least, let's keep that just *his* secret. I think it is nothing he would share, not wanting to put anybody else in an uncomfortable position – he's a nice guy, remember. We must, therefore make his illegitimate activities seem necessary. Remember one of our themes: some problems don't seem to have good answers or solutions. His family needs money. He can't earn enough because of his handicap. But, he *will* arrange to take care of them – somehow. I think we have the central, tension producing, theme for Carl. At some point we will need to contrast his, 'thievery out of necessity', with another thief's, 'I want it so I take it', philosophy. Be thinking how that can come about. (Perhaps he meets a second thief inside an apartment Carl is there to rob. I like that.) How can we work into all this? This time I will present the 'finished' product and then go back through it with you pointing out some of the on-the-fly revisions I made.

**"I'm on my way to the bank," Jasper called as Carl reentered the main room. "Be a half hour like usual. Remember where the shot gun is under the register. It's loaded."**

**Carl shuddered at the thought of using a gun. He often wondered if he would, should the necessity arise. As if by clockwork, five minutes after Jasper left, the bell above the door rang. It was Tommy, Carl's thirteen year old brother. He was short for his age, his face was smudged, his ball cap sat sideways. He pulled a green bank bag out of his tattered, hand me down, jeans and laid it on the counter. It was clearly a well practiced routine. Carl reached into his pocket and withdrew a small roll of bills. He counted out five one's into Tommy's readied palm. He tousled the youngster's hair.**

**"Thanks for your help, Li'l Bro," He said returning the rest of the money to his pocket. "Got plans today?"**

“Hope to get some heavy duty kissin’ in with Mary Ann this next hour down at the rail yard.”

“Kissin’ is okay. You gotta watch that heavy duty variety though. It leads to things you got no business doin’ at your age. You know about rubbers, right.”

“Know about ‘em. Have some. Never had the need to use one.”

“And that’s just the way to keep it for now. You oughta be playing ball or goin’ to the library. You’re way too young to be spendin’ your life lollin’ around in secret with girls. I’ll give you a shot in the head if I find out different, you hear?”

Tommy smiled. The shot to the head remark was just his big brother’s way of saying he loved him and was determined to keep him on the right path. Although it was a pain sometimes, (the guidance not the shot) he usually understood that it was a good thing. Each of them licked his thumb and pressed it into the other’s palm – the Riggins boys way of demonstrating their forever, brotherly, bond. Tommy turned to leave.

“Remember, Mary’s soon gonna be needing money for the baby. We Riggins take care of each other.”

Tommy turned back to the counter and peeled off two bills, handing them to Carl.

“I’ll just spend them if I have them. You take care of them, okay?”

Carl nodded. He’d hoped for three but two was a pretty good start for a kid Tommy’s age. Had it been an emergency he knew the boy would have handed over every last cent.

Tommy opened the door to leave. Carl called after him, “Wash your face – and ears – or you won’t get kisses of *any* variety!”

Carl shook his head and smiled as he unlocked the bag and emptied its contents onto the black felt pad beside the register. There were four rings. He put in a jeweler’s eyepiece and carefully examined each one. He took a small notebook from his shirt pocket and thumbed through it to the first blank space. After entering the date, he wrote, ‘G 46’, and beside it ‘R \$50. Then, ‘I 122 – BH \$250. ‘R’ was his shorthand for *ring*; BH for brooch. ‘G’ and ‘I’ designated the buildings from which he had taken it. ‘46’ and ‘122’ were the apartment numbers. The dollar values represented the actual price he felt sure each one would bring to an end buyer. Carl had stolen the rings, you see, but it was his full intention to pay back every cent when his financial fortunes changed.

Carl was an odd sort of thief. Having needing to drop out of school well before the legal age, and being handicapped as he was, his employment possibilities were severely limited. His mother worked as a housekeeper for one of the hotels in the area – One Carl never touched. Between the two of them they kept the family afloat financially – well at

least bobbing there with a large portion of their heads still above water.

Each night when he returned home from his ‘lifting of essential items’, as he thought of it, he would place the items into the bank bag and slip it under Tommy’s pillow. The next morning Tommy would bring it to the pawnshop after Jasper left to do the banking. He had no knowledge of what was going on or what was in the bag. He trusted his big brother and merely did as he was asked. That extra step between him and the pawn shop may not have been necessary, but Carl was a careful young man understanding that for his family’s sake he didn’t dare get caught with stolen merchandise.

Carl then figured what he thought would be a good deal for Jasper and paid out that much in cash to himself – he was allowed to purchase items of lesser value for the store. Later the jewelry would be sold by the shop for a tidy profit. On occasion, when financial things were looking exceptionally good for him, Carl would buy back an item from the shop and see that it was returned to its owner. Recently, that had not happened very regularly.

He returned the little notebook to his pocket as Jasper descended the front steps.

My, things began popping in that section! It all seemed like a natural flow of events to me. In the beginning we needed to get Carl alone in the store so he could receive the bag. Sending Jasper off to the bank seemed both realistic and handy. The shotgun exchange indicates several things – Jasper’s no nonsense approach, Carl’s contrasting reluctance about violence, and suggests an element of danger working there in the shop. It was a comment clearly repeated by Jasper every morning and suggests an overbearing presence. We have thereby grown each character and introduced a bit of stress into the milieu.

Tommy’s appearance allows more growing. The boy was unkempt suggesting a lack of specific care by his parent. (We still don’t know about the father.) His give and take with Carl implies a good and loving relationship – respect flowing in both directions. The mini ‘sex talk’ furthered the positive nature of the relationship – open and honest – and the concern Carl had for the boy’s wellbeing. In paragraph seven the phrase originally read: *spending your life around in secret with girls*. That didn’t convey the message I intended. I wanted something short of mentioning sexual activity outright, so I added, *lolling around in private with girls*.

The word-forms in the dialog between the boys (dropped final ‘g’ in ‘ing’ words) suddenly begin to reveal things about the social status of the family and of the area in which they live. It also, suddenly forced us to find a last name. *Carl* is typically pronounced as if it were two syllables *Car-l*. I want to balance syllables with his last name – it helps the rhythm and flow for the reader. (Between the first and second names always try for an even number of

syllables.) To me the 'r' sound stands out interestingly in *Carl* and I think incorporating that into the last name will help build a good sound-unit. Also, I find keeping the accented syllables consistent between the first and last names helps. The name that came to mind immediately (and I have no idea why) was Riggins – Carl Riggins. I like that sound. There is a problem, however. One to which I alluded earlier. [Got any ideas?] *Riggins* ends in an 's' which makes the whole possessive/plural thing very cumbersome – Riggins's – and the need for a plural form reared its head almost immediately. (*We \_\_\_s take care of each other*). I liked the name so much I decided to clip off the final 's' and make it Riggin – Carl Riggin, Tommy Riggin. Good sound-units.

It was time for our main, uneducated, overworked, physically handicapped, character to display some wisdom. It came easily in Carl's thoughts about the amount of money Tommy returned to him for Mary. It suggests he understands about personal growth and that pressing the three dollar issue would not have helped the boy discover the truths of altruism by himself. It is one of my favorite passages so far because it indicates so much with so few words. He was pleased with how his brother was developing – the bases for growing respect, even.

We have now established that Carl is a basically good, thoughtful, and responsible person, perhaps wiser than most for his age. That was necessary before we revealed his dark secret. He has to have the makings of a loveable character for all of this to work. Although I didn't want to pussyfoot around about Carl being a thief, there was no really gentle way of introducing it. I wanted to treat it in a straight forward manner attaching no moral judgment. My first attempt seemed stark and harsh. I wrote, *Carl had stolen the rings but . . .* Boom! There it is! Hoping to soften the sudden blow to the reader, I decided to pull him into the process by calling on the never mentioned but always present relationship – loyalty, of a kind – that exists between author and reader. So, it became, *Carl, you see, had stolen the rings but . . .* It is difficult to explain, but a ploy such as that almost always works. I suppose it moves the reader to feel he is being recognized as a legitimate part of the process so he is willing to let things ride at face value. Like I said, it is difficult to explain.

At any rate, it is not something to be used more than once per piece except in special instances. In the *Raymond Masters Mystery series*, the author – from time to time, perhaps three to six times during the course of a novel – steps into the picture and, parenthetically, comments on things the old detective does or says or doesn't. [In *that* case the author has been established as an old friend of the real life detective about whom his is writing.] It is playful banter setting up the captive character – Masters – with how the unrestricted writer feels about something that transpired. Readers love that. Again, it is hard to explain but only works when it is not overused.

Back to this story. I employed one other technique to set a light and



pleasant tone for the section prior to dropping the bomb. I added the parenthetical expression – hopefully humorous – about not confusing the advice given with the *shot to his head*. It helps to have your reader smiling when you need him or her to be sympathetic or tolerant with only shaky justification.

Once laying out the truth about Carl we move immediately to soften the situation further by revealing a bit more about his background – things that will momentarily ameliorate the young man’s troublesome deeds. We never condone his illicit activities but neither do we put him down for doing what he believes he has to do to meet his family’s needs. We will not suggest pie in the sky alternatives. We will live with him right there in the harsh, unbending, reality that is his life. We need the reader to feel the stress within Carl.

I have spared you the ordeal of specific word selection here. I suggest that you reread the passage a number of times and think about every word and why I probably chose it over others. You may well find some you like even better. See. *Your* style is already emerging.

Let me mention a few of those choices, however. In the third paragraph when describing Tommy’s clothes I originally used the word *pants* thinking generic was the best way to go. I then saw it as a way to grow the image of poor family and ended up with phrase, “*his tattered, hand me down jeans.*”

Rereading paragraph 14 it hit me that a careful – precise, if you will – person would want to record *when* things happened. The sentence originally began, “*He wrote ‘G 46’ ...* As you see by adding, “*After entering the date . . .*”, we quickly fixed it in a very simple, straight forward manner.

Paragraph 15, sentence two, originally began, “*Having dropped out . . .*”. I wanted to be more specific – show it was not entirely an irresponsible act (dropping out). So, I changed the opening to: “*Needing to drop out of . . .*”

Earlier I spoke about dialog and that unless it seemed necessary for clarity, the author should omit the *he said, she asked* phrases. As an example look at lines 82 through 94.LLL Another device that accomplishes the same parsing of words is to keep the dialog within the framework of descriptive or explanatory phrases. See lines 101 -114LLL)



**PART THREE**  
**(The chapter continues)**

**It was a slow day. Carl hated slow days. In addition to being boring and prompting Mr. James to continually remind him about cleaning, it gave him way too much time to think.**

Remember that possessive problem (s's). It came up here. We chose Jasper James for reasons previously presented, but now we have to live with it. The most concise phrasing above would have been, "*In addition to being boring and prompting Mr. James's constant reminders to clean . . .*" To avoid that awkwardness for the reader, we had to extend the sentence and complicate its structure. It may not have been worth sidestepping the possessive thing. I may eventually scrap the sentence and start over. For now, I'm okay with it. The sentence serves an important function – transitioning into more personal information. Being a slow day, it legitimately presents time for us to ruminate through some of Carl's most pressing thoughts. What might they be? Remember we need to provide justification for his thievery without endorsing it. Let's see how we might approach that. Do you think the character we have developed so far just might have some twinges of guilt over the way he has to live his life?

**A third problem with slow days was being less able to move the merchandise that Carl had lifted the night before. The shop needed patrons in order to make sales. Prompted by the undervalued amount Carl paid himself, Jasper typically set very reasonable prices, so it usually moved out within one or two days.**

**When just a youngster of twelve he had devised a plan that worked well for him, and during the ensuing ten years he had seldom varied from it. He never opened safes – they contained things that were too valuable, required skills he had no way of acquiring, and dependably set off alarms making a quick getaway a necessity. With his stiff leg, quick anythings were not possible. He kept to the lower priced items – mostly jewelry for ease of transportation – and never took more than one piece from any one apartment. He understood that one piece left out in the open or in a jewelry box would seldom appear to have been theft – misplaced or lost, perhaps – but not stolen. It was another reason he stuck with older people. They would write it off to their own failing memories. Why would a *robber* leave the best stuff behind? That added credence to the 'loss' aspect and made 'theft' seem less likely. Robbery reports were almost never filed. Still, he became nervous when his stuff didn't move out rapidly. When he heard**

that a report *had* been filed, he'd buy the piece back and see that it was returned – under a rug or under clothing in a dresser drawer. It kept the shop's reputation for honesty flawless and that kept the police away.

Carl was indeed an odd thief – smart as the best of them and, because he was not greedy, more successful than most of them.

Well, we neatly avoided pursuing any of the issues we listed to write about. (There is that preposition at the end thing ... *about which we set out to write*. I don't think so!!) Not to worry. We have lots of space in which to cover them. It suddenly seemed time to let the reader in on the mechanics of Carl's work both to justify why he had been able to be so successful for so long and to underscore the 'considerate' side of his thievery. It also provided an historic timeline.

In the second paragraph I allowed a non-word just because it felt right to me – *anythings*. I think it simply yet powerfully demonstrates the thoroughgoing difficulty his physical handicap sets for him in all aspects of his life. We want the reader to come to admire him for how he quietly copes. He will never be heard to complain about it during the story.

At the beginning of that paragraph my initial phrase was originally, *Early on*. How flat! I needed to help the timeline so changed it to, *As a youngster*. That also confirms that Carl was a bright younger boy and that lack of intelligence therefore played no role in his dropping out of school. Upon reflection I didn't like the structure of the idea or the sentence so I changed it to: *When just a youngster of twelve he had devised a plan that worked well for him and during the ensuing ten years he had not varied from it*. Where the word, *acquiring* now sits had been *learning*. I like to save 'learning' for strictly 'intellectual' things. 'Acquiring' seems better to me when a 'skill' is involved. In this case it also suggests that some effort is necessarily expended to get it (acquire it!).

Later in that paragraph, where you see, *made 'theft' seem less likely*, I had originally used the term *unlikely*. *Less* best indicates the meaning I intend – it allows the possibility of *some* likelihood, you see. In the sentence dealing with his return of merchandise that had been reported stolen I felt the need to get more specific about Carl's cleverness. At the end I added the phrase, *under a rug or under clothing in a dresser drawer*.

In the last paragraph my first attempt at crafting a meaningful sentence went sadly awry. The final phrase was, *more successful than any others working the area*. I saw the chance for an interesting, repetitive, rhythm there. So I ditched the last five words and the sentence became much more fun. *Carl was indeed an odd thief – smart as the best of them and, because he was not greedy, more successful than most of them*. It becomes a comparative counterpoint between *best* and *most*.

In a tangentially related matter, a phrase popped up that has potential for

either the book title or the title for this chapter: *The Considerate Thief*. It may not have enough pizzazz to become the title of the book. We'll keep it in mind. Perhaps if used in conjunction with another word or short phrase – *The Considerate Thief of* (someplace – Conservatory Hill /Constitution Square - street - heights)? I like *Conservatory Square*. It could represent a once proud, now faded area of the inner city. In order to use that we would need to make sure the area of the city is referred to by its name early on or else the title would make no sense. We'll see. *The Lifting of Essential Items* is another phrase I jotted down earlier. It is cumbersome as a unit. Perhaps just, *Essential Items*. That would certainly work well for the title of a short story. Not sure about a novel.

Now the potential names seem to be flying. How about, “*An Odd Sort of Thief?*” [It is possible that your publisher will do focus groups and decide on some other title entirely – more impulsive sales appeal – but a book needs to have your best, studied, idea about a title when submitted.]

We now have five of the ten pages per chapter for which we are shooting. It's all been interesting up to this point but let's face it, the material has not been riveting. We need to give the reader a flavor of exciting things to come. How can we do that? We could insert a flashback about Carl's accident and injury. It would further endear the boy to the reader. One of our main jobs in this first chapter seems to be to help the reader acquire a sympathetic if not compassionate relationship with Carl. We want the reader to root for him – become his best cheerleader. Let's try the flashback. If we don't like it sitting *here* we could always move it in one form or another to somewhere else later on.

**Carl and his mother had an unspoken agreement: She didn't ask where all his money came from (she knew his job wouldn't pay that much) and he didn't ask about his or his siblings fathers (he knew there had been several – perhaps ten; there were two sets of twins). Among the twelve of them there were blue and brown eyes, tan and pale complexions, and every shade of hair from the carrot topped four year old baby, through black, brown, and several shades of blond. It made for a colorful group when, on rare occasions, they attempted family outings. Carl had black hair and brown eyes. Tommy blond and blue. Mary brown and brown.**

**None of the youngest three girls and neither set of boy twins had yet been born at the time Carl had his accident. Tommy had been the new baby, back then.**

**On the occasion of his, Carl had been making his nightly rounds for some six months – he was going on thirteen and had the agility of an adolescent monkey.**

**His preferred mode of operation was to scale the outside of the old brick buildings and enter through windows – few of which were ever locked above the third floor. He befriended the old man who ran a one vehicle limo service in the area. Each day he would engage the man in**

conversation and cleverly extract the names, addresses, and times of departure of his clients that evening. He would then determine the position of their apartments in relation to the outside of the building – fifth window from the north on the sixth floor, second from the east on the tenth. The length of the outing was usually of little consequence for he could be up the building and in and out of the apartment, in the time it took to drive around the block. He was no where near that fast anymore but he had found ways of compensating for his leg. In fact, he felt more secure, more confident, and more physically proficient, up on the side of a building than he did on the ground. He often thought that, had he the power to exude webs from his hands, he *would* have been Spiderman.

It had been a cold, blustery, winter night. He had already made four apartments and should have gone home. He wanted just one more so he would be able to buy Christmas presents for his family. One more something he could exchange for a hundred dollars. He figured he could find what he needed in Mrs. Bigalow's apartment. It was on the third floor of The Baker Arms – a retirement, condo-like setting. In his boyish eagerness he veered from his basic plan – making sure ahead of time that the apartment would be empty for the few minutes he would need.

He reached the third floor window at eleven fifteen. The temperature was falling. Ice was forming on the brick surface and his movement was uncomfortably impaired because of his heavy coat and gloves. There was a narrow, granite, decorative, ledge no more than ten inches wide which encircled the building just below the third floor windows. He reached the ledge from the fire escape ladder at the far end of the building. To make himself slender enough he had spread his coat open so he could press his body close against the building. He moved cautiously one small sidestep at a time. At twelve he wasn't into using emergency ropes strung down from the roof the way he employed them after the accident, so the wind posed some threat to him. A fall would be unthinkable.

Originally instead of ending the first sentence after the word, *fifteen*, I had attached, . . . *give or take five minutes*. My intention had been to purposefully add some imprecision. It sounded amateurish and really didn't serve the purpose for which it was intended (to suggest we didn't know the exact moment). In the next to the last sentence *employed them* originally read *was*. Did that improve the sentence?

He entered through the bedroom window, and went right to the dresser. There was jewel box sitting open on top. He lit its contents with his penlight. There it was. Just what he needed. It would be worth at least three hundred dollars on the open market. He'd ask one hundred and get it. At that time he worked the marginally reputable pawn shops ten blocks north of where he lived. Never using the same one twice in the same week

**he had been able to maintain his cover.**

Initially, the first phrase in that sentence began, *'Inside, he found the bedroom'*. It conflicted with the description of action that follows so I had to go back and make it consistent. He left the apartment through the bedroom window in which he had been momentarily trapped. (Read on and see the problem.)

**As he carefully pocketed the ring and turned to leave, he heard the living room door open. From beneath the bedroom door he saw the lights come on. He moved to the window. The door knob began to turn. He pulled the window closed and scurried under the bed opening his mouth wide so his heavy breathing would be less noticeable.**

**She hummed as she took her time undressing. From under the bed he couldn't watch, but wanted to. Safety first. He'd seen his sister unclothed and figured there would be a lot of similarities so he remained still. Presently, she went into the bathroom and he heard water begin running into the tub. He waited a few minutes longer to make sure she was not going to return. He heard what he felt certain was a slipping-into-a-tub-of-inviting-warm-water sigh. He then made his move. He opened the window and went outside. He closed the window and began easing back toward the fire ladder.**

The multiply hyphenated phrase was presented in that manner for reading ease – connecting all the words into a single modifier. I do that sometimes (obviously!).

**During the short time he had been inside, the ledge had become a sheet of ice. He knew he was in a pickle but pressed on. It was as he arrived at the corner and reached out to grasp the ladder that the wind gusted around the building from the north and caused him to lose his footing. He plummeted the three stories down onto a heap of dirty snow the plows had left in the alley the day before. Piles of snow are not soft – regardless of the lore – although, had he not fallen on his back with his leg awkwardly positioned behind him, he would have endured to climb the next day.**

Some will question the construction of the first sentence in that paragraph. I used it intentionally as a thought bridge from inside the apartment to outside. Reversing the two phrases jumbles the time line and requires more thought than I like to make my readers exert.

**The pain was excruciating and he passed out. It was hours later when consciousness returned. He was no longer on his back. His leg was straightened out but the pain continued. His tears had frozen to his cheeks – his left eye was frozen shut. He removed his gloves and warmed his cheeks and eyes with the heat from his palms.**

**He tried to stand. His leg would not take any weight. He reached down to examine it through his jeans. They were soaked with freezing**

blood. He tried hopping on his good leg. It jarred his other leg and, again, the boy came close to losing consciousness.

Two goals loomed large in his mind. First, stash his evening's take in a safe place. If he should pass out again the stuff might be found on him as his clothing was searched for identification. Second, he had to find a way to get home – a three block trek through the blowing snow and zero degree temperature.

Hiding the rings seemed an impossible task due to the inhospitable, prevailing conditions. He immediately knew the solution because he had employed it once before while being frisked by a policeman. Although the prospect of recovering them was most unpleasant he swallowed each one in turn. Then, to get home.

There was a dumpster a few yards away. He dragged himself to it, pulled himself up, and lifted the lid. He quickly formed a plan as he removed a two foot square cardboard box. He tore one side free at the two corners leaving it connected across the bottom. He placed it on the ice covered ground. Pointing it up the alley in the direction of his apartment, he eased himself onto it – sitting, facing away from where he was headed, his back against the front side of the box. With his coat buttoned and his glove on, he leaned forward and began pushing his makeshift sled – backing himself toward home. The pain worsened but he persevered. An hour later he was at his door. An hour after that Doc Carter was there doing what he could. He reset the leg in two places but told Carl's mother – in private – that surgery would be necessary to really fix it. There would not be money for that. The bones healed, the knee stiffened, and that was that.

By the time spring arrived Carl had disposed of the crutch and was moving around with surprising nimbleness. Stairs remained his biggest foe. He worked to develop his upper body strength. He got stronger for sure but the hoped for set of fabulous, female attracting, muscles refused to bloom. He played stick ball with his friends but not very well. When he realized they were intentionally going easy on him he quit playing. Carl Riggin would *not* become the object of pity.

[By the way, he would also not recommend trying to retrieve swallowed merchandise while cemented into a cast from toes to groin.]

In the '*By the time spring arrived,*' paragraph above, the word *female* had originally been *girl*. I made the change thinking female conveyed a sexier flavor – and sexy was what he was going for at that age. (I know because I asked him!)

We added approximately four pages to the novel and came to a good stopping point for the chapter. We could go back and 'fluff' it up to increase its length a bit but that approach typically hurts the natural flow and beleaguers the



reader: conservation of words, remember. By cutting things off we also insert a natural segue – we can start the next chapter almost anywhere and specify any time. We'll see what happens. First, let's examine what we've accomplished and how well we like it.

I took the opportunity to talk a bit more about Carl's family. I fashioned it to work up to a natural lead-in for a presentation of the accident. By the end of this chapter the reader will have the necessary background and hopefully will have solidified the compassionate set we want them to feel toward our main character.

At the opening of this section we used the somewhat staccato *she did, he did approach*, again playing them off each other for rhythmic effect. It leaves an air of mystery about the mother – leaning toward the tawdry side, I suppose. We may want to come back and clarify that later. At this point I don't know what that will be. We set physical descriptions for the three family members we have introduced to here. It didn't employ beautiful prose but quickly and simply got the job done.

As a point of interest, those family members have a 'C' name, a 'T' name and an "M" name to help the reader more easily keep them separate. That is not as important here where age differences and gender tend to help. It becomes more important as those things become more similar. I doubt if we will name any of the others. As a group they serve a major purpose but don't need to become a part of the action. Naming them would just complicate things for the reader.

In the fourth paragraph (*His preferred . . .*), prior to presenting the accident, I felt it was essential to provide a quick overview of how young Carl went about plying his trade. A source of information about who would be out of their apartments and when, was necessary to make the story work so I inserted the old limo driver (a character of reference that will probably never appear – but then, using this approach one never knows!). I can just see the sly, streetwise, adorable young Carl patiently working the old man without him ever knowing what was going on.

Some legitimate reason must be presented which allows this nimble, careful, kid to have the accident. It had to involve something beyond normal conditions. So, we went to a quick onset, winter, ice and blowing snowstorm. Even a savvy twelve year old such as we have described might not see ahead to the full, possible, impact of such conditions. The height from which the fall took place had to be significant enough to cause the handicap but not so far as to make his survival unbelievable. I chose the third story.

In paragraph seven (*He entered through . . .*) I originally used the phrase, *he worked the pawn shops ten blocks north of where he lived*. That represents a good distance in city blocks but still didn't provide sufficiently believable cover – a kid repeatedly taking jewelry to a pawnshop and selling it was not normal. So I added two words – *marginally reputable* before *pawnshop*. I believe that handled

the problem. The owners knew the boy just might be fencing stolen goods but wouldn't ask. They certainly would never turn him in or otherwise identify him to the authorities. To do so would be putting themselves in jeopardy.

In paragraphs eight and nine we introduce the first elements of danger and suspense. We could have had Carl just quickly scramble out the window when he heard the front door open but we are working for a significant change of pace –suspense. So, he needed to stay in the suddenly scary situation a bit longer. She entered the bedroom and he hid. But then, after a brief period of uncertainty, we had to get her out of the way so he could leave. Carl could have waited until she went to sleep – hard to determine from under the bed. That could have taken a long time. Opening the window with a cold wind swirling outside would have surely awakened her. So, I chose to just get her out of the way for a while. A bath seemed legitimate – a good fit to the cold night and just returning home.

It gave us the opportunity to imply the boy was developing normally in terms of his sexuality. We still don't know if, as a young adult, he will have a girl friend. He is from a class of people who marry or partner early and here he is already twenty-two and still single. It seems best to have him be straight – both for reader comfort and so he can give Tommy and his other younger brothers accurate, experience-based, boy/girl advice. Being gay would add an irrelevant path. We need to make a note to suggest there have been and are girls in his life even if not presently a special one.

In paragraph ten (*During the short time . . .*) I specifically chose to have the dangerous wind coming out the *north*. Why, do you suppose? It is generally accepted that north winds can be all the things we need them to be at that point – cold, erratic, and strong. It meant we didn't have to explain or justify any of that. The fire escape ladder (a generic device that serves us better not being described) is placed on the *far* corner of the building some distance along the narrow ledge from the window. This gives the reader a visual map to the objective and sets up a frightening situation and dangerous undertaking.

At the end of that paragraph I initially used the phrase, *to climb another day*. It employed a variation of a familiar, generic, idiomatic form (to *blank* another day). As much as I liked that reader-comfortable approach, it sent the wrong message. Carl *did* indeed climb another day although it would be much later. So, I substituted the words, *the next*. See how it changes the intent of the phrase: *he would have endured to climb the next day*.

I added sentence four in paragraph eleven (*The pain. . .*) after I had finished the section. I wanted to insert an element of potential mystery for those readers who would take to it. How did the boy's leg come to have been moved into a less painful and severe placement? Since that isn't addressed, it leaves open some possibilities down the road *if* we want to pursue them. A person, perhaps, came by and helped but for some reason couldn't stay to help further.

Who might that be? There are other possibilities. A writer must always build in potential opportunities for later. He can always go back and delete them or, as in this case, they are so incidental they can just be ignored. Having them occur naturally is so much better than going back later and trying to build a base for things. In the Milieu approach things flow – sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph because the story is writing – flowing – itself. To interrupt that with additions often interferes with the natural rhythm.

In paragraph thirteen (*Two goals loomed large . . .*) I originally ended the sentence with, *the stuff might be found on him*. Upon rereading, it seemed useful to suggest how that might come about so I added the final phase, *as he was searched for identification*. It may not have been necessary but it ties up – explains – the idea more neatly and I like that.

You just never know when personal experiences will give your writing a boost. The next paragraph (*Hiding the rings . . .*) emerges directly from an experience I had as a five year old. A girl had come over to play and I was hiding her penny, kids' ring (yes there were such things way back then – complete with colorful stones), in my mouth. As I inhaled to begin talking – you guessed it – I swallowed the ring. Luckily, it slipped past my airway and entered my esophagus instead. Mother saw to it that I had regular dates with the potty chair until it was retrieved. If a five year old's swallowing apparatus was big enough to handle a ring, surely a young teen's would be.

I suppose the following paragraph (*There was a . . .*) emerged from my boyhood as well. We had *deep* snows where I grew up and, though great on icy streets, sleds with runners did nothing but sink and stop in the snow. So, we used cardboard boxes much in the way described here. It was important to keep one, fairly sturdy, side up in front of you. Otherwise you would slip off forward and beat the box down the hill.

In the next to the last paragraph (*By the time spring*) I took the natural opportunity presented to further develop Carl's character as an independent, no-sympathy-sought-or-accepted, kind of person. One of the sentences originally read, *When he realized they were going easy on him . . .* It reads better – gives less room for interpretation – when the word *intentionally* is inserted before going. *When he realized they were intentionally going easy on him he quite playing*.

Characters need to be trait-set early in the short novel and immediately in a short story. In the story, a writer must often rely on one straightforward concise blast of description. In a short novel we have the luxury of a bit more time so we can parcel out the information by sprinkling it here and there. That is what has happened for Carl in this first chapter. Right up to the final phrases the readers continue to grow this picture of Carl.

One remaining thought. The mother is obviously poor and yet she made sure young Carl had a warm winter coat and gloves. It supports the impression

we need to grow that regardless of possible improprieties in her personal life, she did intend to take good care of her children. Interestingly, this concept may well be missed by many readers while the opposite never would be. Think of the impact on the mother's character that would have been created if we had used phrases such as, *He pulled his skimpy, summer, jacket, tight as he leaned into the biting, wind blown, snow,* or *He reached down into the freezing snow with his ungloved hands and began the arduous task of moving himself toward home.*

At the end, I felt the need to lighten things, thus, the final, heartfelt, paragraph. A chapter should always end by leaving the reader either wanting more, appreciating what has just been experienced, or smiling (which, of course, sometimes translates to quiet weeping for the *fairer* sex. Do I dare use that phrase anymore or will the A.S.P.C.A. come after me or is that E.R.A. – E.P.A. perhaps? Those acronyms get all jumbled together inside this O.G.H. – old gray head? At any rate, I hope we accomplished some of all three here.)

[And what did *that* last paragraph attempt to illustrate?]



## PART FOUR

### Chapter Two Begins

**It had been eating at Carl all day – just as it had every day since he had made the terrible blunder.**

We begin in a mysterious way with an unspecified problem to grasp the reader's attention. We follow it with a paragraph that holds promise of getting some answers. The story has moved from morning at the shop to evening – that naturally easy, between chapters, segue I spoke about earlier. Because it is a new chapter we needed to specify the name of the character. *Him*, would not do. Once that is established we can revert to a pronoun.

**He closed and locked the door to the shop then made his way along the avenue toward the *Hamilton Arms*. He hoped the old elevator was working because the five flights of stairs were no picnic for his right leg. He'd climb them, mind you, just hoped it wouldn't be necessary.**

We have set both the upcoming scene and suggested it was probably an old building with the mention of the unreliable elevator. We also indicated Carl's sense of urgency and determination about whatever is going on in his mind.

**He was in luck and soon found himself standing at the door to apartment 501. He sighed and knocked. He heard the chain being worked and the locks turning. It was a now familiar, dear old, well-powdered, face that greeted him.**

We established the occupant was a woman without ever saying so. Next we need to accomplish two things. First, demonstrate the relationship they have. Second, fill in some of the missing information and expand what we already have. Let's see if a bit of general conversation can accomplish that.

**"I come for your grocery list, Lady Hamilton."**

**"I have it all ready. Not many things this week. It is so sweet of you to do this for me. The heat you know. It's harder on me since I became an octogenarian."**

We have reminded the reader of the season, set Lady's age, and let her

use a big word suggesting an educated person.

Carl assumed the big word either meant really old or limited physically.

“I’m happy to help.”

“Lemonade before you leave for the store?”

“That sounds wonderful. Yes. Thanks.”

The door was closed and relocked. Her apartment was small – living room, bedroom, and a kitchen with a dining area. It seemed to meet her needs. A picture of her late husband – Lord Hamilton according to her – had a place of honor on top of the TV. The Lady was a green person – furnishings, wallpaper, throw rugs. Carl took a seat on the sofa, too large for the room but comfortable. Lady was soon back with tall glasses of refreshment. She sat in a chair across from him.

Why did I use the word *‘refreshment’*? It just felt awkward repeating *‘lemonade’*. In the exchange below see how we avoided the *he said, she said* problem.

“Was it a busy day at the shop?” she asked. It was her predicable opening between them.

“No, Ma’am. Pretty slow, really. I don’t like slow days. Too much cleanin’. Too little income.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve come across my ruby ring or you would have said so.”

“Afraid not. Sorry. I’m lookin’.”

“I know you are. You are my angel.”

She reached out and patted his knee – the left one that bent as he sat there.

“Mary’s about due. Have I told you it’s gonna be a boy?”

“Yes. I started knitting him a sweater.”

“That’s very kind of you. She’ll love it.”

“I saw your bother holding hands with a young lady earlier – from the window there.”

“His first love.”

Carl smiled.

“He was a regular gentleman from what I could see.”

“He knows better than not to be. We’ve had a talk.”

Lady Hamilton nodded and smiled.

“It must be hard – you having to be like a father to all the other children.”

Carl grinned.

“I wouldn’t have it no other way. They’re my whole life.”

“I keep hoping to see *you* holding hands out there, you know. A young man your age should be making time for the fairer sex.”

**“I’m lookin’. Just haven’t found nobody for sure yet. Mama says I’ll know her when she comes along. I just need to be patient.”**

**“Patience is good, of course, but sometimes we have to help good things along – go looking, you know?”**

**“Thank you.”**

**“Thank you? I don’t understand.”**

**“Sometimes you offer me suggestions like I think my grandma would if I had one.”**

**“Grandma? I’m old enough to be your *great* grandma, son!”**

**“Either way I value your friendship. I hope you know.”**

**Again she patted his leg. She never spoke of her family. Carl didn’t know if she had children or not. He didn’t ask figuring she would let him know if she wanted him to know. There were not pictures of any as far as he could determine. Just the Lord H.”**

In the third sentence of that last paragraph I repeated the word *‘know’*. It is a subtle way of adding emphasis – in this case to the preference for privacy. Fix the sentence without the repetition and see how the *‘feel’* changes.

**He sat the glass on the end table and excused himself.**

**“I’ll be back in an hour.”**

**“Here’s some money. Will that be enough?”**

**It never was. He always said yes. There was always a dollar in change for her when he returned. It had been going on like that ever since he had discovered his terrible miscalculation.**

Again, we are leading the reader along with the hint of mystery – *his terrible miscalculation*. We have been upfront about the missing ring referred to at the outset of Chapter One and have finally established its ownership. Now, that story needs to be completed.

**Carl walked to the only grocery store in the area where he was greeted by the owner and his wife with hugs.**

**“You are such a nice boy,” she said lingering over her embrace and patting his back.**

In this short passage we have established his reputation in the eyes of his long term neighbors and immediately below will counterbalance it by having Carl describe the struggle raging inside of him. Note the use of the single quote mark. Is that working?

**‘If they only knew,’ he said to himself. He went about the task of filling the order. ‘I’m such an idiot that I entered the wrong apartment and instead of lifting a ring from horrible old Beatrice Browning, the ugly, moneyed, crank up on six, I let myself into 501 by mistake. How could I have done that? By the time I heard about my mix-up the ruby ring was long gone.**

**‘At first I figured I could make it up to her by doin’ stuff – like gettin’**



these groceries and walkin' her to and from the park – but then when she told me it was like a family heirloom, passed down through her family to Lady, I got sick to my stomach over it. I see now that nothin' will do but to get it back for her.

'I wish she knowed how sorry I am but I can't tell her. Maybe I should but I can't. I like her so much and I know she likes me. I don't want to risk losing that. The shame is eatin' me up. Maybe havin' to tell her someday will be the punishment I deserve.'

He reassembled his smile and paid the bill, then walked the eleven blocks back to her apartment.

At last the reader is privy to two essential elements of the storyline. Carl stole the precious ring by mistake and the guilt about it is *eatin'* him up.

Notice that I am indicating Carl's social level by emphasizing his special speech pattern. Always work to accomplish that in the simplest way as possible. In the case of Carl and Tommy I am simply losing the 'g' in 'ing' endings and doing some modest messing with verb-noun agreement. If I wanted to make them sound more back-woodsy I could, in addition, throw in '*fer*' for 'for', '*ya*' for 'you', and '*ta*' for 'to'. You can see how it takes only the most subtle modifications to suggest such things. Any *more* than that requires too much effort *fer da reada ta go trough*.

In the service of suggesting educational limitations I really wanted to write the word '*heirloom*' as the two words '*hair loom*'! It would have been the source for a smile, but a man in his profession would certainly be familiar with the term so, most reluctantly, I went with heirloom.

Initially, I began the final sentence in that last passage with the words, *He put on his smile, . . .* It needs to indicate that smiling took some effort for Carl – that he had to force it. Those words (put on) achieved that, I think, but I wanted it to clearly take more effort so I went with the more off beat word, *reassembled*. At first I used just *assembled*, and was pleased with it but *reassembled* better suggests the regularity with which he must put on his front. I believe it works. The re-readings will tell.

If that passage is successful the reader will understand that Carl is less than a happy person at least in this one area. It should add to their building compassion for the character. In fact, if we have done our job right he will now be a loveable thief and the *thief* segment of that description will be so diluted that it is already forgiven by the reader.

I just reread what we have written so far. Although I'm relatively pleased with what we have accomplished, it is clear we have been writing the backstory and only hinting at the most trivial aspects of the real time story. (Not a bad ploy, actually, although initially I hadn't planned on lingering over it this long.) We must now quickly set the parameters of our story into the present and future (which we really have not even specified in our own thinking yet). We have a

character feeling bad about having stolen a ring that carries sentimental value to a nice old lady and have indicated his determination to find ways of making it up to her while continuing to search for it. It has all been essential stuff but won't hold a reader's attention much longer. We must soon introduce something powerful and compelling – threatening, perhaps. (I like that possibility. It may present an intriguing story line – Carl, the 'good' bad guy vs. a really 'bad', bad guy or guys. A writer's job is always to lead the reader in his examination of possibilities.)

Let's get Carl deeply immersed in his search and see what wonderful action line may develop. By the end of this chapter (about six more pages) we need to make the mission clear – complete with good guys and bad guys, intrigue and mystery, danger and . . . more danger. Our gentle Carl, smudged faced, innocent, Tommy, and dear old Lady H, are about to be in for the ride of their lives! (Now all we have to do is create it! What fun!)

**“About the ring, Lady Hamilton. Do you happen to have a picture of it? Ruby rings come in all shapes and sizes you know.”**

**“Let's see. I suppose there would be one in the insurance envelope. Lord Hamilton was a stickler for following procedure. As I recall he had pictures taken. They may be in the wall safe. I can never get it open. Will you come into the bedroom and help me?”**

**It really hadn't been a question, nor had it been an order – more like a gentle request which assumed a positive reply. It was the last thing Carl wanted to do – learn the combination to her safe – but he complied and followed her. In the belief Carl would retrieve it for her she had not filed a claim.**

That last sentence really doesn't belong with the content of that paragraph but the message had to be delivered. I hope it doesn't sit there too awkwardly.

**“Lord always had a picture hanging in front of it. I figure any robber who got in here would know where to look so I just let it be there in the open. Nobody's ever in here besides me anyway.”**

**She went to her dresser and opened the top drawer. She withdrew a small piece of paper and returned to Carl's side at the safe. She read.**

**“Eighteen right, ten left, sixteen right.”**

**The safe was soon open. Carl stood back so Lady could go through the contents.**

**“Look in this big, thick, envelope. It's from our insurance company. I'll keep searching.”**

**“This seems to be what we're looking for, alright.”**

**She turned to see what he had. She nodded.**

**“Take out the picture of the ring and then lock the rest back in the safe.”**

**With that completed, they returned to the better light of the living**

room.

**“Can I make a copy?”**

**“Certainly if you think that will help. Make lots of them if you want.”**

Begin back ten paragraphs (to: *She went to her dresser . . .*). Read down to here and see how the conversation flows without using the, ‘somebody said’ format.

**“It is certainly a beautiful ring,” Carl said suddenly taken with its true quality – something he had hurried past in his initial rush to sell it.**

**Lady stroked the picture and her eyes moistened.**

**“It is *that*, but even more *precious* than beautiful.”**

**“I’ll have this picture back within the hour. I’ll take good care of it. Don’t be concerned.”**

**“Goodness, child, if I were going to be concerned I certainly wouldn’t have given you the combination to my safe. I’d trust you with my life, you know.”**

**Again, Carl forced a smile as the guilt churned in his gut. He turned and let himself out. It was after six. He could make the copy and have the original back before seven. For the rest of the week his lunch hours would be spent revisiting his childhood haunts ten blocks to the north. It seemed strange knowing he could trust them – them being the contemptible scalawags they were.**

In the first sentence of the last paragraph (*Again, Carl . . .*) we came face to face with the decision about using the typical modifiers about feeling guilty (*gnawed* or *ate at* his gut) or try something different. Carl’s language will be littered with clichés because that’s how his cultural associates speak. So, I wanted to try something more original. My first ideas included ‘*chewed* and *bit* at his gut’ but they were merely word substitutions within the same old pattern – and not very good ones, I decided. I wanted lots of negative power delivered just a bit out of sync with the expected pattern. ‘*As the guilt churned in his gut*’ accomplished both things for us I believe – power and unexpected. And why did I choose what might be seen as a distasteful word – *gut* – rather than ‘stomach’, ‘insides’, or ‘gastric balloon’ (I actually once read a manuscript which contained that latter phrase – shudder!)? I wanted to keep the passage in sync with his vocabulary – *his* most likely term.

Now, notice the asterisks below. The convention is to use three to indicate the passage of time. Some publishers specify some other indicator.

How many ways can you say somebody wakes up in the morning? I’m not sure but again I chose to go with the out of the ordinary in the first sentence below. Some grammarians won’t like the sentence but I wanted a short shot that made the point without weaving it in and out among a bevy of distracting words. I continue that approach in the next two phrases. In the second sentence I try to accomplish a LOT in an energetic blast to illustrate Carl’s revved up mental state.

\* \* \*

Carl met the day excited. He got to the shop well ahead of time – even before Mr. James. In fact, the sheets were removed, the front counter dusted, and the cash drawer set up by the time Jasper walked through the door.

**“You sick, Kid?”** came the man’s opening volley as he paused once inside and surveyed the room, deliberately.

See how that next sentence is structured to further heighten Carl’s energy level by contrasting it against the easier, more measured, physical, manner presented by Jasper.

**“No Sir. Just feelin’ full of it today, I guess. I may need a little extra time over noon.”**

**“It’ll come off your pay.”**

**“I know. Wasn’t askin’ for special treatment.”**

Jasper was only JASPER on the outside. Carl had figured *that* out by the end of the first week he had worked in the shop some eight years earlier. He dropped out of school at fourteen to go to work in the shop as clean up and delivery boy. It paid poorly but money had not been Carl’s primary goal. He understood that he needed to know more about the value of merchandise – the kinds that made their ways in and out of pawnshops. Once inside a hotel room or apartment, he allowed himself no more than a minute to survey the situation and make the decision as to what one thing he was going to lift. The better his knowledge about value, the more effective his clandestine sorties would become. His goal was to watch and listen and ask questions. He had been an excellent student.

In the first sentence of the paragraph above I borrowed a wrinkle often used on the internet today. I believe it is called ‘shouting’ when a word is written in all upper case letters. (And here I thought I had invented that in the journals I kept as a grade school kid!) The first ‘Jasper’ contrasts with ‘JASPER’ to suggest the real guy was a far softer being than the one often demonstrated.

**The morning dragged on. He was thankful for the large number of customers. Still, the morning dragged on. Carl usually took lunch from one until two o’clock after the noon hour rush was over. The clock struck one.**

By using the repetition (*dragged on*) I sought to dramatize the sluggish creeping of time from Carl’s perspective. I could have stacked up a variety of other eternity extending adjectives to accomplish the same end but I liked the simple words and the simple construction. It allows an easy transition to the next time sequence in the story. In four lines we covered the entire morning to the satisfaction of the reader. Originally, I had written . . . one to two o’clock . . . The intervening ‘to’ made it awkward so I changed *to* to ‘until’.

**“I’ll be on my way now, if that’ okay, Sir.”**

**“Go. Go. Don’t run over too long. We got a business to run here, you know,”** Jasper said.

**Carl heard: 'I'll be glad to see you when you return, Son. I value your help and friendship.'**

There was no need to add, Jasper said in order to identify the speaker. I did it as a lead-in to Carl's mental response.

**He took the bus north and exited some ten blocks away. He hoped to visit at least four shops before heading back south to Jasper's. He entered the first, small, smudged stone, building sitting as if helpless there in the clutches of two much larger, foreboding, structures.**

I wanted to reaffirm the city element – the not as nice or comfortable as we'd like it to be city element. The reader must not forget the unfriendly milieu in which Carl grew up and in which life forces him to continue that struggle. Find the word 'clutches'. It went through several transformations beginning with *shadows*, followed by *grasp*. I think *clutches* better suggests the helplessness of the abject scene I am trying to paint.

**He entered the shop.**

**"Gus, you ol' son-of-a-gun. Remember me, Carl, bearer of all things great and wonderful back when I could barely see over the counter?"**

**"Carl. As I live and breathe. It's been years. Figured you'd fallen in somewhere and couldn't get out. Leg still bothering you, I see."**

**"As all of life's possible bad stuff goes, I'm doing really well."**

**Gus leaned forward over the counter and lowered his voice.**

**"Got stuff?"**

**"No, actually. I do have a picture of a ring I'm looking for. I really need to find it. Would have been up for sale about three months ago. You'd have probably given under three hundred for it and sold it for a thousand."**

We have now established the ring stealing timeline. It was a relatively recent happening. (I figured it would be! How about you?)

**He showed Gus the picture.**

**"Nice piece. Looks very old. Mid to late eighteen hundreds I'd guess. What's the deal?"**

**Carl understood the talk – it meant yes I've handled it but won't admit to it unless I know for sure I'm off the hook.**

**"It was taken from an elderly friend of mine – a family heirloom. I'm just trying to get it back for her. She's a dear, sweet, old lady who's really sad about the loss."**

**"That's always been your problem."**

**"What?"**

**"Your conscience. In our business you don't dare have no conscience. It'll just get you into trouble. Know anything more about it?"**

**He was still not fully convinced he could trust the young man, gone from his life for so long.**

Note the use of the word ‘fully’ just above. I inserted it after the first draft feeling the need to make it seem the man was leaning toward giving his young friend the benefit of the doubt. Read the sentence with and without ‘fully’ and see if you think it helped.

**“My info says it was being shown on the street by Hec Brown.”**

**“Hec’s no thief.”**

**“He’s a fence and not such a careful one. I hear he’s in jail as of last week. Just hopin’ he moved it before he got pinched, you know?”**

Why add this? Suspense. Hurdles. A possible stumbling block Carl may have to face.

**Gus nodded and the two of them stood eye to eye across the counter searching each other’s souls. At last Gus straightened up.**

**“Suppose I knew about it? I wouldn’t just hand it over for nothing, you know.”**

**“I’m serious about gettin’ it back. Name a price. I know you’ll treat me right. We been through too much together for you not to give me that.”**

**Gus nodded and spoke.**

**“We both know Hec would sell his own mother if he stood to make a buck. I took it off his hands. Assuming it was hot I turned it around right away for a small profit. My boy sold it to *Johnson’s Pawn* over on Hickory. That’s all I know. Been out of my hands for nearly three months. I do remember it though.”**

**He picked up the picture from the counter and pointed.**

**“See the filigree. Imitation of early 19<sup>th</sup> century work out of Germany or Scandinavia. This piece was most likely made in pre-World War One England, however. It’s a case of the copy being worth as much or more than the original – the copies are so rare.”**

**Carl was fascinated by the lesson but was more eager to move on. He thanked Gus and did just that – moved on. Hickory Street was three blocks east. He knew the shop and had occasionally sold pieces there as a boy. It was under new ownership so he would be starting from scratch.**

Why didn’t we allow Gus to just have the ring and get on with the story? Oh. That’s right. *Finding* the ring IS the story. We established that in the opening paragraph.

**He introduced himself as working at *Jasper’s* and explained he was searching for the specific ring there in the picture for a client. He assured him that the utmost privacy would pervade the recovery transaction.**

**“Had it. Don’t, no more,” came the surprisingly candid response from the new owner – a shifty eyed, Barney Fife look-alike.**

I suppose it’s cheating and or lazy writing but referring to a universally known figure can give immediate form to a character when there are more important things to attend to than description. I hope the shifty eyed reference

immediately transformed him from loveable Barney to sinister Barney. How well do you think all of that worked?

**Carl cocked his head and looked puzzled. The owner continued.**

**“Was robbed about eight weeks ago – maybe nine or so. That ring and two similar to it was all that was took. Strange. Like they was stealin’ for a client with a certain thing in mind, you know?”**

**“No trace of it then? No way to track it down?”**

**“There may be. About a week later the other two rings was sold to my cousin Vincent over on Madison – *Harley’s Pawnshop*. He may have some records. Not sure, of course.”**

**“How far’s that from here?”**

**“Five minutes due west.”**

**He pointed.**

**Carl was again on the move. He entered *Harley’s* at 1:48 and went through the information he had received at the previous shop.**

**“I know. My cousin, Barney, just called about you. I called Gus. You check out okay.”**

**Vincent produced a tray from beneath the counter and pointed.**

**“That ruby is the only one I have left. Had the two of them. Sold one a few weeks ago.”**

**“Do you remember the person who you bought them from?”**

**“Hard to forget. A huge man – mid thirties, maybe – hard to say when they are that big. Had odd tattoos – a crescent moon here on his right cheek and a sun here on the left. Creepy! Spoke with a accent – German, maybe Russian. Not English or French or Alabam, for sure.”**

**“Don’t suppose you have a address.”**

**The man pulled his glasses down on his nose and looked at Carl across the top. Carl understood. No records unless there was a pawn ticket issued. It had been an outright purchase.**

**Carl’s heart sank. Things had been looking so good and then it was as if the gods suddenly pulled the plug. He thanked Vincent and turned to leave.**

**“You know. . . there might be one chance left,” the man said, leaving from behind the counter to approach Carl. “He got into Manny’s cab. Manny’s worked this area as a independent for years. He might remember where he took him. I’m sure he couldn’t forget the guy.”**

Traditional form suggests that I should have identified the speaker above immediately after his first utterance in the paragraph – (“You know,” *the man said*). But I wanted to make short work of the exchange so I worked it into the second phrase instead. I think it remains clear. Try it the other way and see how much additional work would be necessary to set the scene and deliver the message.

**“Okay. Thank you. *Manny*, you say?”**

**“Yes. Manny. Red bottom. White top. The cab, not Manny. Well, as far as I know at least.”**

**It was worth a smile and chuckle between them. Carl was out of time but he left that first leg of his search on an up note. He was back in the shop by two twenty.**

**“Two twenty,” Jasper called out in order to emphasize the amount of time Carl would be docked. He wouldn’t be, of course. It was just a Jasper thing.**

A mini-struggle here. Having established both Jasper and JASPER above, should it be in caps in that sentence? I decided not. Prolonging or repeating *cutsie* seems amateurish. (To see a book long setting in which it does work – the words being happiness and HAPPINESS – see my *How to be Deep Down Forever Happy*.)

**Carl nodded in response and buried his smile somewhere close to his heart. Jasper was not married and had no children of own. Carl assumed that made him in some way special in the man’s life. He was a man of interesting contrasts – patient as any man on earth while teaching a new skill but ruthless in criticism once it was supposed to have been acquired. He let it be known that *he* was in charge and yet clearly looked kindly upon the quiet innovations Carl brought to the place and system. The sheets had been Carl’s idea – he just began spreading several at night and removing them in the morning without having any words about it with Jasper beforehand. One morning soon after that, a dozen new sheets were delivered. He rewired the ceiling lights so half could be turned off at closing to save on electricity and still allow full vision of the place during the night. He ordered 500 advertising pens to give out to the customers – Jasper increased the second order to five thousand without ever speaking of it. Way back when Carl turned fourteen, soon after he began working there, Jasper directed the boy to a clergyman for a birds and bees talk – nothing he would undertake himself but something he would see was undertaken.**

I know. That last sentence really doesn’t fit with the obvious topic of the paragraph but I wanted it said so slipped it in. If it didn’t bother you as you read it, I suppose I succeeded without doing too much damage to the English language. The prolonged characterization of Jasper, clearly a minor character, was less about him and more about the kind of man who had been such a major influence in Carl’s life. He had to get his positive traits from somewhere.

For now, at least, I am happy to leave the second chapter right there. We could add some late afternoon details but unless they would move the story forward and engage the reader’s curiosity I see no purpose for them. I may change my thoughts later. It *is* an abrupt halt. I think I will add a final sentence



or so to put a more definite period at the end of the chapter.

**It was like a father-son bond without the hugs and truly personal discussions. Though it would never be said between them, both treasured the relationship.**



## **PART FOUR**

### **Chapter Three**

In this chapter I want to accomplish several things. First, solidify some family and personal information about Carl – try to get *all* that behind us. Second, keep Tommy fresh in the reader’s mind because I have the idea he may begin playing a bigger role. I like the character and think his vestiges of innocence and his pseudo-worldliness – typical of the thirteen-year-old psyche – could make an interesting addition. Third, present the gritty details of Carl’s ‘night job’. And fourth, begin to lay out the seriousness of the plot – finding the ring among a bevy of yet to be designated bad guys. We’ve already introduced the generally unsavory appearing fat man.

**Carl wasn’t comfortable being out on the streets at night. With his obvious handicap he was an easy target for those who would accost him for his wallet. He would return to find Manny the following morning – he wasn’t due at work until ten on Wednesdays.**

We needed to make it legitimate for ‘eager’ Carl to postpone his visit with Manny so we can work in the other information first.

**Tommy met him at the door as Carl was locking it for the night.**

**“Little Bro. How goes it?”**

**“Not so good. Mary Beth dumped me for Jacob.”**

**“Sorry. Tough. Been there, you know?”**

**“So? I’m askin’ for advice here, not reminiscin’ Big Guy.”**

**Carl smiled.**

**“So you are. Well, you won’t like it.”**

**“Let me decide about that – it’s what you’re always sayin’.”**

**“Okay. Here it is. Move on to somebody else. Nothing looks more pathetic than a guy sulkin’ around over his broken heart. Nobody wins. The other guys think you’re a wimp. The girl realizes what awesome power she has over guys, and you feel miserable – less the man than you want to feel. Move on, you see. Focus on what *she lost*. Take what you’ve learned**

from her and move on.”

“Well, I have learned lots of good stuff from her – tongue stuff especially. She was always on me for doin’ or sayin’ the wrong stuff. I suppose that was learnin’ what *not* to do, right?”

“*What not to* is just as important as *what to*, I’d say – probably more. You’ll find girls each have their own lists of *what to*’s and *what not to*’s.”

“Really? This girl thing is gettin’ complicated.”

Carl laughed out loud. Tommy didn’t ask knowing he’d just be put off about it. However, he had his brother’s ear so he’d work it for more information.

“How have you and Jenny got along so good for so long – what? Four years now?”

“Almost six. She let me kiss her for the first time on our third date – it was my sixteenth birthday.”

“You must have been a really slow starter, Bro. Sixteen? I been kissin’ since I was eleven – *seriously* kissin’ since I was twelve. It just keeps gettin’ better.”

“Didn’t say I hadn’t kissed other girls.”

“Oh. Okay then. You and Jenny *do it*?”

*Do it*, of course, is popular parlance for having sex and I wanted no question about that in the sentence above. I italicized the phrase so the reader would not be in even a momentary quandary about whether it referred to Carl and Jenny kissing – which had been the topic – or having sex. Re-read it and see if the italics prevent the problem.

“Tommy, my boy. Listen up.”

Carl stopped and faced him. They had just entered the alley leading to the rear entrance of their apartment. He reached down and put his hands on his brother’s shoulders.

“When you aren’t especially fond of a girl and you do it with her you might brag about it to your buddies. When you do it with a girl you love, it’s private; you never speak of it to others. So, whether or not we do it, is nobody else’s business.”

“You and Jenny in love?”

“I’m not sure. I think, maybe, yes.”

“How do you know when you’re in love?”

“I wish I knew. I guess it just gradually seeps into your soul and one day you know that’s what the feelin’ is.”

“You gonna get married or go shack up?”

“You ask way too many questions.”

“I think I have a right to know. Once you leave home I won’t have you to talk to about stuff.”

“Who says? I’ll always be here for you, Little Bro. We’re natural

family. I won't never let *nothin'* come between us. And Jenny understands that. When I'm old and in a wheelchair I'm countin' on *you* to push me around, you understand?"

Tommy grinned up into Carl's face and reached his arm around his waist. Carl pulled him close and they moved on down the alley.

Okay. We extended the nature of the boys' relationship and sprinkled it with some more socially redeeming qualities where Carl was concerned. At one point Carl shows his own uncertainty (*I wish I knew.*) – his fallibility. Tommy accepts it suggesting he knows his brother is human and that's alright.

Every week he tried to spend private time alone with each of his brothers and sisters. Tommy was the brightest of the lot and the most sensitive so he needed more time, thus the walk home from work most afternoons and the time at the shop in the mornings. His next two younger brothers had joined the service so were no longer his responsibility. That left nine. With the new baby, Mary would probably be at home for some time. She was good help for their mother. The two sets of twin boys – only ten months apart (God have mercy on that household!) – were now nine. At that age they preferred to live their lives all quite separate from the family – well, except for food and spending money – so they remained cloistered in their room or ran with their friends. Fortunately they got on well with one another and during any given day only minimal blood was spilled among them. The rest of the children held their own in and around the others.

As was his habit, Carl left at ten after he had seen the younger family members bathed and put to bed. Tommy was becoming a big help with that evening routine and corralled and hosed down the twins pretty much by himself. He never asked where Carl went – assuming it had to do with one or both of two things: the green bank bag and Jenny – perhaps a small second job and a big dose of kissin'.

I hope we have satisfied any lingering questions readers may have about the family. It serves no purpose to go into it further.

Although it was only the *third*, there was a *Fourth of July* party in the smallest of the residential buildings in the area – building 'K' in Carl's scheme. Most of the two dozen residents would be in attendance in the ballroom down on the first floor. He had his eye on six specific apartments. Understanding the finest of the jewels would spend the evening on the fingers and wrists, and around the necks of the women, he would easily find his specialty – items seldom worn and of medium to low end value – left behind and ready for lifting. It was a four story, quarried stone, flat roofed, building with its back to an unlit alley – ideal in every way for plying his trade.

He kept a small, metal, storage shed in the alley, second block west.

It was there he kept the tools of his trade. He got what he needed and locked it. Crossing two blocks through alleys, he arrived at the building. He immediately climbed the north fire escape to the roof, secured two ropes, and dangled them – some twenty feet apart – over the side where they reached just below the second floor windows. The ropes were knotted at one-foot intervals to ease the act of climbing. He pulled his gray ski mask down over his head. It was a good match in color to the sweat suit he chose for the occasion. Medium gray for graystones. Light brown for brownstones. Dark, red-orange, for brick. He descended the east rope to the level of the second floor. Once he was over the side it required mostly arm and shoulder strength. He became a whole different being – light, agile, competent, complete. Legs were of minimal importance and *one* was more than sufficient.

Hint: Re the italicized *one* in that last sentence. Without the artificial emphasis the *one was* combo could trick the reader into thinking it was about to indicate *someone was* rather than referring to *one leg was*. Most would have quickly muddled past the problem but I think that simple ploy rendered the muddling unnecessary.

In the sentence before that one there is a list of four items (– *light, . . .*). In the western cultures people are most comfortable with three items in a row and it is worth a writer's time and effort to follow that well ingrained expectation. When you *don't*, do something to set it apart from the usual three part sequence. I tried to accomplish that by using alliteration between the third and fourth words. I think it made it legitimate and prevented the typical awkward feeling. Most writers would have connected the final two words with the conjunction *and*. I preferred the staccato effect leaving them separate but equal.

The first window was open and he was soon inside. Had it been locked he would have moved on. He never broke in. His success depended on the fact that no one ever realized he had been there. The bedrooms were set across the backs of the apartments, which added to the ease of his work that night. In that first apartment, the door to the wall safe hung open – trusting folks. The jewelry box inside yielded a pearl necklace – it had been relegated to the bottom suggesting it was not an often-used piece. He was back outside within the sixty-second period he allowed himself. He moved easily, though with great care, from window to window. He preferred to work bottom to top. It presented shorter climbs – one story at a time on the return trip. That spread the strain out over three short bursts back to the roof. Had he begun with the top story and worked his way down, when finished, he would have to make the continuous three story climb back to the top.

The other five went as smoothly as the first. It was as if they had set things up just for his visit. They *had*, of course, because Carl built his

approach according to how folks operated. A half hour later he had stowed his gear back inside his well-secured shed.

He walked the three blocks to Jenny's place – a two bedroom apartment shared with three roommates. Two were stewardesses. When they were out of town he and Jenny could have some privacy. Not so that night. They spent a few minutes on the balcony and said good night. He wanted to get an early start the next morning and Jenny had Beauty School classes all day. During the final, lingering, kiss, he thought about Tommy – suddenly amazed that Little Bro was old enough to be sharing that same wonderful feeling with a girl. He'd seen it come into the lives of the other two boys but it was somehow different with Tommy. He would never admit it but Tommy was his favorite. He liked the boy's spontaneity and openness and the wonderful questions that he could fire at the speed of a Gatling Gun. He appreciated his unfaltering loyalty, trust, and honesty. He just enjoyed having him around.

Well, I was surprised about Carl's *kissing thoughts*. How about you? I believe it worked well, however.

Carl transferred the six pieces of jewelry to the green bag and locked it. He slipped it under Tommy's pillow and kissed him on his forehead. He made similar rounds of the others and then spent a few minutes over coffee with his mother. She was always exhausted. He wished he could fix that but he couldn't.

In a longer piece we could add dialog here to expand the 'mother' character. I chose not to muddy the waters with the new character. How her children were fathered will remain a mystery. The simple mention of *exhaustion* seals her tireless efforts on her family's behalf. [Note the contradiction that arises when using both exhaustion and tireless in the same sentence. See how you can fix that.]

\* \* \*

Seven a.m. the next morning found Carl on the streets searching for Manny. Seven-thirty found him in the red and white cab's back seat.

"I'm not lookin' to go nowhere, Manny, but I'll pay the meter charge. I need information. You picked up a very large man with an accent from the pawnshop there a week or so back. He had odd cheek tattoos as I understand it. Remember him?"

"Oh, yes. One big, scary, dude. Tried to pay me in Euros but I refused. He finally dug up enough greenbacks. Made guttural sounds the whole time he was in here. Like some bad guy out of a James Bond movie."

"Where did you take him?"

"Troy Hotel – corner of Wilson and 71<sup>st</sup>."

As a convention I italicize places (like the *Troy Hotel*) when they appear in

description but *not* when in dialog. I don't know how to speak in italics!

**"I know the place. Expensive. Anybody seem to meet him there?"**

**"Yes, actually. A woman – faux classy if you know what I mean."**

**Carl wasn't sure.**

**"A prostitute?"**

**"No. Well, maybe. Not what I meant. Looked all upper class until she opened her mouth. Can't pull that act off on looks alone you know."**

**"I see. Like me trying to pass myself off as Lord Hamilton."**

**The analogy lofted over Manny's head. He shrugged."**

**"You catch anything else about him?"**

**"She called him something like, Gunther – 'Gunther Baby' to be exact."**

**"She have a accent?"**

**"Yeah. Like his. German maybe. I was glad when he got out. Thought his weight was gonna bust my shocks."**

**"Seen him since?"**

**"Two days ago. Entering the Luxembourg Café near the hotel – he and the girl."**

**"Thanks, Manny. You've been a great help. What do I owe you?"**

**"If you find him just don't tell him where I am. Little ol' *Red* here probably couldn't take another outing with him."**

**"You're very kind. Thank you."**

**"You're a Welshman – something my ma used to say instead of welcome – to be funny."**

**Carl exited the cab. Manny rolled down the window. He remembered one more piece of information.**

**"The Gunther guy has a scar – old – running the length of the right side of his throat – like the leavin's of a knife blade I'm thinkin'."**

**Carl thanked him again and headed off in the direction of the *Troy Hotel*. He'd been there on other occasions – just never entered through the front door before. It had a majestic two story entry lounge with everything maintained as it had been when it was built, a hundred years before. One sank into the carpet. The same with the antique chairs. Carl sat and tried to set a plan. What would he do if Gunther strolled by? What did his next step need to be? It seemed he was still miles away from discovering what had become of the ruby ring.**

**Suddenly, there he was – like a lumbering mountain with huge shoulders and a neck too large to measure. His features were engulfed in pads of fatty flesh, his teeth crooked and unsightly. The man's hair was short and black and had clearly not met a comb or shampoo for some weeks. For the first time, Carl understood what it meant to feel a shiver run up one's spine.**



I felt the story needed a very scary villain so I lingered a bit over his description and personal hygiene. Once that description represented a person I would not want to meet in a dark alley, I stopped. (Think about the construction of the last sentence, here – ‘*Once that description . . .*’)

**The man stopped as if looking for something. Carl stood and approached him.**

**“Gunther, I believe?” Carl began more hesitantly than he had expected.**

**The big man looked down on him from his six-six, maybe six-ten, foot frame.**

**“*Günter*,” came the heavy, guttural, correction.**

**Believing that he didn’t have some of those sounds in his oral repertoire, Carl skipped the name and continued.**

**“I was told you might be interested in certain kinds of rings – rubies in gold settings?”**

**Again it came out a question.**

**“Who say?”**

**“Nobody in particular. Word’s out on the street. I just picked it up. I have connections if you have certain needs.”**

**“Word on the street is wrong. Leave me, now.”**

**The big man turned and walked to the desk requesting his key. That was really what Carl was going for, anyway. He listened and watched – room 938. He wrote it on the back page of his pocket notebook.**

**The Faux Class girl approached – clearly late – and Günter returned the key. He and she left through the front door. Carl took an elevator to the seventh floor. There he took another up to the ninth. Carl was as careful as he was bright. He found 938 and made the necessary calculations so he could locate it from outside. He figured he couldn’t count on there being an unlocked window, although in the past, he had some success with the hotel’s patio doors, which opened onto the balconies. When he returned that night he would bring a circle cutting, glass cutter; if necessary, he would cut an opening large enough to reach through and unlock the glass door.**

I know, that last sentence is too full of circular *glass cutter/cutting*. On the first try I wrote, . . . *he would bring a circular glass cutter*. That was not what I meant – a glass cutter which was circular in shape. So, I went with the repetition. How could we fix that? I’ll live with it as it is.

**He returned to the lobby and exited through the service entrance, which opened into a narrow alley. He was facing the rear of an office building. He circled around to the front and entered, making his way to the ninth floor. He was searching for a rear window from which he could reconnoiter – pinpoint the rear of room 938 in the *Troy*. It took some doing,**

having to pose as a workman, there to look into a complaint about a window seal. It worked and he was soon peering across the expanse above the alley. He located the room – one large window and one sliding door leading onto the small balcony. He studied the building and determined that repelling down from the roof was the only viable way to get there.

In a longer piece we could have expanded that paragraph into several pages of give and take between Carl and the receptionist and others. We could have used it to showcase his charm and quick wits.

**‘Eight floors above it,’ he thought. ‘Should be a genuine rush up there. Dark brown stone. Door is lever opened rather than knob opened. Makes it easier and safer. The old wood-framed, glass, door is probably hasp locked. Guests hate the complication of locking and unlocking them so usually leave them open.’**

To his good fortune lights had been left on in the room. He took his jeweler’s eyepiece from his shirt pocket and replaced the near point lens with one designed for distance – specially made for his night job. He surveyed the room in search of a likely place to keep the ring. Nothing jumped out at him. The room had all the usual places.

**‘Probably not a wall safe in an old building like that although the picture on the north wall seems off center like it could be covering something recessed between studs that were not placed symmetrically. Maybe, maybe not. Like the hasps, some guests also dislike reopening safes and often forget to lock them when they leave the room.’**

He took time to sketch the essential landmarks on the rear of the building, then left, assuring the receptionist that the window should be fine, now. She thanked him, winked, and slid a business card in his direction. He picked it up, returned her smile, and exited to the hall. Upon sliding the card into his shirt pocket he noticed writing on the back. **‘Call me, Cutie.’** There was also a cell phone number.

Carl smiled. He didn’t consider himself cute or handsome as some others had described him. He saw himself as a grotesquely stiffened leg with a body attached. That left no room for good looks. Later, he and Jenny would have a good chuckle about the card. Neither harbored jealous tendencies. They trusted each other completely.

He was back at work early, needing to busy himself until that night. Before boarding the bus south, he had placed a payphone call to the front desk at the *Troy*. It was for Günter in 938. ***“Meet me at the Luxembourg this evening. I will be there sometime between nine and ten. I have the information you need.”*** If the big lummoX took the bait his room would be empty during that hour.

Later in the morning it hit him. What if *Faux Class* stayed behind

while 'Gunther' went out? She might be there in the room! Carl would just have to deal with what he found.

\* \* \*

"I need to skip out a hour or so earlier than usual tonight, Little Bro," Carl said as Tommy used the key to lock the shop door. Handling the closing gave him a sense of being grown up. It gave Carl a good feeling to know he was helping foster that.

The first sentence in the paragraph above posed a structural problem. It concerns the use of the adjective 'the' before the word 'key'. It is Carl's key not Tommy's. Originally I used *'his'* key, wanting to denote Carl. That made the intention messy – *his* could be Carl or Tommy. *'Carl'* appears twice in the paragraph as it is, so it would have been awkward to use it there as well. Bypassing specific ownership I went with 'the' suggesting singularity and thus Carl's. Do you think it worked? I could have split it into two sentences but that seemed awkward to me as well and *still* did not solve the *Carl's/his/the* decision.

"Okay. I'll do the baths, but you'll owe me dishes sometime next week."

Carl put him in a headlock and noogied him unmercifully. They giggled together as they turned down the street toward their alley.

As usual, Tommy had things to say.

"I know I can't ask what you do at night but I'm pretty sure I have it figured out."

Carl felt a sudden, disquieting, wave bathe his being.

"Speculate all you want, though I think there are better ways for you to be spending your time."

"Can't always be kissin' girls, you know," he said smiling up into his brother's face. Carl's comment had not dissuaded the boy from pursuing the topic.

"I figure you are a secret agent and you work for the government, spying on guys who come to the city to do bad stuff. Bad stuff happens at night. You go out at night. It all makes perfect sense."

"Well, I certainly am *A Gent*, though I don't try to keep it a *secret*."

Carl's attempt at humor was worth a smile between them – not a laugh or a chuckle – just a smile.

'How great to have such a trusting brother and best friend,' Carl thought.

'How great to have a brother and best friend who's a secret agent,' Tommy thought.

\* \* \*

Carl carried his sweat suit and supplies in a black, leather, 'Doctor's bag'. That night he walked with a cane – a necessary part of his paraphernalia that would not fit inside the bag. The fire escapes on the

back of the building were weight triggered so they could provide easy exit down to the alley but prevented anyone from easily using them to move upward. He could have done it but the time, effort, and hassle suggested another strategy would be better employed.

He entered through a side door and avoided the lobby by taking the stairs to the second floor – a mezzanine overlooking the lobby. From there he took an elevator to the top floor. He made his way to the roof exit – always open according to fire regulations. It would sound an alarm when opened but that was easily rewired.

Once onto the roof he found the landmark, which told him he was directly above the balcony on which he needed to land. He secured the rope – thinner and longer than the usual – and fed it over the side, carefully, so it didn't dangle in front of any windows on its way. Had it been windy, he would have used a five-pound weight on the lower end to keep it stable. He tied a plastic bag to his belt – it contained items he thought he might need below. The cane was carried between his teeth.

Then, it was over the side and down the rope. He was soon standing on the balcony peeking into the well-lit, empty, room. He tied the dangling rope to the railing in a knot which could be quickly released from there but couldn't be pulled up if anybody happened onto it up on the roof. The door was locked and the window was sealed shut – not constructed to open. It was a slide lock on the inside and a lever-type handle – push it down and the door opens. The drapes were open. They overhung the glass by six inches. That was a plus. It would cover the round hole Carl would leave behind – the little circular piece of glass being set back in place with superglue and clear plastic sealing tape. The hole was soon cut – just large enough to fit his well-developed upper arm through. With the slim metal handle of the cane, he slid the latch open and pressed the lever down. The door clicked open. He was immediately inside. Out of habit he looked at his watch – 9:11. He figured he would necessarily run over his usual time allotment.

In the sentence, *The hole was soon cut –*, we have that pesky word, *through*, with which to deal (to deal with?). A more grammatically correct form might include the phrase, *just large enough through which to fit his arm*. Awkward!! So I left it in the form of more common usage. I'm sure we could have avoided the problem by replacing it with another approach to structuring the sentence but I like it as it is.

He checked for a safe behind the picture. It was there – open and empty. He worked methodically around the room, drawer by drawer, leaving things neatly in place. The desk drawer presented a felt bag – the drawstring variety in which jewelry is often kept. He opened it. Seven gold rings. Oddly, each ruby – *eight* of them in the bag – had been separated

from the ring. None of the settings was exactly like the one for which he was searching. Perhaps it was the missing one. He examined each ruby with care. One of them seemed to be a perfect match to Lady's. He put in his eyepiece and examined it more closely, comparing it with the picture. He was convinced it was hers.

It presented a quandary that required an immediate resolution: Should he take only the stone? The likelihood a stone would be immediately missed was higher, he thought, if there were an even number of settings and stones. Why was the matching setting not there? It made no sense to him. He took Lady's ruby and one setting, then replaced the bag exactly as he had found it in the drawer. 9:16. Five minutes but still lots of time if Heir G. was patient enough to last out the hour at the *Luxembourg Café*. It was where Carl assumed the man had gone, intrigued in some way by the phone message. That was not a certainty, however. He quickly searched the remaining desk drawers thinking he might find the setting. Finding nothing of interest, he decided to leave.

Outside, he again used the cane, that time to pull *shut* the slide-lock. He replaced the piece of glass. Eventually the hole would be found when the maid washed the window. That may or may not have been done daily. 9:20

On the way back to the roof he made three stops to rest, each time supporting himself on a railing. 9:24. He was back on top. He drew the rope up into a coil and put it back into the black bag with his sweat suit and other supplies. Once inside he reestablished the alarm on the door, then made his way to the first floor and back out the way he entered.

At home he found everybody asleep. He heated the coffee, knowing it would be sludge. Taking a chair at the kitchen table he examined the ring setting. In every way it appeared run of the mill. Perhaps that was why it had been left behind. It was Lady's ring that had been somehow special – the far less expensive setting rather than the ruby. But special how?

Folks, we are about to get ourselves into a pickle of the first magnitude. The problem we have to resolve is: If somebody is after Lady's ring in particular, how did this coincidence come about – the ring just happening to show up on the street at the time it was being sought?

I love pickles (sweet, dill, and story-line). In stories they require creativity and acceptable if not careful logic. If someone was looking for the ring they clearly didn't know where it had been or they'd have most likely taken it earlier (if they were bad guys). Perhaps it is one of a set and as they become available this 'person' buys them up. It would require continuing vigilance on 'his' part. It also requires some reason for 'him' to believe the ring or rings were in this particular city – rather than in any other.

I have had the kernel of an idea, of course, or else the rings would not

have been separated into stones and settings. I also introduced a foreign sounding bad guy (supposedly, at least) – a German connection back to the heyday of the filigree ring work. It will have to do with something set under the stone. What? Why? When? By Whom? How did it get there? For what purpose? Why is it being sought now after so many decades?

Those are some of the questions our pickle requires us to begin answering. What Fun! Most fiction is designed to answer a question (or several). See how the story line is suddenly being driven by the developing situation – the characters, the milieu, and ‘out-of-the-blue’ elements. As you have already determined, a big part of this approach is to weave these off the wall ideas together meaningfully – in ways that work. It is always like solving a mystery – which, by the way, our story has now become, hasn’t it?

The questions the author must continually ask himself are, *How did that come to be?* and, *What use can I make of that element that just popped up?* and, *What reactions must the characters have to whatever it is?* As an example, I initially gave Carl a stiff leg. It was on a whim to add character and maybe provide a cross for him to bear. But then, we found ways of using it. We had to explain how it came about. That led to his being a second story man (which required us to answer the question about why he needed so much money – therefore the large family and single parent). It was used to imply courage and ingenuity at the time of the fall. Later, it became a source for positive feelings of self – so competent when up on the side of a building where that leg provided no handicap. We have also used it, though not in-the-face of the reader, to subtly help build compassion for the young man. It required him to have a relatively sedentary job – the pawnshop coming together in a supportive way relative to his ‘night job’. I’m sure it will drive other aspects of the story as well. So, always raise questions about every little thing that pops up. One never knows which can be grown into useful and fascinating aspects of the story. (Remember Tommy’s conceptualization of Carl’s night time occupation? It was offered as small talk to grow the honesty of their relationship. I’m thinking that could grow into some interesting counterpoint to his life as a thief. Hmmm?)

**He secured his take into the bank bag and delivered it to Tommy’s pillow. After tucking and kissing all around, he went to bed.**

\* \* \*

**Carl arrived at the shop earlier than usual. He wanted to research Lady’s ring in the reference books Jasper kept in his office. There could be some clue there. One book led to another, which led to several websites. Carl was not web proficient. He knew somebody who was.**

\* \* \*

**“Tommy my boy,” he said as his brother deposited the bag on the counter.**

He peeled off five dollar bills. Tommy returned two. They understood the transaction.

“You know that stuff you were saying about my night job?”

“Yeah.”

Tommy perked up but looked puzzled.

“Well. I’m not admitting to what you’re thinking but if I was what you think, would you help me?”

“Of course. In a second. What? What?”

“I need your sacred promise to keep this just between me and you, okay?”

“Okay. You got my sacred promise. Now, what?”

Carl took a copy of the picture of the ring from his pocket.

“I need your computer and web savvy. I – we – need to find out the exact history of this ruby. I’ve made notes on everything I know so far.”

He tore two pages from his notebook.

“Here’s it is and a web address that should get you started. Do it yourself. Don’t ask the librarians for help. If you can’t get anywhere come back to me and we’ll try to find some other way to go about it.”

“This is great. One question, though. Couldn’t your agency do this quicker on its huge computer?”

It is natural question from a smart kid and it just showed up out of the blue for me. Once there it has to be handled. How does Carl handle it?

“Agents working deep undercover don’t contact the agency until a case is solved – I mean that’s how it would work if I was a agent.”

Tommy nodded, a hint of reservation in his expression.

“Go. Scoot. Here’s five bucks for lunch.”

“It costs ten cents a page to print off stuff.”

Carl replaced the five with a ten.

“Shouldn’t I swear a oath or something – me being a junior secret agent and all?”

“Oh. Well. Yes. Remember I haven’t admitted to anything. You have to think of this like it’s pretend. If it was like you think, though, you’d have to swear to uphold the laws of the land and the goodness of truth, justice, and the American way. Swear to it.”

“I swear to it. This is so great! Do we need code names?”

“You’re gonna wear me out before we get started. Of course. Code names. Let’s see. You’ll be *Little Bro* and I’ll be *Big Guy*.”

I am not sure where the need for an oath and code names came from but, again, they arrived, so I had Carl deal with it. It tends to continue to build our picture of him as a savvy, intelligent young man, which may not be evident because of his speech pattern.

Tommy grinned. He looked at his watch.

**“I’ll check in at thirteen hundred hours – Big Guy.”**

**“That’ll be great. When’s thirteen hundred hours?”**

**“One o’clock p.m.”**

**Carl nodded. Tommy rolled his eyes and left on the trot.**

(Big brothers. How can they have survived into their twenties and still be so dumb?) The exchange was added to hint at the ‘normal’ brother to brother aspect of their relationship. We’ve gone out of our way to establish a ‘special’ relationship and it could easily become lopsided.

**Carl smiled watching the boy disappear around the corner. He was pretty sure it was the first conversation they had shared during the past eighteen months in which Tommy hadn’t alluded to girls – specifically, the kissing there of.**

Lots of things have developed in the past two pages, most of which are obvious. Continue to examine the word selection and sentence structure. I left that section pretty much as a first draft for the reader to analyze. It will certainly have been changed by the time it reaches the final draft at the back of this book. Let me just point out several structural elements.

Have you noticed how the nature – function – of the pawnshop has developed differently from how we first envisioned it? It was to be *the* major milieu. It has become more a hub inside the broader milieu – an anchor. The timeline easily relates to Carl’s daily work schedule and that seems to have become the primary way the shop is being used. But, you say, one of the primary guidelines of the milieu approach is to keep to the setting. True, and we have in a general way, but natural story development trumps *all* rules in this approach.

Jasper has assumed a less central role than I thought he might. That is a function of how the story-line has developed. (Carl is going *out* to seek the ring rather than waiting in the shop for it to come to him). It is as if the emerging plot has written Jasper into a minor role.

I think it is also fascinating to see how a character that didn’t even exist, initially, has broken out into what at this point, looks to become a major, essential, loveable, participant – Tommy. In the back of my mind I thought Carl’s girlfriend might become his sounding board. Now that we have Tommy (in general the portrait of brains, innocence, trust, and honesty), the story will probably remain less complicated by using the youngster in that way. We’ll see! (In a longer piece we may well have *wanted* to add another character for texture and additional interaction possibilities. Later, we may wish we had gone with the girlfriend. At this point it is a male dominated story.)

**Promptly at one o’clock (thirteen hundred hours!) Tommy came through the door, looking somehow taller and more mature, Carl thought.**

**“I got lots of stuff, Big guy.”**

**“I’m going to lunch, Sir. Be back at two,” Carl called to Jasper.”**



**“Don’t let the kid wear you out. Still got the afternoon to work. Ten minutes with him and his questions, and I’m in need of a nap.”**

**It had been as close to humor as Jasper ever came. It was also his way of indicating that he understood about the brothers’ special relationship. Carl easily made the translation. Tommy didn’t understand and once outside he asked.**

**“Why doesn’t he like my questions? You always say questions are good – that you have to keep looking for the right one or you’ll never solve problems.”**

**“He was trying to be funny. Forget it.”**

**“I guess I never thought of Mr. J. as the kind who tried to make jokes.”**

**“How about I treat you to lunch at Mary’s Café?”**

**“Really? Great!”**

**“I figure we can talk privately there. The other kids will be way too nosy at home.”**

**Suddenly, Tommy felt their bond strengthen. He beamed into his brother’s face.**

**“We got a good thing, don’t we, Carl?”**

**“We got the best there is, Tommy.”**

**It called for spit-laced thumbs to each other’s palms.**

**After ordering – BLT’s, slaw, and fries – they got down to work.**

**“This is great stuff,” Tommy began, pulling a batch of folded sheets out from the front of his pants. “It’s like researching a term paper without having to write it. I got twenty pages of info but I can summarize all but the really technical stuff. I had to go and learn about rubies, facets, and carats, before some of it made any sense. TGFG.”**

**Carl frowned.**

**“Thank God for Google.”**

**Carl let the reference go – not really understanding the web-eze his brother was speaking.**

**In the sentence above I originally used *Tommy* where *his brother* now sits. Examine the four lines before this insert and the one after. In five lines I had used *Carl*, *Carl*, *Tommy*, and *Tommy* – too many first names. It still seems name-crowded to me but I can live with it.**

**Tommy sorted through the pages pulling out several with pictures.**

**“Okay. While I talk you make sure all these pictures of the ruby are really the one you gave me.”**

**He slid the relevant sheets across the table.**

**“During the Second World War the Germans stole lots of art and jewelry – it was the generals, mostly, to live on after the war, I guess. Anyway, see this little crown – they call it a Tierra. It has – had – six**

**matched rubies across the front here and belonged to a princess in Bavaria. It was stolen by a SS officer who seems to have made stealing stuff his major contribution to the German war effort – that’s a quote – not original from me.**

I am breaking into a paragraph because I want to offer an explanation of what just happened. I can’t recall ever having done this before. Here’s the deal. I let myself fall in love with the first portion of that sentence (down to the first dash). It was not how Tommy thought or spoke, so I had the boy come clean and admit to it as a quote. I got to keep the phrase I liked and Tommy could remain true to his character. Win-win, I think. What do you think?

**When he figured the war was about to be lost, he hid his treasure someplace secret. He had the rubies removed from the crown and set into six rings. The story is that each ring contained the location of his stash. He sent one to each of his children using six different carriers, knowing he would probably be caught and imprisoned or worse. The war was raging and he hoped that at least one of the carriers would make it to his family. One guy – one writer – says he supposes the man’s wife knew something about how such coded messages would be transported. She would know where to look for it and things like that. But, she had already been killed along with three of the children. He thinks it is doubtful that any of the rings made it further than the first pawnshop each of the carriers came upon. It had become a really bad time when the German people could only look out for themselves. Does that help?”**

**“That is the best Jr. Secret Agent work I’ve ever heard of. You got all that in just three or four hours?”**

**“Two actually. Me and Kerstin got in some quality time together up on the library’s roof.”**

**Carl flashed a short lived smile as he skimmed through several of the other pages.**

The first time through, that sentence began; *Carl smiled as he . . .* Rereading it I pictured him sitting there grinning throughout the skimming process. That was not the correct image for such a serious process – circumstance. So, I found a way to retain the smiling reaction to Tommy’s statement and still maintain the serious decorum I felt was appropriate.

**“The pictures here all sure look like the picture I have. I’d like to know more about the how and who connected with the rings themselves. Did it say if all the rubies were cut alike?”**

**“All identical – I think I said matched. There is one reference there somewhere about the rings all having the same design – *fillygreen* – I think or something like that.”**

**“Yes. I found it. *Filigree* is the word. It means fancy, open, intricate designs. See it here in the picture? Sounds like there were six identical**

rings. This one in our picture could be any one of them. I guess that doesn't matter since they all seem to have carried the same information. I need you to look up how lots of information could have been recorded in such a tiny space back then."

"In the space under the ruby, you mean?" Tommy asked.

"Right."

"Probably a microdot."

"I've heard of them. You seem to know more. Give."

"I'll have to go look for more info. What I know is that it was the first technology to compress big amounts of data into tiny areas. Nothin' like we got now but a real big deal back then. I'd a thought you'd a learned about that back in spy school."

I have begun sprinkling the piece with passages that telegraph Tommy's high level of intelligence – here through his vocabulary usage. I have the kernel of an idea about things for the story ending and his intellectual competence needs to be established in order to support those 'things'.

"Apparently not. Maybe that's all we need to know. Maybe more about how the process worked and where in Germany it was done – the places. How big were the dots?"

"I'll get on all that right after lunch. Can I finish your slaw?"

"No. I just haven't got to it yet, Slug Head."

Tommy smiled as Carl continued.

"Anyway, if you ate that you wouldn't have room for peach pie."

"Really? This is like a feast! You must a got a raise."

The purpose of the passage is partly to establish the boy's folk blown appreciation of the little pleasantries of life. It also extends a positive picture of Carl.

"We'll just keep this lunch between the two of us. Can you imagine what the twins would do to a place like this?"

It was worth an exchange of knowing nods and cheek busting grins.

It had been a slow day. Jasper went home early leaving Carl to close up. Tommy arrived at three. He talked while he helped his brother spread the sheets.

"The SS officer was Hilman Berger. His wife was Gert. She worked in the coding section of the intelligence agency. Get this! Her job was making and reading microdots."

"You found that kind of stuff on the internet?"

"Yeah. Most everything is up there somewhere if you just keep following the links."

"Anything else?"

Here we will extend the honest, open, relationship the brothers have established.

**“Well, there are lots of naked lady sites.”**

**“I mean about the ring, Hormone Harry.”**

**Tommy grinned and continued.**

**“Historians have begun calling the jewels the Barina Rubies – the princess was named Barina and I never could find out if that was a first or last name. I copied a couple of references. Maybe you can make heads or tails out of it. It sounds like she was originally from England and was offered to the Bavarian Prince as a wife in return for some kind of mining rights. Not sure about that. It’s somewhere in the stuff I copied.”**

**“Good work again, Agent, Little Bro.”**

**“That’s not even the best stuff. Dr. Franklin, a history writer guy, has been doing research on the rings and he says they’ve never been found but one was reported brought to America in 1850 by the Barina person’s family from England.”**

**“Find a name?”**

**“Barina, like I said.”**

**“I mean the English family name.”**

**“Oh. I think it’s in there – Hamilton maybe.”**

**“Really? Hamilton?”**

**“I think. What’s the big deal?”**

**“Classified stuff, Little Bro, but I can tell you that you did really, really, good.”**

We needed for Carl to recognize a possible connection with Lady Hamilton but I didn’t want to take up space with the kind of explanation that would be needed to fill Tommy in on the facts so I cut off the discussion. (We writers can do that when we’re stumped about how to proceed.)

**Tommy smiled. He needed more positive strokes than most boys his age. Carl clearly recognized that. With one final look around the shop, Carl moved toward the door. Tommy followed and reached out to receive the key so he could lock up. The phone rang. Carl moved to answer it.**

**“Jaspers Pawn.”**

**It was Manny.**

**“I just delivered the human mountain to a gray stone walk up out on 54<sup>th</sup>. He had me wait – twenty minutes with the meter running. Then I took him back to the Troy. Get this. He had a black briefcase with him when he got out at the gray stone. *Not* when he came back though. Thought you’d want to know.”**

**“Thanks. Way above the line of duty, Manny. Thought you were avoiding him – potential cab damage and all.”**

**“Well, just between you and me, I made you.”**

**“Made me?”**

**“Over the years I’ve driven lots of government agents so I can**

usually spot one. I'm a loyal American. I do what I can. Like I said, I just wanted you to know. My lips are zipped. No need to worry about that. I got your business card with me. If I find out anything else I'll keep you informed. Oh. The address is 9867."

"Well. Thanks again. I really appreciate it. That's 9867 North 54<sup>th</sup>. If you see him moving out of the hotel I'd appreciate a call if you're willing."

"You got it, . . . , I guess I don't have your name."

"Name. Not a good idea, you understand."

"Gottcha. Later."

Several things. Carl needed the information to move the story along and Manny, originally just entered into the story as a 'throw away' character, seemed to be in a position to serve that purpose. It extends the 'secret agent' fallacy, which may well be too much of a stretch. I'm going to live with it at this point. Manny had to have some reason to pass on the information to Carl.

The side of the conversation to which Tommy had been privy only further convinced him of his brother's secret agent status.

"Another late night the way it sounded," Tommy said as they closed the door behind them.

"Fraid so. Won't have to leave 'til after ten, though, so I can still do the bedtime stuff tonight."

The word afraid most correctly would have been written 'fraid, but at the beginning of a quote it becomes visually awkward – "Fraid so. Therefore I did what I did. For him to use the word 'afraid' just seemed out of character. You do what you have to do.

As was typical, Tommy kept up a constant patter as they walked home. Carl missed much of it, lost in his own thoughts.

'Why does everybody think I'm a spy? Bro, Manny, and who knows who else. I guess I should be grateful right now and not let it bother me. All I'm really after here is the ring that goes with Lady's ruby. I'm not after the microdot. I'm not after the stolen treasure. I'm not here to solve any half-century-old mystery left over from the war. I'm just about finding that one special ring setting.

'Still, Gunther is my only real lead so I need to follow up on Manny's information tonight. I'll go by bus. Shouldn't take a half hour that late. I'll have to think about what I'll need to take along.'

"So, what do you think," Tommy said ending his three block monologue as they approached the door to their place. "Kirsten or Angie?"

"Kirsten or Angie, huh? I'd say look for *nice* rather than *beauty*. That help?"

"Like always. Thanks."

Tommy understood that once inside, Carl's attention would be

scattered among the other kids. That was all right with him. He had long ago devised his own ways to get and maintain his brother's attention. He had asked himself the right question: "Since he doesn't have time for me here at home, how can I go about getting his attention elsewhere?" It had been just like Carl said; you had to ask the right question before you could arrive at the right answer.

That passage may present a whole lot of 'over think'. I may remove it later. Tommy's smart but is he wise and which does that passage indicate? Hmmm?

By the time Carl finally got around to tucking Tommy in – he shared bunk beds with Carl and was the last in line – Tommy had concerns to offer.

"You'll be careful out there tonight, won't you?"

"I always am. It's not your job to worry about me."

"When will you be back?"

"I can't say – don't know, I mean. By midnight, I'd think."

Tommy nodded. They traded kisses and he rolled over onto his side. Carl snugged the sheet around his brother's neck and left.

The bus ride was uneventful. He sat at the rear. His twenty years as a rider had taught him that folks who rode up front were old and annoying. Those in the middle, were way too chatty. At the rear he was left alone. Left alone was what he was after that night. There were few other riders. He got off at the cross street where the 9800s began. It was a middle class neighborhood – probably lower middle class. Lights were being turned off here and there as he surveyed the street. Many windows were already darkened. He found the building – four floors with one apartment on each. The stairwell was on the left. He climbed the four steps to the front, cement slab, stoop. The mailboxes were numbered and named. He had no idea what he was looking for.

At this point I had no idea what he was looking for either. I just began filling in 'city' sounding last names and lo and behold look what happened.

'Atherton, Kramer, Tarasenko, Barina.'

"Barina!" he said out loud.

Then, to himself, 'That was the name of the princess in Bavaria.'

It was the fourth floor apartment. He descended the porch steps and circled to the rear. The buildings were no more than two feet apart but that left a sufficient walkway – paved, even, probably to escort the rain water out to the street. He found what he was looking for at the back – the fire escape. He knew there would be one; he just didn't know what form it would take. In this case it was a steel ladder, the lowest section being a pull-down from some twelve feet above the ground. It presented no challenge for a man of his special talents. He caught it with his rope,

pulled it down and secured it at the ground with a large block.

Within minutes he was cautiously peering into the window on the fourth floor. The lights had been on in the front. They were off there in the rear. No need for a sweat suit. It was a hot evening and the window had been propped open – a cat burglar’s dream come true. It was the bedroom – unoccupied. He could see no light under the door to the middle room, indicating that if anybody was home he was in the front room. Carl entered the apartment.

In the beam of his penlight he first searched the open surfaces – tops of the dressers, bedside tables, desk, and shelves. He found nothing there. It was definitely a male’s place of residence. The only two pictures in the room were painted on felt – a red bull and Elvis. It told him the resident had less than good taste in art. That didn’t jive with someone from an aristocratic background. Perhaps that had not been conveyed down through the generations.

He began the systematic search of drawers. Nothing was found in the first dresser. The second had two small drawers sitting at each side of the top. A large mirror spanned the dresser above them. He opened the one on the left. Nothing. He pulled on the one on the right. It was locked or stuck. He tried a second time. Still nothing. There were key openings in both of the small drawers. He took a paper clip from the ceramic dish on top and fashioned a key. It worked. Such locks were not meant to be foolproof – just to keep the kids out.

He pulled the drawer completely out and looked behind it before going through its contents.

‘Bad thing!’ He thought to himself. “Looks like a spring loaded alarm. Hope it isn’t working.’

He searched the drawer for only a few seconds and then slid it back in place, heading for the window in case he had tripped a silent alarm.

“Halt!” came a strong, Germanic, voice from behind.

Carl stopped in his tracks. It had been the first time he had ever been caught in the act. Fear and uncertainty filled his being. That was the last thought he had until he awoke to a blinding headache an hour later. He was sitting on the floor, still in the bedroom, tied hands and feet, and secured to a radiator with handcuffs from his right wrist. His clothing had been removed and he could see it scattered about, torn to shreds. His attacker had searched it for something.

In that simple fashion – an extreme search of *all* of his clothing – I wanted to indicate how important that search was to whoever carried it out - really important to go to that extreme. It couldn’t be indicated through conversation because it wasn’t a dialog-based scene and to make it one would have necessitated introducing a character for which the story was not ready at that

point.

**Why? He had taken nothing so nothing should have been found missing. He was sure the back of his head was bleeding although he had no way of reaching it to make sure.**

**The doorknob turned. Carl dropped his head and pretended to still be unconscious. The door closed and he heard steps retreating down the hall. Things looked bleak.**

**“Pssst!”**

**Carl cocked his head.**

**“Psssssssst!”**

**He repositioned himself so he could look at the wall behind him.**

**“Psssssssssssst!”**

I increased the physical dimensions of the attention getting word, *pssst*, in order to indicate the incrementally increased length of each successive pronouncement. Intensity is often difficult to indicate. Did we succeed?

**Carl’s heart sank. There, with his chin firmly planted on the windowsill was Tommy.**

**“Get out of here, NOW!”**

**Tommy ignored the order.**

**“Looks like I got here just in time.”**

**“Go on. Get out of here.”**

**Tommy climbed inside and began working on the ropes. Carl’s arms and legs were soon free.**

**“Got a paper clip?” Tommy asked.**

**“On the dresser – in the dish. Be quiet!”**

**In less than a minute Carl was free. He pointed to the window and they exited the room and made their way down the ladder.**

It may seem uncharacteristic that Tommy so blatantly disobeyed his brother. There are times in every young teen’s life that he is all quite certain he knows better than anybody else how to precede in a given situation. I count on the fact readers will understand that and not question why Tommy didn’t obey.

**You’re naked as a jay bird, you know,” Tommy said. “The bus ride home could be very interesting.”**

**“That black bag behind the dumpster.”**

**Carl pointed. Tommy retrieved it.**

**He was soon decent, fully clothed in his tan sweat suit.**

**“Out of here, now!” Carl said leading his brother down the alley at the best trot he could muster.”**

**The bus had just pulled to a stop. The two of them were immediately onboard, heading back south. They took seats at the rear.**

**“If you ever pull a bone head stunt like this again I’ll ground you for life and withdraw your kissing license ‘til you’re so old you won’t remember**



**why you want to pucker up. You could have been killed up there.”**

I opted for a short and to the point visual response rather than trying to craft some reasonable, more drawn out, verbal response.

**Tommy sobered and eased his hands to his throat, suddenly getting the horrific side of Carl’s message.**

**“You’re welcome, Big Guy.”**

**Carl put out his arm and pulled him close.**

**“Okay, thanks, but never again and I’m serious. If anything happened to me, Mom would have to depend on you. You understand that?”**

**Tommy nodded suddenly sensing his boyhood slipping away.**

**“So, you gonna tell me about your striptease back there?”**

**“I was looking for the ring and got caught – simple as that. They or he or whoever must have thought I had something hidden on me that they wanted so they went through my clothes. All I can think of is that they were looking for the same ring I was looking for. I just assumed Gunther had taken it to them, him, whoever. It’s why I was there. When I couldn’t find it in the bedroom I figured it was bein’ kept in some other room – maybe *on* somebody, even. Now, I’m thinkin’ they don’t have it any more than we do.”**

**Tommy looked at the bloodied back of Carl’s head.**

**“How we gonna explain that,” he said pointing.**

**“We’ll stop by the shop first and clean me up. If questions are asked we’ll say I slipped and hit my head. I’ve done that often enough to make it believable. By the way, how did you know where I was?”**

**“I heard you say the address while you were on the phone with somebody.”**

**“Oh. That’s right. How did you figure out which apartment I was in?”**

**“I figured you wouldn’t go in the front door so I went around to the back. I saw the bottom section of the fire ladder weighted down with a cement block so figured you climbed it. The only window that was open was the top one. I climbed the ladder. I looked inside. There you were. Pretty basic secret agent stuff, really.”**

**Carl allowed a quick smile.**

I ignored why Tommy had decided to go looking for Carl. That may need to be dealt with later. What do you think? Is just his basic concern and the fact that he seems himself a central part of the activity enough to handle the motivation?

**What time is it?”**

**“Almost three. We’ll be home before we’re missed.”**

**They were.**

With those two words I avoided three inches of dialog that would have taken the story nowhere.

**Carl awoke to the headache of all headaches.**

**He was standing in the shower letting the cold water bathe his head when Tommy located him. He pulled back the curtain and pulled up a chair.**

**“So, what’s our plan for today?”**

**“Apparently not privacy.”**

**Tommy smiled and went on.**

**“Seriously.”**

**“For one thing, you are to stay away from that place and you know which *that* place I’m talkin’ about.”**

**Tommy shrugged his shoulders, all quite intentionally acknowledging, but not agreeing to, the dictum.**

**“That Barina family,” Carl began. “See if you can find out more about them. See if you can trace any of them to this country. See if you can find out if any of those Barina Rubies – in or out of rings – have ever been sold at auction.”**

**“I’ll do what I can. Those are really tough assignments.”**

**“I got faith in you Little Bro.”**

**\* \* \***

**“Your mind seems to be somewhere else, this morning,” Jasper said as the last of the noon browsers left the store.**

**“Sorry. Yeah. Things on my mind.”**

**“And a nasty *thing* on your head as well.”**

I emphasized ‘thing’ to tie it back to Carl’s statement as a segue for Jasper to make the topic legitimate.

**“A stupid thing. I fell. Sliced a bit of scalp in the process. Lucky I have such a hard head.”**

**“Go to lunch early if you want to.”**

**“Thanks but I’m waiting on Tommy. He sort of needs his big brother this summer.”**

Five minutes later Tommy was on the scene carrying two plastic grocery bags.

**“I made us like a picnic lunch. Thought we could go to the park and watch girls while we ate and talked.”**

They had soon taken up residence on a green wooden bench under a large tree not far from the volleyball court.

**“I got mostly nothin’, I’m afraid,” Tommy said handing over a half dozen printed sheets to his brother. “There was one ruby ring in a gold, fillygreen, setting sold at auction in London back in 1951. Sold by a man named Benson to a man named Hamilton – a Duke or Lord or something.**

The really interesting part is that when I looked into the Benson guy's background it turned out that his grandfather changed the family name to Benson from Barina a generation earlier. Just one more thing. The Benson guy was apparently disowned by his father because he sold the ring. He moved to the US in the late 1950s."

"I wouldn't have thought Barina would be involved in all this. Maybe somebody in that household traded the Tierra for safety back in the days of the SS. Maybe after the war the family somehow came to repossess one of the rubies in one of the six rings."

"That's a lot of maybe's."

A good deal of information was presented in a few inches, there. It was necessary to lead the reader on into the rest of the story even if he doesn't remember the specifics – he will believe what follows is appropriate.

"I know. Lots of German's did change their names after the war though. Grampa Kirkenbaughm used to tell me stories about the old country when I was a kid."

"Grampa who?"

"He died long before you were born. Lived in the apartment above us."

"So, what about the stuff I got?"

"Excellent work, like usual, Little Bro. I'm not sure how we can use it yet. But too much info is always better than not enough. It seems to give us two possibilities. First, maybe the Barina's are just searching so they can return the ring to their family. Second, somebody may be after the microdot – if there was one – so the SS officer's treasure can be located."

"And," Tommy added, "It might be that *both* are happening."

"Interesting. Good thinking. That could really complicate things, you know."

"So, what's next, then?"

"You take the rest of the day off. Go in search of some willing lips or a good book. I'll think on it 'til closing time. Meet me there like usual at five. And thanks for lunch. You make a fantastic baloney sandwich and open an amazing bag of chips."

Tommy grinned, gathered up the leavings and deposited them in a trash container.

"Later, then."

He took off on a trot across the grass. Carl walked back to the pawnshop. His momentary, fully selfish, sadness, prompted by watching Tommy run and jump with such ease, was immediately put to rest as he realized how wonderful it was that his brother was so perfectly normal in every way.



## PART FIVE

Carl had been thinking about it all day – the mountain, the brief case, and then no brief case. What could it mean? One thing it could mean was that Gunther had taken money in the brief case, paid for something – something small – and left with it back to the hotel. If that were the case, whatever it was would likely be in his hotel room. Carl needed to return and search that room again.

He also wondered about the German connection. Gunther and the man in the apartment who knocked him out both carried heavy German accents. He also wondered what the man at the walk up had planned to eventually do with or to him. Probably *not* let him go or he would have been dropped off somewhere while still unconscious. The odds suddenly seemed very high. Perhaps he should return the ruby to Lady and fess up to having stolen it. He could pay to have it reset. His family depended on him and he didn't dare put himself in mortal danger again.

A litany of possible problems and dangers are suggested adding some element of suspense even if never acted upon.

Since he never carried identification on his night job the man in the walk-up couldn't have learned who he was or where to look for him. Up to that point, therefore, he and his family seemed to be safe. The sane thing, the logical thing, the reasonable thing, would be to cut and run – keep his nose forever out of it. However, something in his head rejected that safe approach. He would return to the *Troy* that night.

Ten fifteen found him on the balcony outside the big man's room. The lights were on but the room was empty. The bathroom door was open and Carl could detect no activity inside. He carefully applied a large suction cup to the previously cut circular piece of glass and dislodged it so he could remove it to the outside. He entered the room and immediately secured the back of the desk chair under the knob on the door leading into the hall. That wouldn't keep the mountain out for long but it would buy

enough time to exit to the roof.

Carl moved directly to the drawer where he had found the felt bag with the ring parts in it. He undid the drawstring and poured the contents out into his hand. There it was – Lady’s gold filigree setting. Gunther had apparently purchased it. If so, why the brutalizing at the walk-up and the methodical destruction of his clothing? The ruby, itself, perhaps?

Pose a question. Answer a question and put to rest potential questions about tangential elements. I had written the handcuff scene before I had any idea why it occurred – just to add some excitement and mystery I hoped. It seemed necessary to justify it. Did that work?

He put the setting in his pocket and returned the rest to the bag. With it back in its resting place he closed the drawer, removed the chair from the door, and exited the room. The glass patio door was quickly repaired and Carl was soon back on the roof. Shortly after eleven he entered the darkened pawn shop and headed for the back room.

There, he closed the door and turned on a light. There was jeweler’s equipment there and he began examining the setting – telling himself it was strictly routine preparation to reset the ruby. In reality part of him was hoping to find the microdot. He didn’t.

Disappointment often can be used to build suspense. I hoped it did, if only marginally.

What he did find was a strange round, raised surface on which the ruby would be set – a base or build up or cradle he had heard it called. It was covered in a lighter colored gold and was soft – way too soft to be part of a ring. It just could be that it was covering the microdot – holding it there under a paper-thin coat of soft gold to hide and protect it. Such soft metal would melt away under very little heat but not knowing what material a microdot was made of he did not dare heat it.

Surrounded by specialized jewelry working tools he smiled as he reached, instead, for his pocketknife. Working under the large, bench-mounted, magnifying glass, he carefully made a shallow cut around the edge of the raised, circular, disk. With a long, deliberate, sigh, he worked the point of his knife under the disk and flipped it up. It came free. Although he had never actually seen a microdot (he must have been sick the day they covered that in Secret Agent School!) he immediately knew that what he had found was just that.

The parenthetical remark was clearly to add a smile.

“Now what!” he asked out loud.

He placed the dot – still covered in gold on one side – into an envelope and slipped it into his pocket. He returned home where the envelope and the ring setting were deposited into the bank bag and tucked under Tommy’s pillow.

In the sentence above I originally used the word *placed* instead of *tucked*. I believe the new word suggests a sense of tenderness in the act and it forms a nice extended alliteration with Tommy's.

**Tommy stirred and opened his eyes.**

**"You okay?"**

**"I'm great."**

**"You do good tonight?"**

**"I did the best that could be done."**

**"Wanna talk?"**

**"Tomorrow morning at the shop. You go back to sleep."**

**Carl seldom had trouble sleeping – he got so little. Morning came quickly. Tommy was lying beside him in the lower bunk awaiting the opening of his eyes. Eventually it happened.**

**"Hey Big Guy!"**

**"Hey Little Bro! Your own bed break, did it?"**

**"Just wanted to be the first to say good morning to you."**

**"I imagine this is a good way to make sure."**

**Tommy grinned and stood up. Carl followed suit, saying,**

**"I need to hit the shower. Can you set out the cereal boxes and bowls for the kids? Give me fifteen minutes."**

**From the way Carl walked Tommy could tell his bad leg was hurting him. Humidity did that. He assumed they were in for rain that day.**

**\* \* \***

**Jasper left for the bank. Tommy entered with the bag and questions.**

**"So, what were you up to last night? Did you find something? Did you hurt your leg? I noticed you favoring it this morning."**

**Carl ignored the specific questions. He opened the bag in front of Tommy – it was a first. Tommy sensed the importance of the moment and described what he saw.**

Originally that last sentence stopped after the word *moment*. It could have been left that way but I didn't want the reader to have to wonder who was about to speak so I added the rest.

**"The ring! It's broken. Is that the one we've been after?"**

**"The very same. Look it over."**

**Tommy picked it up.**

**"What's the mess all about – there on top?"**

**"Look at the shape of that mess."**

**"Round – well, roundish."**

**"Look at the size."**

**"Small. Tiny. Micro. Really! The microdot? Did you find the microdot?"**

**"I think so. You know what one looks like?"**

“Seen pictures. They are tiny circles of film maybe a quarter of an inch across.”

“Like this, maybe?”

Carl opened the envelope and shook the contents out into his palm. Tommy’s eyes grew wide.

“That’s a microdot for sure. What’s this gold stuff on the back?”

“*Gold stuff*, I assume. It was like plastered over the dot which sat right here.”

He pointed to the area on the setting.

“Now what?” Tommy asked.

“Now we have two things to do. First, get the ruby reset in the setting and return it to its owner. Second, decide what to do with the microdot.”

“You know who the owner is?”

“Yes and I’m afraid that’s classified.”

“That’s cool. I’m just happy I could help find it and all. I did help find it, didn’t I?”

“You sure did. It wouldn’t be here right now without your help, Little Bro.”

Tommy grinned and grew an inch.

“So, what about the microdot?” he asked. “I don’t know how we can read it. I doubt if they even use them anymore – do they?”

“Doubt it,” Carl said not knowing, but taking his lead from Tommy.

“I’d think you’d know about such things.”

“Different sections in the Agency. We can’t all be expected to know everything.”

It made sense. Tommy Nodded.

It had taken on a life of its own. Carl wondered how he could put a stop to the charade. That would need to wait.

“One more thing for you to do on the computer, Little Bro. See if you can find out what agency in the US government might still be interested in this microdot. My first hunch is the CIA – they spy mostly overseas. If not them, then maybe the FBI.”

“I’m on it. What you thinkin’? Turn the dot over to the government?”

“It ain’t no good to us and if the SS officer’s treasure is still hidden it needs to get returned to the proper places – families or museums or what have you.”

“You’re a good man, Carl Riggin. I’m proud to be your bro. We are brothers, don’t you think?”

“You started worrying about that?”

“Been for some time – soon as you had that first talk with me about sex stuff – needing both moms *and* dads to make babies – you remember.”



“Here’s how I’ve dealt with it. We have the same mom and that gives us the same blood and that makes us brothers – maybe full, maybe half – but brothers just the same.”

Tommy nodded, his face sober. He had a question.

“Suppose we’ll ever know who our dad – dads – is?”

“I don’t know. I figure that’s mom’s business.”

“I don’t agree. I think it’s my business to know who my dad is. I get really mad about it sometimes and I want to go yell at mom over it.”

“Well, yellin’ won’t help. I hope you can live with it ‘til you’re sixteen. Then if you still need to know, you can go to mom privately, all calm like, and have a talk about it. You already know a lot about him.”

“I do?”

“Sure. Probably blond with blue eyes – you didn’t get those things from mom. He had an athletic body like you do. He was really smart – you’re the smartest one in our family by a long way. He probably had an inquisitive mind – you certainly do.”

“I hadn’t thought about any of those things. You really think I’m the smartest?”

“You’re doctor material if you want to be.”

“Wow! Does that mean you think I should get a head start and begin studying the female anatomy up close and personal?”

“You seem to have ways of doing that on-line.”

“I’m sure it’s not the same as a hands on approach would be.”

“And I’m sure you’re right but you still have no business touching girl parts at your age.”

“You keep saying that. How old do I have to be?”

“I was sixteen so I guess I can’t delay it past then for you.”

“Two years! I’ll be past my prime.”

“Believe me, Bro. You’ll just be coming into it.”

“It gets better?”

“Oh, yes. Now, to that computer and spend at least part of the time on *our* business and not just preparing for your medical studies.”

Tommy grinned.

A question popped into Carl’s mind.

It popped into Carl’s mind because it popped into mine – posing a potential problem that needed to be dealt with.

“How do you find those girlie sights? I thought the library had them blocked.”

“Just in the student section. I sneak upstairs in the adult part. Private cubicles up there.”

“I’m not going to tell a guy your age that you shouldn’t be interested in looking at pictures of naked females – that just proves how normal you

are. I do think you should think about the fact that you're breaking the library rules."

"For a fun guy you can sure be a party pooper."

"That's what big brothers are for. I don't envy *your* job with the twins."

"My job!"

"You're *their* big bro, Little Bro."

"I guess you're right. I only thought of us as havin' one big bro."

"That time's gone now. This week you've moved from little kid to big brother. Welcome to the club and all the responsibilities that . . . whatever that saying is."

". . . that accrue thereto – it means go along with it."

"See? Smart! What did I just tell you?"

Tommy left. Carl put things away.

Tommy felt ten feet tall. Carl allowed a moment of sadness, knowing he would never be able to afford Tommy's education.

He wondered if he should wait to return the ring until after the government agency Okayed it. They might want to take it. He wouldn't allow that. He'd have the stone reset and get it back to Lady Hamilton as soon as possible. There was one jeweler he knew he could trust – Rudy, down the street.

At noon he and Tommy repeated the BLT lunch at the café and then stopped at the jewelers to drop off the ring and ruby. The man asked no questions and wrote them a receipt. Carl was hesitant to require it of a friend. It made it look like he didn't trust the man. Rudy insisted. Carl figured it covered them both ways so he picked it up and slid it into his shirt pocket.

Tommy went in search of a ball game – or a girl, whichever came into view first. Carl went back to work with three things on his mind: figure out just how to return the ring; get the microdot into the proper hands; and get together with Jenny for a long, romantic, night together.

That paragraph offered a review for the reader of what was left for the story to resolve. It was intended as a preview of coming attractions.

He would have asked her to marry him long ago if he had been just a little more certain about his feelings and if he hadn't had so many responsibilities. Jenny said she understood all that. She would graduate in September and get a job as a hairdresser. Then, they would talk more seriously about their long-term relationship.

Jasper went home early leaving Carl alone in the shop. At four thirty, two well suited men in dark glasses entered the building.

Since Carl and Tommy had no personal means for handling the bigger picture that has become associated with the 'case', it seemed useful – necessary

– to bring in the authorities who could handle it. It also allowed an initial setting for some more suspense.

**One stayed by the door keeping watch outside. The other approached Carl at the counter. He thought they looked to be thugs that could have been sent by a crime boss. His adrenalin began pumping and he moved closer to where the shotgun lay on the shelf under the register. The man reached into his breast pocket. Carl froze as the man removed a wallet, opened it, and displayed a badge – Central Intelligence Agency. Carl had no way of knowing if the shield was authentic but decided not to question it – the best decision, he figured, whether it was or wasn't.**

There is a problem of repetition in that paragraph – *The man reached* and *the man removed*. I wanted to change up in the second case with the word *he*, but it made it unclear as to which *he* we were referencing. Try it with the pronoun and hear the problem. We didn't yet know that he was an *agent* so we couldn't use that and I wasn't willing to characterize him as *the thug*, so went with the repetition.

**“Carl Riggins?” he asked in a businesslike and certainly not a threatening manner.**

**“Yes.”**

**‘Surely the CIA wouldn't be involved in my thievery,’ he thought. ‘What can this be about?’**

**“We received an email asking about our possible interest in a microdot and a stolen treasure at the end of World War II. It was signed by a Tommy Riggins, which, we soon learned, is the name of one of your younger brothers. We soon had you tracked to this pawnshop.”**

**“You guys *do* have connections *don't* you?”**

**It had been a dumb comeback but Carl was just pleased his vocal cords were still working.**

**“Yes, Tommy is my brother and yes, I am here.”**

**‘Now *that* was moving toward the ridiculous,’ he feared.**

**The agent smiled.**

**“Relax. We are just responding to the communication. What do you have to tell us?”**

**Carl cleared his throat.**

**“A microdot came into my possession. It was said to be connected somehow with a ruby ring – a *Barina* ring I think is what I heard. That was somehow connected with a SS officer in Germany at the end of the war – something about a treasure he stole in jewels and art. That's what I know. I figured the microdot was no good to me and if it really is that one, I hoped it would help you guys find the stuff and return it to its rightful owners.”**

**“The ring?” he asked.**

**“It's gone and I'll have nothing more to say on the matter. It will end**

up back in its current owner's possession."

"The ring is insignificant to us. Can you tell us if there are other players – other people involved in the search for the ring or ruby?"

"I have two names and one address. Gunther and a girl – young woman at the *Troy Hotel*. I don't have her name. I call her the *Faux Girl*. A thing between me and a cabby. They both speak with heavy German accents. Then the address is 9867 North 54th. Fourth floor apartment in a walk-up. Way north of here. Another man with a German accent lives there. I believe money – or payment of some kind – was exchanged between Gunther and the man in the walk-up and he received the gold setting that goes with the ruby. He didn't find the microdot."

"Sure you're not one of us, undercover."

Carl smiled but did not respond.

"May I see the microdot?" the agent asked.

It had not really been a question though it had politely been worded as such.

Carl removed the envelope from his pocket and handed it over. The man shook the contents into his palm.

"Gold on one side," he said. It was a question.

"Looked that way to me, too, Sir."

With that, Carl plead ignorance of everything the question had implied, again avoiding the necessity for an involved explanation.

It was all Carl was moved to say on the matter.

The second man approached and removed a very expensive looking piece of equipment from his pocket. Three times the thickness of a cell phone. It had two wings that opened – one to each end. The dot was placed under a clear plastic holder. He lifted it toward a light and repeatedly pressed a button on one side of the device. He sighted through it and held his gaze for some time. He then handed it to the first agent. He spent some time in examination as well. They looked at each other and nodded. The second agent took charge of the device and dot and returned to the door.

Tommy leapt down the steps outside and pressed against the door, which was being held closed by the foot of the second agent.

"That's Tommy, my younger brother. Somehow he got the idea I'm a secret agent so if he says things that sound strange you'll understand."

The second agent opened the door and Tommy entered looking puzzled.

"Tommy, these gentlemen are government agents. They got an email I guess you sent to the CIA."

The boy's face brightened as he gave them the once over.

"I'm Bill. That's Brad," the first agent said extending his right hand

to shake while holding out his badge in the other. With due deliberation, Tommy studied it and then responded.

“Glad to meet you, Sirs. Fast work by the way. That’s what we like to see.”

The three men exchanged amused glances.

“You think the dot’s the real SS Guy thing?” he continued.

“We have already verified that it is. We’re still a bit baffled by how it came into your possession.”

Carl clapped a hand over Tommy’s opening mouth and proceeded with an answer – not *the* answer but *an* answer.

“The ruby was dislodged from the setting of a ring I had in my possession. It was clearly very old and very valuable. I had Tommy do some research and he found the Barina connection and then found the story about the SS officer and the treasure and the microdot. If I hadn’t known the dot part, I’d have probably never noticed the raised circle – the disk just under the gold surface on the ring. I removed it. We decided to contact you, and here we are.”

“It appears that you handled everything just right,” Agent Bill said. “There will be a reward from a German reparation agency – provided the treasure hasn’t been found. No guarantee. Lots of those stashes have been uncovered already. We’ll get back to you.”

The agents prepared to leave. Bill turned at the door and addressed Tommy.

“You know, son, this is a huge discovery you and your brother, Agent Riffin, have made. We’re very proud of you both.”

He directed a private wink at Carl. They left. He was a good man.

Tommy did the fisted arm-pull and hopped up to sit on the counter.

“I knew it! Bill just blew it! Now, I *know* it!”

“I have no idea what you’re babblin’ about.”

“Babblin’? Jr. Secret Agents don’t go around babblin’ especially one that just solved a seventy year old international mystery.”

Tommy grinned. Carl spoke.

“Wow! Suddenly it seems you’re *full*.”

“Full. Full of what?”

“It.”

“*It?* Full of *it*. Oh, I get what you’re saying. I think I deserve to be full of it for a few minutes.”

“So do I. You have ‘til we get home.”

Tommy’s grin grew.

“Then, let’s take the *l o n g* way home this afternoon.”

“Sounds good to me. How about a banana split down at Angie’s to celebrate our first success as a team?”

Angie's? That's a fifteen block walk. Oh! I see. The *l o n g* way home. Great. Sure your leg is up to it?"

"If it ain't, you can carry me back – Super Dooper Jr. Secret Agent Man."

You noticed of course the physical form of the word *long* in the passages above. It avoids a drawn out description of the way the word is pronounced.

## PART SIX

Time out. There are several things we would be doing differently if this were to be a full-length novel. The previous chapter, for example, would have been divided into its several sub-topics and each one dealt with at length over a period of one or more chapters. The ring at the jewelers might have been stolen so Carl would have another mystery to address. Probably Gunther and/or the man from the walk-up would have been involved. We would have spent time allowing Carl to make his nightly rounds to provide funds to support his family. More time would be allotted to develop the relationship between Carl and Jenney. More moments with Lady Hamilton would have been inserted. It could easily become a 200 to 250 page novel.

Instead, this version will be truncated – less fully developed – to serve our purposes here. With the ring found and reassembled, and the microdot handed over to the authorities, it's time to help the story find its conclusion. Loose ends must be handled. What loose ends do you see? (List them.)

I see these, not all of which necessarily need to be tied up. Who moved Carl's body after his fall as a boy? Who are Günter/Gunther and the man in the walk-up? What ends were they trying to achieve? The return of the ring to Lady Hamilton. The reward. The future of Carl as a cat burglar. The possibility of Carl's operation. Mary's baby. Two more years of cold showers for Tommy (not really a loose end!). The boys' biological father(s). Remember our philosophic bases and themes. Have we been true to them?

If we wrap it all up *too* neatly it will seem contrived. I like happy endings – I'm not even opposed to a smattering of 'sappy', but too much can be just *too* much. Let's see what happens. At this point I intend this to be the final chapter. I have no final paragraph in mind. Let's see if it will develop on its own. It would be an interesting and useful exercise for you to write your version of that final chapter before you read on. I hope you like yours better than mine.

**“So, what sort of a reward do you think Bill was talking about?”**  
**Tommy asked as they began the long walk south.**

**“No idea, really. Maybe five hundred – a thousand. I’ll be real happy if we just get enough to fit out the clan with school clothes and winter coats come September.”**

Expectation of financial gain is set low to temper the reader’s hopes and extend the suspense with an element of uncertainty.

**“That would be good. And Mary’s baby. Mom says it’ll be here before this time next week. I’m feeling bad for the little guy.”**

**“Feeling bad?”**

**“Yeah. He won’t have a dad either.”**

Carl nodded appreciating the boy’s compassion.

**“But, just think of all the aunts and uncles he will have. I predict a spoiled brat if we aren’t really careful and take steps to avoid it.”**

**“I think we’ll love him enough to do what’s right for him and not just what’s fun – like you’ve done for me.”**

Carl swallowed hard but did not respond. Tommy continued not anticipating a response.

**“Let’s pretend the reward will be huge – like a million dollars. Then what would we do with it?”**

**“Send you to college for one thing.”**

**“And get you that operation for another. And let mom stop working so she can really enjoy her family.”**

Carl nodded, not so much at what the boy had said as in agreement with his previous statement, which indicated he had done a pretty good job of raising his younger brother.

**“If I do get to be a doctor, I think I’ll be a kid’s doctor. I’ve had a lot of good experience with kids, you know?”**

**“You have time to make that decision. You have to know that I really can’t see money happening for your college. Maybe scholarships if you study hard and keep making good grades.”**

**“Has there ever been a problem me and you hasn’t been able to solve, Big Guy?”**

**“I can’t recall none, I guess.”**

**“Okay, then. I’m going to be a kid doctor. You’re gonna run again, and Momma’s gonna retire.”**

It was all settled in Tommy’s head. It sent a private shiver up Carl’s spine – the second in as many days.

The banana splits were delicious. They lingered over them longer than necessary. It was as if once they started home, reality would crowd out the very special week they had just experienced together.

**\* \* \***

**The following afternoon Carl picked up the ring. It was every bit as**



beautiful as its picture. The jeweler had cleaned it up and polished the setting.

“What do you suppose it’s worth?” Carl asked his friend.

“I did some research on it. I seldom see a piece of this quality just walk in off the street. As it sits here, it’s worth ten thousand dollars, give or take a couple. If it has some historic significance – and I think it may – it could go at auction for ten times that. You have an exceptional piece there.”

“I appreciate your time and beautiful work – and the information. I’ll gladly pay extra for your research.”

The man waved off the suggestion.

“My pleasure.”

Carl paid the bill and pocketed the small jewelry box in which it sat. He still didn’t know just how he was going to approach Lady with it. The fact that he could have sold it for a huge amount of money to keep and use never entered his head. The pleasure of returning it to Lady far overshadowed such a thing. He stopped briefly at the shop and then went on home.

Once there, Carl hitched his head in Tommy’s direction. He followed his big brother into the bathroom. Carl locked the door. Tommy understood that it was a matter of great privacy. Carl held up two fingers.

“Two things,” Tommy whispered in response.

Carl removed the case from his pocket and handed it over.

“The ring. You got the ring. Let’s see it!”

He opened the box.

“Wow! I don’t know nothin’ about rings but this is gorgeous!”

“It sure is. I’m going to return it right after supper.”

“You held up *two* fingers?”

Carl reached out for the ring box and returned it to his pants pocket. He reached into the other one and removed another little box, again handing it over.

Tommy opened it.

“A diamond ring. I didn’t know anything about a diamond.”

He looked puzzled.

“What are diamond rings used for?” Little Bro.

“To get engaged. You want to marry me?”

“No, Slug Head. *Jenny*. I’ve decided to propose to her tonight.”

“Wow! That’s really cool, Carl.”

Tears began spilling down his cheeks. He engaged his big brother in a hug.

“Hey. I thought you’d be happy for me. You’re the first person I told – even before mom. This should be a special time for us.”

**“It is. And I know you said gettin’ married wouldn’t take you away from me but it will, you know. Not all at once I suppose, but it will. That’s how it’s supposed to be – you and her goin’ off to start a new family life together. I’m really, really, happy for you two. I’m just bein’ selfish and really, really, sad for me.”**

**Carl separated from Tommy with his hands on the boy’s shoulders. He put a hand under his chin and tipped his face up so their eyes met.**

I am some concerned that those last two sentences make it appear Carl has three hands but to fix it – and I tried – became very awkward.

**“I promised you that I’d always be here for you and you know I meant that. I may live down the block but I’ll still be here to help with bedtimes as long as I’m needed. I’ll always be here to talk with you and listen to your plans. You got that?”**

**Tommy nodded and wiped away his tears with his forearm.**

**“I know that. But that lower bunk is gonna be awful empty, you know?”**

**“Not if you move into it. I figure that’s where the big brother should sleep, you know?”**

**Tommy smiled – not a grin but enough to acknowledge what Carl was trying to do. He splashed his face with cold water and patted it dry – his way of getting rid of any sign of tears. It worked.**

**\* \* \***

Jenny’s ‘yes’ warmed Carl’s heart. They would wait until January. By then, Mary’s baby would be six months old. The twins would be ten and Tommy fifteen. Fifteen suddenly seemed *much* older than fourteen.

On Sunday morning Carl arrived at Lady’s apartment. She was clearly overjoyed at his unexpected visit.

**“Got news,” Carl said smiling. “Deserves at least a glass of your special lemonade.”**

Lady beamed and bustled off to fix the drink. Carl took out the box and opened it. He sat it on the coffee table turned toward the chair in which Lady always sat, then took his usual seat on the sofa.

She returned, immediately spotting the ring. She sat the tray on the table. Tears began rolling down her cheeks parting the powder as they went. She picked up the box and held it to her heart. She looked at it as if it were the most precious thing in her life.

Carl blinked back his own tears eventually losing the struggle. She approached him and he stood to receive the hug of all hugs.

**“You dear, dear, boy. I won’t even ask how. Thank you doesn’t come close to expressing how I feel. I have something for you I’ve been saving for a *long* time. Now seems like the *right* time.”**

Notice the italics above. It provides a tie by emphasis that I believe

dramatizes the moment.

**“Before that, Lady Hamilton, I have to tell you something about the ring’s disappearance.”**

**“That is not necessary, Carl.”**

**“Yes. It is something I have to do.”**

**Lady took a seat, still grasping the ring box.**

**Carl moved closer and sat at the edge of the couch, leaning toward her.**

**“I stole your ring. I steal things to support my family. I had no idea your ring was so valuable or I wouldn’t have touched it. Of course if I’d knowed about the sentimental value I sure wouldn’t have touched it. I am so sorry and I hope you can forgive me even though I know I don’t deserve it. If you don’t want me commin’ around no more I’ll understand.”**

**Lady reached out and took his hand, patting it gently.**

Here comes the twist. Ready? Is it a surprise or had you already decided this was how it would go? It needs to be a surprise that is immediately followed by the feeling that, ‘of course, that’s how it had to be’. See if it worked.

**“I’ve known all along that you took it, dear. Lord had security cameras installed years ago. It was all recorded.”**

**“But . . .”**

**“But I knew you were a good boy so I knew you had some good reason to do what you did. I figured it had to do with keeping up your family. Then when you started coming around I could see the guilt sitting there in your eyes. I knew I just needed to give you time to work it out.”**

**“How could you have possibly known I was a *good* boy? We never even spoke before it happened.”**

**“We did. Once. You were about Tommy’s age I’d guess. It was a really cold winter night. I was watching the beautiful snow fall glistening in the street lights when I spotted what looked like a body down in the alley. I put on my coat and went to investigate. It was you, laying there on a snow bank. I knew immediately that you had fallen. I rolled you over onto your side so I could move your leg out from under you. I could tell it had been broken. As I turned to go get help you opened your eyes and called out to me. You said, ‘*Thank you kind lady*’. You reached toward me but then fell back into unconsciousness. By the time I got back with help, you were gone. Any boy who would call out through his pain to thank an old lady just had to be a *good* person, you see.”**

**Carl sat back, dumbfounded.**

**“Would you slip this ring on my finger, son. My old hands are too unsteady.”**

**Carl obliged, puzzled at her response. No anger. No desire for revenge. Nothing but kindness in her words and tone. How could she**

have believed in him when, all along, she knew about his reprehensible act? He knew she was a special person but . . . .

“Now, I have something for you,” she said.

“After all of this you still want to give me something?”

“I decided that night down in the frigid, snowy, alley that I was going to do this and nothing that has happened between then and now has done anything but tell me my decision was exactly right. I’ve watched you grow up – taking care of your family like you were the loving father.”

She went into the bedroom, returning shortly with an envelope. She handed it to him and sat, studying his face as she began sipping at her drink. Carl took out the several sheets of paper he found inside.

“It looks all legal. I’m not sure I’ll understand it,” he said looking up at her.

“Let me tell you about it, then. It’s the deed to this apartment building, the *Hamilton Arms*. It says that from whatever date I insert in it, this place is yours and that there is a sum of money set aside to pay the fees and taxes and such that accrue to the transaction.”

Carl smiled to himself. Thanks to his brother he now knew what *accrue* meant.

The accrue thing just happened – a happy, unplanned, happening. Things like this come along more often than you might expect.

“I can’t accept this. Surely your children or family. . .”

“Got nobody but you, son. You wouldn’t dash an old ladies dream, now, would you?”

“I had no idea this whole place was yours, Lady Hamilton. Hmmm. Lady *Hamilton*. *Hamilton Arms*. I suppose I’m pretty dumb for not making the connection.”

“I’ve never advertised it. Figured if word got out that I was filthy rich somebody might try and rob me.”

They broke into laughter. His, from the release of months of pent up guilt. Hers, from a lifetime of love from afar. It worked for both of them. He suddenly saw college for Tommy. Her vision saw Carl walking straight and true.

Carl decided to follow Lady’s lead and keep his ownership a private matter. Maybe he’d tell his mother and maybe he’d tell Tommy. Maybe!

Think about the uses of the word, ‘maybe’ just above. In its first use it might easily be construed to mean ‘probably’. I wanted there to be more uncertainty so I added the second. Did that work?

\* \* \*

Several weeks passed. The first month’s rent checks totaled something over twenty-five thousand dollars. It was as much as Carl had ever seen in a year. He took Tommy to the bank and they opened a college

fund savings account with a sizeable initial deposit. Tommy dragged him to an orthopedic surgeon. The findings were positive, which in that instance meant there was a good chance he would recover almost full use of his leg. Tommy cried at the news. Carl was somehow beyond tears. He had accepted his situation years ago. Being any other way would seem odd.

Carl began the arduous task of going through his records and secretly returning, in cash, the worth of the many things he had lifted over the years. He calculated it would all be paid back by January. He added ten percent per year to each payment. He felt good he was able to make things right in that way. Interestingly, he still felt guilty for having done it in the first place. He decided that was as it should be.

\* \* \*

The story has one more major loose end to tie up. I hope it's not overkill.

At two o'clock Tommy came on the run down the steps and into the nearly deserted pawnshop. He waved a large, white, pasteboard envelope above his head to get Carl's attention.

"It's from *Deutsche Reparation-Agentur* – that means the German Reparations Agency. I translated it on AltaVista. It's what Agent Bill said gives out the rewards. It was just delivered by a big white truck. I figured you'd want to open it right away."

"It's addressed to both of us, Bro. You could have opened it."

"I wanted it to be a special moment for us."

"It may just be a note saying thank you, you understand."

"I know but even that'll be the coolest – a thank you from a whole foreign country."

Carl pointed to the pull tab.

"Rip it open."

Tommy complied and removed an envelope.

"A envelope inside a envelope. Like a puzzle, maybe."

"Look inside. See what's there!" Carl urged taking pleasure in watching his brother's excitement.

"Looks like a check. It says, Pay in US Funds."

He handed it to Carl.

"Well, Little Bro. There's your education plus a whole lot more."

"We're rich!"

"Sort of, I suppose," Carl said. "But, just like the apartments, *this* has to remain a secret between you, me and mom. I need you to swear and spit palm with me."

Their ritual completed, Tommy voiced a philosophic concern.

"There is a basic problem with secrets, you know?"

**“What’s that?”**

**“They’re always the coolest stuff but you can’t tell nobody. It’s like they’re all responsibility and no privilege, so having them really ain’t no fun. I think I’ll just avoid them in the future.”**

**“No you won’t.”**

**“Yes I will. You’ll see.”**

**“Then you won’t be interested in what I learned about Gunther and the guy at the walk-up.”**

**“Of course I will. You know us teenagers. We’re fickle! Give! Give!”**

**“You sure? Wouldn’t want to lay on too much *responsibility* without no chance of *privilege*.”**

**“Will you move on from that mindless prattle?”**

**“I heard from Agent Bill. Seems Gunther is actually the bodyguard for Faux Girl who is married to the walk-up guy. Him and her are both agents for the German Mafia. The CIA’s been after her for years. They’ve been taken into custody thanks to us.”**

Tommy nodded and flashed a deliberate smile. He became thoughtful.

**“It’s odd and disappointing in a strange sort of way,” Tommy said.**

**“What?”**

**“I always thought having lots of money would suddenly make me really, really, happy.”**

**“And . . . the *odd and disappointing* part?”**

**“It was like a bolt of lightning. I suddenly just realized I was *already* happy – before the money. The fortune won’t change a thing. Odd, you see, and disappointing in a really wonderful way. How lucky can I be!”**

Carl sighed and crossed his arms, looking Tommy in the face.

**“I think the saying is, ‘You are mature beyond your years, Tommy.’”**

Tommy looked up into Carl’s face, clearly sobered by whatever was on his mind.

**“All in all I’d say we’ve had a pretty cool *week* together, wouldn’t you, Big Guy?”**

**“All in all I’d say we’ve had a pretty cool *fourteen years* together, wouldn’t you, Little Bro?”**

The hug lasted a long, long, long, time.

Well, the book wrote its final paragraphs (just like I knew it would!). It may tilt toward sappy but I think it is acceptable due largely to the open and loving relationship that has been solidly established between these two characters – hugs, tears, compassion, and honesty. The *story* was actually tied up paragraphs before the end. What I wanted to firm up after that without preaching, was our philosophic message – the realization about money and

happiness and the fact that true, deep down forever happiness as well as solid family relationships are built from things that in *no way* relate to money, possessions, or status – a socially destructive misconception that is running rampant in our society today. (It's what I do. Get used to it. Remember what my son said about that *one book* I keep writing over and over again! My I introduce you to its latest reincarnation!) I used the most naïve of the characters (Tommy) to highlight that message. In a comic book a light bulb would have suddenly appeared above his head. If *he* got it, everybody should get it. I believe it worked. What do you think?

A weakness that I see in *this* tutorial approach to writing using the Milieu approach, is that it probably does not do justice to the huge amount of rewriting that is required to polish a piece. Here is an exercise I encourage my students to perform. Write two double-spaced pages of a story with two-inch margins (the pages not the story). Then re-read it making corrections and changes with a red pen. Then, immediately re-read that and make additional corrections as they seem called for, with a green pen. Then a third time with a black pen. Then in blue pen. It demonstrates how much that initial 'perfect' piece can, indeed, be improved with additional thought and care. I sometimes refer to it as gardening: *watering* (improving the flow), *fertilizing* (the important, small, additions), and *weeding* (removing unnecessary or misleading words and phrases. I use *this* guide for myself: When, after I am making no more than one minor change on five successive pages, I consider the piece finished.

The rewriting should not be a burdensome, unpleasant, or disheartening task. It should be fun, engaging, and wonder-filled. It should prove to you how you have it within yourself to make your initial good piece into an even better piece. I sometimes liken it to painting a wall with a roller. You get it covered the first time and it looks great until it dries – spotty and too shiny. Then you go over it a second time paying attention to the poorly covered sections. It may take one or even two more coats until you have it just the way you want it.

## SUMMING UP

We are still searching for a book title. I decided chapter titles were inappropriate. A chapter title should suggest the content that is to follow. Our chapters have been so filled with a variety of things that any title could not be all encompassing enough. The way the final chapter closed I'm leaning toward a book title such as, *Big Guy and Little Bro*. Perhaps use a subtitle such as *The Mystery of the Berina Ruby*. Or, just use *that* – although it may fall short of characterizing the contents of the story. What else might we use?

(An interesting idea just popped into my head. This could become the first in a series of books starring Carl and Tommy as self-supported, undercover, good guys working together to solve crimes and right injustices in their city. I don't envision masks, colorful capes, and tights but it holds some possibilities.)

Most accurately, I suppose, the book should be titled, *A Socio-Philosophic treatise on Issues having no good solution, and their impact on families and individuals*. In essence we did start with that title in the back of our heads, didn't we – remembering the philosophic underpinnings and the themes we preset. We would never saddle a work of fiction with such a title except in the rare instance where the intended audience would revel in the absurdity. (I have long thought the children's song, *Three Blind Mice*, should be re-titled, *The inevitable revenge behavior engendered by irrational fear*. I gave it up realizing that in that form it quickly lost its potential for interesting rhymes. Can't you just hear the bright eyed, smiley, little kids singing the last line: *Did you ever see such a sight in your life as the inevitable revenge behavior engendered by irrational fear – Oh, dear!*)

I have grown to really like all four of our main characters – so much, that I may someday return to their lives and expand this story into a full-blown novel. It would be interesting for you to do the same. Initially, I had hoped to play with Lady and exploit her eccentricities for their humor value. (She could make a wonderful character in a play or movie; forgetful, delightful, pointedly blunt.)

Jasper seemed to serve his purpose better as a background character than a more major one. We used him to demonstrate our positive philosophy –



more powerfully, I think, because his words needed to be interpreted by Carl. I hope that presented a pointed contrast between positive and not-so-positive philosophies and suggested that we often need to look deeper than words for the true intention of others. At one point I toyed with the idea of having Carl discover that Jasper was his father but between coincidence and sappy I decided against it. In a long piece it might be feasible but here it would have pulled the story line off track from the fairly simple path we laid down. (It may still be true! I wonder if the readers will consider that as a possibility. Did you?)

I am now going to re-read the story and make my final alterations, which you will find in the story as presented at the back of this book. Pencil in additional changes you would make after giving due deliberation to your reasons. Remember to keep ease of reading at the forefront of your analysis. There are places for long, wordy, descriptive passages when they utilize words beautifully and serve a purpose. Nothing turns off a reader sooner than such a passage that fails to clearly meet those two requirements – beauty and purpose. I have purposefully taken the opposite tack here, using quick, descriptive, snapshots, so as to not interrupt the flow of the story.

I hope you have felt the force of the underlying philosophy. I have tried to keep the ‘preaching’ to a minimum. It becomes so easy to put a character up on YOUR soapbox and let him rant on about some pet topic. With care, that can be done effectively (See Ayn Rand’s books or my David Lawrence Trilogy – *The Box, The Strap, The Map*, all adventure-wrapped philosophic investigations in which I tipped the scale in the direction of my belief system. At a lighter level, read my four little books about *The Little People of the Ozark Mountains* – a fairly complete positive social philosophy woven into what have been called, “delightful stories of a magical childhood past”.

This remains a male dominated story but not merely a story for males – there is a huge difference. I hope it conveys the importance and high esteem in which women are held by these characters. They are never put down and their importance to males in terms of romance and parenting (and great-grand-parenting) is, hopefully, made obvious.

It was an interesting challenge to develop a main character that constantly broke the law and yet remained a loveable, responsible, well-meaning, person, and to do so without ever condoning his dark side. You will notice I didn’t let him off the emotional hook even after he atoned for his wrongdoing by returning – with interest – the worth of the items he had stolen. (Lady was far more forgiving than the author. Good going, Lady!) She modeled the only truly appropriate social response. Carl modeled the realistic and most likely inner reaction of a basically good person – lingering self-reproach.

The story line was resolved. Several of the philosophic struggles were not. We leave that up to the thoughtful reader – it is the only way the *thoughtful* reader wants philosophic issues handled. Present alternatives and let the reader

go from there.

And so we leave our new friends – Carl, Tommy, Jasper, Lady, Mom, Jenney, Mary, and the *four* twins (I love that!). We leave the wedding and the birth of the new baby in a way that suggests all will go well in both instances. We have not dealt with Carl's specific future. Will he continue to work at the pawnshop? Will he finish his education? Will he ever learn to add that final *g* to *ing* words? (My bet is that he begins night school, gets his GED, and enrolls in college. What's your bet?)

**FINAL EDITION OF**  
**Big Guy and Little Bro**  
***The Mystery of the Barina Ruby***  
By Tom Gnagey

As he entered the small pawnshop at the corner of Ash Boulevard and 72<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, Carl's focus was clear for the first time; he would find the ruby ring and return it to its owner.

The five concrete steps leading down to the store presented some problem for Carl and his stiff right leg, the aftermath of a three-story fall ten years earlier when he was twelve. As he inserted the key he glanced inside through the large windows where a variety of newly pawned products lay scattered on display.

The morning sun, set low in the sky behind him, was just beginning to bathe the area from between the tall apartment buildings, highlighting the large, gaudy, iridescent, letters on the door – *Jasper's Pawnshop*.

"You're almost late," Jasper grouched, predictably, as he took out his large, gold, pocket watch as if to emphasize his point.

He was a big boned man, made larger in appearance by his chubby cheeks and ruddy complexion. The store had been his life for all of his thirty some, adult, years.

'But I wasn't late,' Carl thought, smiling and keeping the response to himself, as was his style. He was as small and lean in stature as Jasper was large and rugged. The young man spoke.

"Good morning, Mr. James. Looks like it's going to be a pretty day – hot maybe."

"If that's a hint to turn on the AC forget it. Too expensive. Anyway, we're mostly underground here. Patrons coming in from the hot sidewalks will think it feels great."

It had not been what Carl intended. He knew better than to make outright suggestions to the man.

Feeling he had effectively re-established the roles for the day, Jasper continued.

"How's your sister, Mary, doing? Due any day now I suppose."

“She’s fine, Sir. Doctor says she’s due in two weeks. Mama says it’ll be sooner.”

“Your mama should know, I suppose, having had, what, eleven more after you?”

Carl began removing and carefully folding the white sheets they used to cover the merchandise at night. It was an old building that seemed to take impish delight in dusting the shop each and every evening – just an imperceptible hint over any one night but unpleasantly noticeable after a week.

“What’s new in the jewelry case?” Carl asked as Jasper continued setting up the cash drawer.

“Just before closing last night a guy brought in a half dozen rings and several bracelets. Said he bought them at an estate sale. Take a look, here. Tell me what you think. He took three hundred for the lot.”

Carl lingered over them for some time.

“I’d say you got quite a bargain – will be worth a couple of thousand when sold separately. Two of the rings are junk but this one is a diamond for sure – small but certainly not junk. Doesn’t seem reasonable they would have all come from the same estate – varying so much in quality like that.”

“Not bad for an amateur,” Jasper said breaking the faintest glimmer of a private smile.

‘You’re learning fast,’ was what Carl heard. He had to wonder if the man’s tongue would fall out if it ever uttered an outright compliment. He smiled at that image as he moved with the sheets into the back room.

“I’m on my way to the bank,” Jasper called as Carl reentered the main room. “Be a half hour like usual. Remember where the shot gun is under the register. It’s loaded.”

Carl shuddered at the thought of using a gun. He often wondered if he would, should the necessity arise. As if by clockwork, five minutes after Jasper left, the bell above the door rang. It was Tommy, Carl’s barely fourteen year old brother. He was short for his age, his face was smudged, his ball cap sat sideways atop mussed hair. He pulled a green bank bag out of his tattered, hand me down, jeans and laid it on the counter. It was clearly a well-practiced routine. Carl reached into his pocket and withdrew a small roll of bills. He counted out five one’s into Tommy’s readied palm. He playfully planted a fist into the boy’s shoulder.

“Thanks for your help, Li’l Bro,” He said returning the rest of the money to his pocket. “Got plans today?”

“Hope to get some heavy duty kissin’ in with Mary Ann this next hour down at the rail yard.”

“Kissin’ is okay. You gotta watch that heavy duty variety though. It leads to things you got no business doin’ at your age. You know about rubbers, right.”

“Know about ‘em. Have some. Never had the need to use one.”

“And that’s just the way to keep it for now. You oughta be playing ball or goin’ to the library. You’re way too young to be spendin’ your life lollin’ around in secret with girls. I’ll give you a shot in the head if I find out different, you hear?”

Tommy smiled. The shot to the head remark was just his big brother’s way of saying he loved him and was determined to keep him on the right path. Although it was a pain sometimes, (the guidance not the shot) he usually understood that it was a good thing. Each of them licked his thumb and pressed it into the other’s palm – the Riggin boy’s way of demonstrating their forever, brotherly, bond. Tommy turned to leave.

“Remember, Mary’s soon gonna be needin’ money for the baby,” Carl said. “We Riggins take care of each other.”

Tommy turned back to the counter and peeled off two bills, handing them to Carl.

“I’ll just spend them if I have them. You take care of them for her, okay?”

Carl nodded. He’d hoped for three but two was a pretty good start for a kid Tommy’s age. Had it been an emergency he knew the boy would have handed over every last cent.

Tommy opened the door to leave. Carl called after him, “Wash your face – and ears – or you won’t get kisses of *any* variety!”

Carl shook his head and smiled as he unlocked the bag and emptied its contents onto the black felt pad beside the register. There were two rings. He put in a jeweler’s eyepiece and carefully examined each one. He took a small notebook from his shirt pocket and thumbed through it to the first blank space. After entering the date, he wrote, ‘G 46’, and beside it ‘R \$50. Then, ‘I 122 – BH \$250. ‘R’ was his shorthand for *ring*; BH for brooch. ‘G’ and ‘I’ designated apartment buildings in the area. ‘46’ and ‘122’ were the apartment numbers. The dollar values represented the actual price he felt sure each one would bring to an end buyer. Carl had stolen the rings, you see, but it was his full intention to pay back every cent when his financial fortunes changed.

Carl was an odd sort of thief. Having needed to drop out of school well before the legal age, and being handicapped as he was, his employment possibilities were severely limited. His mother worked as a housekeeper for one of the hotels in the area – One Carl never touched. Between the two of them they kept the family afloat financially – well at least bobbing there with a large portion of their heads still above water.

Each night when he returned home from his ‘lifting of essential items’, as he thought of it, he would place the items into the bank bag and slip it under Tommy’s pillow. The next morning Tommy would bring it to the pawnshop after Jasper left to do the banking. The youngster had no knowledge of what was going on or what was in the bag. He trusted his big brother and merely did as he was asked. That extra step between him and the pawn shop may not have been necessary, but Carl was a careful young man understanding that for his family’s

sake he didn't dare get caught with stolen merchandise.

Carl then figured what he thought would be a good deal for Jasper and paid out that much in cash to himself – he was allowed to purchase items of lesser value for the store. Later the jewelry would be sold by the shop for a tidy profit. On occasion, when financial things were looking exceptionally good for him, Carl would buy back an item from the shop and see that it was returned to its owner. Recently, that had not happened very regularly.

He returned the little notebook to his pocket as Jasper descended the front steps.

It was a slow day. Carl hated slow days. In addition to being boring and prompting Mr. James to continually remind him about cleaning, it gave him way too much time to think.

A third problem with slow days was being less able to move the merchandise that Carl had lifted the night before. The shop needed patrons in order to make sales. Prompted by the undervalued amount Carl paid himself, Jasper typically set very reasonable prices, so it usually left the shop within one or two days.

When just a youngster of twelve he had devised a plan that worked well for him, and during the ensuing ten years he had seldom varied from it. He never opened safes – they contained things that were too valuable, required skills he had no way of acquiring, and dependably set off alarms making a quick getaway a necessity. With his stiff leg, quick *anythings* were not possible. He kept to the lower priced items – mostly jewelry for ease of transportation – and never took more than one piece from any one apartment. He understood that one piece left out in the open or in a jewelry box would seldom appear to have been theft – misplaced or lost, perhaps – but not stolen. It was a reason that he stuck with older people. They would write it off to their own failing memories. Why would a *robber* leave the best stuff behind? That added credence to the 'loss' aspect and made 'theft' seem less likely. Robbery reports were almost never filed. Still, he became nervous when his stuff didn't move out rapidly. When he heard that a report *had* been filed, he'd buy the piece back and see that it was returned – under a rug or under clothing in a dresser drawer. It kept the shop's reputation for honesty flawless and that kept the police away.

Carl was indeed an odd thief – smart as the best of them and, because he was not greedy, more successful than most of them.

Carl and his mother had an unspoken agreement: She didn't ask where all his money came from (she knew his job wouldn't pay that much) and he didn't ask about his or his siblings fathers (he knew there had been several – perhaps ten; there were two sets of twins). Among the twelve of them there were blue and brown eyes, tan and pale complexions, and every shade of hair from the carrot topped four year old baby girl, through black, brown, and several shades of blond. It made for a colorful group when, on rare occasions, they attempted

family outings. Carl had black hair and brown eyes. Tommy blond and blue. Mary brown and brown.

None of the youngest three girls and neither set of boy twins had yet been born at the time Carl had his accident. Tommy had been the new baby back then.

On the occasion of his fall, Carl had been making his nightly rounds for some six months – he was going on thirteen and had the agility of an adolescent monkey.

His preferred mode of operation was to scale the outside of the old brick buildings and enter through windows – few of which were ever locked above the third floor. He befriended the old man who ran a one vehicle, low end, limo service in the area. Each day he would engage the man in conversation and cleverly extract the names, addresses, and times of departure of his clients that evening. He would then determine the position of their apartments in relation to the outside of the building – fifth window from the north on the sixth floor, second from the east on the tenth. The length of the outing was usually of little consequence for he could be up the building and in and out of the apartment in the time it took to drive around the block. He was nowhere near that fast anymore but he had found ways of compensating for his leg. In fact, he felt more secure, more confident, and more physically proficient, up on the side of a building than he did on the ground. He often thought that, had he the power to exude webs from his hands, he *would* have been Spiderman.

It had been a cold, blustery, winter night – unpleasant in every way even to a robust twelve year old. He had already made four apartments and should have gone home. He wanted just one more so he would be able to buy Christmas presents for his family. One more something he could exchange for a hundred dollars. He figured he could find what he needed in Mrs. Bigalow's apartment. It was on the third floor of *The Baker Apartments* – a retirement, condo-like setting. In his boyish eagerness he veered from his basic plan – making sure ahead of time that the apartment would be empty for the five minutes he would need.

He reached the third floor window at eleven fifteen. The temperature was falling. Ice was forming on the brick surface and his movement was uncomfortably impaired because of his heavy coat and gloves. There was a narrow, granite, decorative, ledge no more than ten inches wide which encircled the building just below the third floor windows. He reached the ledge from the fire escape ladder at the far end of the building. To make himself slender enough he had spread his coat open so he could press his body close against the building. He moved cautiously one small sidestep at a time. At twelve he wasn't into using emergency ropes strung down from the roof the way he was after the accident, so the wind posed some threat to him. A fall would be unthinkable.

He entered through the bedroom window, and went right to the dresser.

There was a jewel box sitting open on top. He lit its contents with his penlight. There it was. Just what he needed. It would be worth at least three hundred dollars on the local market. He'd ask one hundred and get it. At that time he worked the marginally reputable pawn shops ten blocks north of where he lived. Never using the same one twice in the same week he had been able to maintain his cover.

He carefully pocketed the ring and turned to leave. He heard the living room door open. From beneath the bedroom door he saw the light come on. He moved to the window. The door knob began to turn. He pulled the window closed and rolled under the bed, opening his mouth wide so his heavy breathing would be less noticeable.

She hummed as she took her time undressing. From under the bed he couldn't watch, but wanted to. Safety first. He'd seen his sister unclothed and figured there would be a lot of similarities so he remained still. Presently, she went into the bathroom and he heard water begin running into the tub. He waited a few minutes longer to make sure she was not going to return. He heard what he felt certain was a slipping-into-a-tub-of-inviting-warm-water sigh. He then made his move. He opened the window and went outside. He closed the window and began easing back toward the fire ladder.

During the short the time he had been inside the ledge had become a sheet of ice. He knew he was in a pickle but pressed on. It was as he arrived at the corner and reached out to grasp the ladder that the wind gusted around the building from the north and caused him to lose his footing. He plummeted the three stories down onto a heap of dirty snow the plows had left in the alley the day before. Piles of snow are not soft – regardless of the lore – although, had he not fallen on his back with his leg awkwardly positioned behind him, he would have endured to climb the next day.

The pain was excruciating and he passed out. It was hours later when consciousness returned. He was no longer on his back. His leg was straightened out but the pain continued. His tears had frozen to his cheeks – his left eye was frozen shut. He removed his gloves and warmed his cheeks and eyes with the heat from his palms.

He tried to stand. His leg would not take any weight. He reached down to examine it through his jeans. They were soaked with freezing blood. He tried hopping on his good leg. It jarred his other leg causing great pain and the boy came close to losing consciousness again.

Two goals loomed large in his mind. First, stash his evening's take in a safe place. If he should pass out again the stuff might be found on him as his clothing was searched for identification. Second, he had to find a way to get home – a three block trek through the blowing snow and zero degree temperature.

Hiding the rings seemed an impossible task due to the prevailing,



inhospitable, conditions. He immediately knew the solution because he had employed it once before while being frisked by a policeman. Although the prospect of recovering them was most unpleasant he swallowed each one in turn. Then, to get home.

There was a dumpster a few yards away. He dragged himself to it, pulled himself up, and lifted the lid. He quickly formed a plan as he removed a two foot square cardboard box. He tore one side free at the two corners leaving it connected across the bottom. He placed it on the ice covered ground. Pointing it up the alley in the direction of his apartment, he eased himself onto it – sitting, facing away from where he was headed, his back against the front side of the box. With his coat buttoned and his glove on, he leaned forward and began pushing his makeshift sled – backing himself toward home. The pain worsened but he persevered. An hour later he was at his door. An hour after that Doc Carter, from next door, was there doing what he could. He reset the leg in two places but told Carl's mother – in private – that surgery would be necessary to really fix it. There would not be money for that. The bones healed, the knee stiffened, and that was that.

By the time spring arrived Carl had disposed of the crutch and was moving around with surprising nimbleness. Stairs remained his biggest foe. He worked to develop his upper body strength. He got stronger for sure but the hoped for set of fabulous, female attracting, muscles refused to bloom – he had just turned thirteen. He played stick ball with his friends but not very well. When he realized they were intentionally going easy on him he quit playing. Carl Riggle would *not* become the object of pity.

[By the way, he would also not recommend trying to retrieve swallowed merchandise while cemented into a cast from toes to groin.]

## CHAPTER TWO

Fast forward to the present.

It had been eating at Carl all day – just as it had every day since he had made the terrible blunder several months before.

He closed and locked the door to the shop then made his way along the avenue toward the *Hamilton Arms*. He hoped the old elevator was working because the five flights of stairs were no picnic for his right leg. He'd climb them, mind you, just hoped it wouldn't be necessary.

He was in luck and soon found himself standing at the door to apartment 501. He sighed and knocked. He heard the chain being worked and the locks turning. It was a now familiar, dear old, well-powdered, face that greeted him.

"I come for your grocery list, Lady Hamilton."

"I have it all ready. Not many things this week. It is so sweet of you to do this for me. The heat you know. It's harder on me since I became an

octogenarian.”

Carl assumed the big word either meant really old or limited physically.

“I’m happy to help.”

“Lemonade before you leave for the store?”

“That sounds wonderful. Yes. Thanks.”

The door was closed and relocked. Her apartment was small – living room, bedroom, and a kitchen with a dining area. It seemed to meet her needs. A picture of her late husband – Lord Hamilton according to her – had a place of honor on top of the TV. The Lady was a green person – furnishings, wallpaper, throw rugs. Carl took a seat on the sofa, too large for the room but comfortable. Lady was soon back with tall glasses of refreshment. She sat in a chair across from him.

“Was it a busy day at the shop?” she asked. It was her predicable opening between them.

“No, Ma’am. Pretty slow, really. I don’t like slow days. Too much cleanin’. Too little income.”

She smiled.

“I don’t suppose you’ve come across my ruby ring or you would have said so.”

“Afraid not. Sorry. I’m lookin’.”

“I know you are. You are my angel.”

She reached out and patted his knee – the left one that bent appropriately as he sat there.

“Mary’s about due. Have I told you it’s gonna be a boy?”

“Yes. I started knitting him a sweater.”

“That’s very kind of you. She’ll love it.”

“I saw your bother holding hands with a young lady earlier – from my bedroom window that looks down on the alley.”

“His first love,” Carl said, smiling.

“He was a regular gentleman from what I could see.”

“He knows better than not to be. We’ve had a talk.”

Lady Hamilton nodded and smiled.

“It must be hard – you having to be like a father to all the other children.”

Carl grinned.

“I wouldn’t have it no other way. They’re my whole life.”

“I keep hoping to see *you* holding hands out there, you know. A young man your age should be making time for the fairer sex.”

“I’m lookin’. I may have found somebody. Mama says I’ll know her when she comes along. I just need to be patient.”

“Patience is good, of course, but sometimes we have to help good things along – go looking, you know? Glad to hear you are looking.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you? I don’t understand.”

“Sometimes you offer me suggestions like I think my grandma would if I had one.”

“Grandma? I’m old enough to be your *great* grandma, boy!”

“Either way I value your friendship. I hope you know.”

Again she patted his leg. She never spoke of her family. Carl didn’t know if she had children or not. He didn’t ask figuring she would let him know if she wanted him to know. There were no pictures of any as far as he could determine. Just the Lord H.”

He sat the glass on the end table and excused himself.

“I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Here’s some money. Will that be enough?”

It never was. He always said yes. There was always a dollar in change for her when he returned. It had been going on like that ever since he had discovered his terrible miscalculation.

Carl walked to the only grocery store in the area where he was greeted with hugs by the owner and his wife.

“You are such a nice boy,” she said lingering over her embrace and patting his back.

‘If they only knew,’ he thought to himself. He went about the task of filling the order. ‘I’m such an idiot that I entered the wrong apartment and instead of lifting a ring from horrible old Beatrice Browning, the ugly, moneyed, crank up on six, I let myself into 501 by mistake. How could I have done that? By the time I heard about my mix-up Lady’s ruby ring was long gone.

‘At first I figured I could make it up to her by doin’ stuff – like gettin’ these groceries and walkin’ her to and from the park – but then when she told me it was like a family heirloom, passed down through her family to Lady, I got sick to my stomach over it. I see now that nothin’ will do but to get it back for her.

‘I wish she knew how sorry I am but I can’t tell her. Maybe I should but I can’t. I like her so much and I know she likes me. I don’t want to risk losing that. The shame is eatin’ me up. Maybe havin’ to tell her someday will be the punishment I deserve.’

He reassembled his smile and paid the bill, then walked the many blocks back to her apartment.

“About your missing ring, Lady Hamilton. Do you happen to have a picture of it? Ruby rings come in all shapes and sizes you know.”

“Let’s see. I suppose there would be one in the insurance envelope. Lord Hamilton was a stickler for following procedure. As I recall he had pictures taken. They may be in the wall safe. I can never get it open. Will you come into the bedroom and help me?”

It really hadn’t been a question, nor had it been an order – more like a gentle request which assumed a positive reply. It was the last thing Carl wanted

to do – learn the combination to her safe – but he complied and followed her. In the belief Carl would retrieve it for her she had not filed a claim.

“Lord always had a picture hanging in front of the safe. I figure any robber who got in here would know where to look so I just let it be there in the open. Nobody’s ever in here besides me anyway.”

She went to her dresser and opened the top drawer. She withdrew a small piece of paper and returned to Carl’s side at the safe. She read.

“Eighteen right, ten left, sixteen right.”

The safe was soon open. Carl stood back so Lady could go through the contents.

“Look in this big, thick, envelope. It’s from our insurance company. I’ll keep searching.”

“This seems to be what we’re looking for, alright.”

She turned to see what he had. She nodded.

“Take out the picture of the ring and then lock the rest back in the safe.”

With that completed, they returned to the better light of the living room.

“Can I make a copy?”

“Certainly if you think that will help. Make lots of them if you want.”

“It is certainly a beautiful ring,” Carl said suddenly taken with its true quality – something he had hurried past in his initial rush to sell it.

Lady stroked the picture and her eyes moistened.

“It is *that*, but even more *precious* than beautiful.”

“I’ll have this picture back within the hour. I’ll take good care of it. Don’t be concerned.”

“Goodness, child, if I were going to be concerned I certainly wouldn’t have given you the combination to my safe. I’d trust you with my life, you know.”

Again, Carl forced a smile as the guilt churned in his gut. He turned and let himself out. It was after six. He could make the copy and have the original back before seven. For the rest of the week his lunch hours would be spent revisiting his childhood haunts ten blocks to the north. It seemed strange knowing he could trust them – them being the contemptible scalawags they were.

\* \* \*

Carl met the day excited. He got to the shop well ahead of time – even before Mr. James. In fact, the sheets were removed, the front counter dusted, and the cash drawer set up by the time Jasper walked through the door.

“You sick, Kid?” came the man’s opening volley as he paused once inside and surveyed the room deliberately.

“No Sir. Just feelin’ full of it today, I guess. I may need a little extra time over noon.”

“It’ll come off your pay.”

“I know. Wasn’t askin’ for special treatment.”

Jasper was only JASPER on the outside. Carl had his number by the end

of the first week he had worked in the shop some eight years earlier. He dropped out of school at fourteen to go to work in the shop as clean up and delivery boy. It paid poorly but money had not been Carl's primary goal. He understood that he needed to know more about the value of merchandise – the kinds that made their ways in and out of pawnshops. Once inside a hotel room or apartment, he allowed himself no more than a minute to survey the situation and make the decision as to what one thing he was going to lift. The better his knowledge about value, the more effective his clandestine sorties would become. His goal was to watch and listen and ask questions. He had been an excellent student.

The morning dragged on. He was thankful for the large number of customers. Still, the morning dragged on. Carl usually took lunch from one until two o'clock after the noon hour rush was over. The clock struck one.

"I'll be on my way now, if that's okay, Sir."

"Go. Go. Don't run over too long. We got a business to run here, you know," Jasper said.

Carl heard: 'I'll be glad to see you when you return, Son. I value your help and friendship.'

He took the bus north and exited some ten blocks away. He hoped to visit at least four shops before heading back south to *Jasper's*. He entered the first, small, smudged stone, building sitting as if helpless there in the clutches of two much larger, foreboding, structures.

He entered the shop.

"Gus, you ol' son-of-a-gun. Remember me, Carl, bearer of all things great and wonderful back when I could barely see over the counter?"

"Carl. As I live and breathe. It's been years. Figured you'd fallen in somewhere and couldn't get out. Leg still bothering you, I see."

"As all of life's possible bad stuff goes, I'm doing really well."

Gus leaned forward over the counter and lowered his voice.

"Got stuff?"

"No, actually. I do have a picture of a ring I'm looking for. I really need to find it. Would have been up for sale about three months ago. You'd have probably given under three hundred for it and sold it for a thousand."

He showed Gus the picture.

"Nice piece. Looks very old. Late eighteen hundreds I'd guess. What's the deal?"

Carl understood the talk – it meant yes I've handled it but won't admit to it unless I know for sure I'm off the hook.

"It was taken from an elderly friend of mine – a family heirloom. I'm just trying to get it back for her. She's a dear, sweet, old lady who's really sad about the loss."

"That's always been your problem, kid."

"What?"

"Your conscience. In our business you don't dare have no conscience. It'll just get you into trouble. Know anything more about it?"

He was fishing, still not fully convinced he could trust the young man, gone from his life for so long. He offered a minimal response.

"Okay, my info says it was being shown on the street by Hec Brown."

"Hec's a thief?"

"He is and not such a careful one."

Gus nodded and the two of them stood eye to eye across the counter searching each other's souls. At last Gus straightened up.

"Suppose I knew about it? I wouldn't just hand it over for nothing, you know."

"I'm serious about gettin' it back. Name a price. I know you'll treat me right. We been through too much together for you not to give me that."

Gus nodded and spoke.

"We both know Hec would sell his own mother if he stood to make a buck. I took it off his hands. Assuming it was hot I turned it around right away for a small profit. My boy sold it to *Johnson's Pawn* over on Hickory. That's all I know. Been out of my hands for nearly three months. I do remember it though."

He picked up the picture from the counter and pointed.

"See the filigree. Imitation of late 19<sup>th</sup> century work out of Germany or Scandinavia. This piece was most likely made in pre-World War One England, however. It's a case of the copy being worth as much or more than the original – the copies are so rare."

Carl was fascinated by the lesson but was more eager to move on. He thanked Gus and did just that – moved on. *Hickory Street* was three blocks east. He knew the shop and had occasionally sold pieces there as a boy. It was under new ownership so he would be starting from scratch.

He introduced himself as working at *Jasper's* and explained he was searching for the specific ring there in the picture – for a client. He assured him that the utmost privacy would pervade the recovery transaction.

"Had it. Don't, no more," came the surprisingly candid response from the new owner – a shifty eyed, Barney Fife look-alike.

Carl cocked his head and looked puzzled. The owner continued.

"Was robbed about eight weeks ago – maybe nine or so. That ring and two similar to it was all that was took. Strange. Like they was stealin' for a client with a certain thing in mind, you know?"

"No trace of it then? No way to track it down?"

"There may be. About a week later the other two rings was sold to my cousin Vincent over on Madison – *Harley's Pawnshop*. He may have some records. Not sure, of course."

"How far's that from here?"

"Five minutes due west."

He pointed.

Carl was again on the move. He entered *Harley's* at 1:48 and rehashed the information he had received at the previous shop.

"I know. My cousin, Barney, just called about you. I called Gus. You check out okay."

Vincent produced a tray from beneath the counter and pointed.

"That ruby is the only one I have left. Had the two of them. Sold one a few weeks ago."

"Do you remember the person who you bought them from?"

"Hard to forget. A huge man – mid thirties, maybe – hard to say when they are that big. Had odd tattoos – a crescent moon here on his right cheek and a sun here on the left. Creepy! Spoke with an accent – German, maybe Russian. Not English or French or Alabam, for sure."

"Don't suppose you have an address."

The man pulled his glasses down on his nose and looked at Carl across the top. Carl understood. No records unless there was a pawn ticket issued. It had been an outright purchase.

Carl's heart sank. Things had been looking so good and then it was as if the gods suddenly pulled the plug. He thanked Vincent and turned to leave.

"You know. There might be one chance left," the man said, leaving from behind the counter to approach Carl. "He got into Manny's cab. Manny's worked this area as an independent for years. He might remember where he took him. I'm sure he couldn't forget the guy."

"Okay. Thank you. *Manny*, you say?"

"Yes. Manny. Red bottom. White top. The cab, not Manny. Well, as far as I know at least."

It was worth a smile and chuckle between them. Carl was out of time but he left that first leg of his search on an up note. He was back in the shop by two twenty.

"Two twenty," Jasper called out in order to emphasize the amount of time Carl would be docked. He wouldn't be, of course. It was just a Jasper thing.

Carl nodded in response and buried his smile somewhere close to his heart. Jasper was not married and had no children of own. Carl assumed that made him in some way special in the man's life. He was a man of interesting contrasts – patient as any man on earth while teaching a new skill but ruthless in criticism once it was supposed to have been acquired. He let it be known that *he* was in charge and yet clearly looked kindly upon the quiet innovations Carl brought to the place and system. The sheets had been Carl's idea – he began by spreading several at night and removing them in the morning without having any words about it with Jasper beforehand. One morning soon after that, a dozen new sheets were delivered. He rewired the ceiling lights so half could be turned off at closing to save on electricity and still allow full vision of the place

during the night. He ordered 500 advertising pens to give out to the customers – Jasper increased the second order to five thousand with never speaking of it. Way back when Carl turned fourteen, soon after he began working there, Jasper directed the boy to a clergyman for a birds and bees talk – nothing he would undertake himself but something he would see *was* undertaken.

It was like a father-son bond without the hugs and truly personal discussions. Though it would never be said between them, both treasured the relationship.

### CHAPTER THREE

Carl wasn't comfortable being out on the streets at night. With his obvious handicap he was an easy target for those who would accost him for his wallet. He would return to find Manny the following morning – he wasn't due at work until ten on Wednesdays.

\* \* \*

Tommy met him at the door as Carl was locking it for the night.

"Little Bro. How goes it?"

"Not so good. Mary Beth dumped me for Jacob."

"Sorry. Tough. Been there, you know?"

"So? I'm askin' for advice here, not reminiscin' Big Guy."

Carl smiled.

"So you are. Well, you won't like it."

"Let me decide about that – it's what you're always sayin'."

"Okay. Here it is. Move on to somebody else. Nothing looks more pathetic than a guy sulkin' around over his broken heart. Nobody wins. The other guys think you're a wimp. The girl realizes what awesome power she has over guys, and you feel miserable – less the man than you want to feel. Move on, you see. Focus on what *she lost*. Take what you've learned from her and move on."

"Well, I have learned lots of good stuff from her – tongue stuff especially. She was always on me for doin' or sayin' the wrong stuff. I suppose that was learnin' what *not* to do, right?"

"*What not to* is just as important as *what to*, I'd say – probably more. You'll find girls each have their own lists of *what to's* and *what not to's*."

"Really? This girl thing is gettin' complicated."

Carl laughed out loud. Tommy didn't ask knowing he'd just be put off about it. He had his brother's ear so he'd work it for more information.

"How have you and Jenny got along so good for so long – what? Four years now?"

"Almost six. She let me kiss her for the first time on our third date – it was my sixteenth birthday."



“You must have been a really slow starter, Bro. Sixteen? I been kissin’ since I was eleven – *seriously* kissin’ since I was twelve. It just keeps gettin’ better.”

“Didn’t say I hadn’t kissed other girls.”

“Oh. Okay then. You and Jenny *do it*?”

“Tommy, my boy. Listen up.”

Carl stopped and faced him. They had just entered the alley leading to the rear entrance of their apartment. He reached down and put his hands on his brother’s shoulders.

“When you aren’t especially fond of a girl and you do it with her you might brag about it to your buddies. When you do it with a girl you love, it’s private; you never speak of it to others. So, whether or not we do it, is nobody else’s business.”

“You and Jenny in love?”

“I’m not sure. I think, maybe, yes.”

“How do you know when you’re in love?”

“I wish I knew. I guess it just gradually seeps into your soul and one day you know that’s what the feelin’ is.”

“You gonna get married or go shack up?”

“You ask way too many questions.”

“I think I have a right to know. Once you leave home I won’t have you to talk to about stuff.”

“Who says? I’ll always be here for you, Little Bro. We’re natural family. I won’t never let *nothin’* come between us. And Jenny understands that. When I’m old and in a wheelchair I’m countin’ on *you* to push me around, you understand?”

Tommy grinned up into Carl’s face and reached his arm around his waist. Carl pulled him close and they moved on down the alley. Every week he tried to spend private time alone with each of his brothers and sisters. Tommy was the brightest of the lot and the most sensitive so he needed more time, thus the walk home from work most afternoons and the time at the shop in the mornings. His next two younger brothers had joined the service so were no longer his responsibility. That left nine. With the new baby, Mary would probably be at home for some time. She was good help for their mother. The two sets of twin boys – only ten months apart (God have mercy on that household!) – were all nine. At that age they preferred to live their lives all quite separate from the family – well, except for food and spending money – so they remained cloistered in their room or ran with their friends. Fortunately they got on well with one another and during any given day only minimal blood was spilled among them. The rest of the children held their own in and around the others.

As was his habit, Carl left at ten o’clock after he had seen the younger family members bathed and put to bed. Tommy was becoming a big help with

that evening routine and corralled and hosed down the twins pretty much by himself. He never asked where Carl went – assuming it had to do with one or both of two things: the green bank bag and Jenny – perhaps a small second job and a big dose of kissin’.

Although it was only the *third*, there was a *Fourth of July* party in the smallest of the residential buildings in the area – building ‘K’ in Carl’s scheme. Most of the two dozen residents would be in attendance in the ballroom down on the first floor. He had his eye on six specific apartments. Understanding the finest of the jewels would spend the evening on the fingers and wrists, and around the necks of the women, he would easily find his specialty – items seldom worn and of medium to low end value – left behind and ready for lifting. It was a four story, quarried stone, flat roofed, building with its back to an unlit alley – ideal in every way for plying his trade.

He kept a small, metal, storage shed in the alley, second block west. It was there he kept the tools of his trade. He got what he needed and locked it. Crossing two blocks through alleys, he arrived at the building. He immediately climbed the north fire escape to the roof, secured two ropes, and dangled them, some twenty feet apart, over the side where they reached just below the second floor windows. The ropes were knotted at one-foot intervals to ease the act of climbing – the second one there in case something happened to the first. He pulled his gray ski mask down over his head. It was a good match in color to the sweat suit he chose for the occasion. Medium gray for gray stones. Light brown for brownstones. Dark, red-orange, for brick. He descended the east rope to the level of the second floor. Once over the side it required mostly arm and shoulder strength. He became a whole different being – light, agile, competent, complete. Legs were of minimal importance and *one* was more than sufficient.

The first window was open and he was soon inside. Had it been locked he would have moved on. He never broke in. His success depended on the fact that no one ever realized he had been there. The bedrooms were set across the backs of the apartments, which added to the ease of his work that night. In that first apartment, the door to the wall safe hung open – trusting folks. The jewelry box inside yielded a pearl necklace – it had been relegated to the bottom suggesting it was not an often-used piece. He was back outside within the sixty-second period he allowed himself. He moved easily, though with great care, from window to window. He preferred to work bottom to top. It presented shorter climbs – one story at a time on the return trip. That spread the strain out over three short bursts back to the roof. Had he begun with the top story and worked his way down, when finished, he would have to make the continuous three story climb back to the top.

The other five went as smoothly as the first. It was as if they had set things up just for his visit. They *had*, of course, because Carl had built his approach according to how folks operated. A half hour later he had stowed his

gear back inside his well-secured shed.

He walked the three blocks to Jenny's place – a two bedroom apartment shared with three roommates. Two were stewardesses. When they were out of town he and Jenny could have some privacy. Not so that night. They spent a few minutes on the balcony and said good night. He wanted to get an early start the next morning and Jenny had Beauty School classes all day. During the final, lingering, kiss, he thought about Tommy – suddenly amazed that Little Bro was old enough to be sharing that same wonderful feeling with a girl. He'd seen it come into the lives of the other two boys but it was somehow different with Tommy. He would never admit it, but Tommy was his favorite. He liked the boy's spontaneity and openness and the wonderful questions that he could fire at the speed of a Gatling Gun. He appreciated his unfaltering loyalty, trust, and honesty. He just enjoyed having him around.

Carl transferred the six pieces of jewelry to the green bag and locked it. He slipped it under Tommy's pillow and kissed him on his forehead. He made similar rounds of the others and then spent a few minutes over coffee with his mother. She was always exhausted. He wished he could fix that, but he couldn't.

\* \* \*

Seven a.m. the next morning found Carl on the streets searching for Manny. Seven-thirty found him in the red and white cab's back seat.

"I'm not lookin' to go nowhere, Manny, but I'll pay the meter charge. I need information. You picked up a very large man with a accent from the pawnshop there a week or so back. He had odd cheek tattoos as I understand it. Remember him?"

"Oh, yes. One big, scary, dude. Tried to pay me in Euros but I refused. He finally dug up enough greenbacks. Made guttural sounds the whole time he was in here. Like some bad guy out of a James Bond movie."

"Where did you take him?"

"Troy Hotel – corner of Wilson and 71<sup>st</sup>."

"I know the place. Expensive. Anybody seem to meet him there?"

"Yes, actually. A woman – faux classy if you know what I mean."

Carl wasn't sure.

"A prostitute?"

"No. Well, maybe. Not what I meant. Looked all upper class until she opened her mouth. Can't pull that act off on looks alone you know."

"I see. Like me trying to pass myself off as Lord Hamilton."

The analogy lofted over Manny's head. He shrugged."

"You catch anything else about him?"

"She called him something like, Gunther – 'Gunther Baby' to be exact."

"She have a accent?"

"Yeah. Like his. German maybe. I was glad when he got out. Thought

his weight was gonna bust my shocks.”

“Seen him since?”

“Two days ago. Entering the Luxembourg Café near the hotel – he and the girl.”

“Thanks, Manny. You’ve been a great help. What do I owe you?”

“If you find him just don’t tell him where I am. Little ol’ *Red* here probably couldn’t take another outing with him.”

“You’re very kind. Thank you.”

“You’re a Welshman – something my ma used to say instead of welcome – to be funny.”

Carl raised his eyebrows and exited the cab. Manny rolled down the window. He remembered one more piece of information.

“The Gunther guy has a scar – old – running the length of the right side of his throat – like the leavin’s of a knife blade I’m thinkin’.”

Carl thanked him again and headed off in the direction of the *Troy Hotel*. He’d been there on other occasions – just never before entered through the front door. It had a majestic two story high entry lounge with everything maintained as it had been a hundred years before, when it was built. One sank into the carpet. The same with the antique chairs. Carl sat and tried to set a plan. What would he do if Gunther strolled by? What did his next step need to be? It seemed he was still miles away from discovering what had become of the ruby ring.

Suddenly, there he was – like a lumbering mountain with huge shoulders and a neck too large to measure. His features were engulfed in pads of fatty flesh, his teeth crooked and unsightly. The man’s hair was short and black and had clearly not met a comb or shampoo for some weeks. For the first time, Carl understood what it meant to feel a shiver run up one’s spine.

The man stopped as if looking for something. Carl stood and approached him.

“Gunther, I believe?” Carl began more hesitantly than he had expected.

The big man looked down on him from his six-six, maybe six-ten, foot frame.

“*Günter*,” came the heavy, guttural, correction.

Believing that he didn’t have some of those sounds in his oral repertoire, Carl skipped the name and continued.

“I was told you might be interested in certain kinds of rings – rubies in gold settings?”

Again it came out a question.

“Who say?”

“Nobody in particular. Word’s out on the street. I just picked it up. I have connections if you have certain needs.”

“Word on street is wrong. Leave me, now.”

The big man turned and walked to the desk requesting his key. That was

really what Carl was going for, all along. He listened and watched – room 938. He wrote it on the back page of his pocket notebook.

The Faux Class girl approached – clearly late – and Günter returned the key. He and she left through the front door. Carl took an elevator to the seventh floor. There he took another up to the ninth. Carl was as careful as he was bright. He found 938 and made the necessary calculations so he could locate it from outside. He figured he couldn't count on there being an unlocked window, although in the past, he had some success with the hotel's patio doors, which opened onto the balconies. When he returned that night he would bring a circle cutting glass cutter; if necessary, he would cut an opening large enough to reach through and unlock the glass door.

He returned to the lobby and exited through the service entrance, which opened into a narrow alley. He was facing the rear of an office building. He circled around to the front of it and entered, making his way to the ninth floor. He was searching for a rear window from which he could reconnoiter – pinpoint the rear of room 938 in the *Troy*. It took some doing, having to pose as a workman there to look into a complaint about a window seal. It worked and he was soon peering across the expanse above the alley. He located the room – one large window and one sliding door leading onto the small balcony. He studied the building and determined that repelling down from the roof was the only viable way of getting there.

'Eight floors above it,' he thought. 'Should be a genuine rush up there. Dark brown stone. Door is lever opened rather than knob opened. Makes it easier and safer. The old wood-framed, glass, door is probably hasp locked. Guests hate the complication of locking and unlocking them so usually leave them open.'

To his good fortune lights had been left on in the room. He took his jeweler's eyepiece from his shirt pocket and replaced the near point magnifying lens with one designed for distance – one he had specially design for his night job. He surveyed the room in search of a likely place to keep the ring. Nothing jumped out at him. The room had all the usual places.

'Probably not a wall safe in an old building like that although the picture on the north wall seems off center like it could be covering something recessed between studs that were not placed symmetrically. Maybe, maybe not. Like the hasps, some guests also dislike reopening safes and often forget to lock them when they leave the room.'

He took time to sketch the essential landmarks along the roof on the rear of the building, then left, assuring the receptionist that the window should be fine, now. She thanked him, winked, and slid a business card in his direction. He picked it up, returned her smile, and exited to the hall. Upon sliding the card into his shirt pocket he noticed writing on the back. 'Call me, Cutie.' There was also a phone number.

Carl smiled. He didn't consider himself cute or handsome as some others had described him. He saw himself as a grotesquely stiffened leg with a body attached. That left no room for good looks. Later, he and Jenny would have a good chuckle about the card. Neither harbored jealous tendencies. They trusted each other completely.

He was back at work early, needing to busy himself until that night. Before boarding the bus south, he had placed a payphone call to the front desk at the *Troy*. It was for Günter in 938. "*Meet me at the Luxembourg this evening. I will be there sometime between nine and ten. I have the information you need.*" If the big lummoX took the bait his room would be empty during that hour.

Later in the morning it hit him. What if *Faux Class* stayed behind while Gunther went out? She might be there in the room! Carl would just have to deal with what he found.

\* \* \*

"I need to skip out a hour or so earlier than usual tonight, Little Bro," Carl said as Tommy used the key to lock the shop door. Handling the closing gave him a sense of being grown up. It gave Carl a good feeling to know he was helping foster that.

"Okay. I'll do the baths, but you'll owe me dishes sometime next week."

Carl put him in a headlock and noogied him unmercifully. They giggled together as they turned down the street toward their alley.

As usual, Tommy had things to say.

"I know I can't ask what you do at night but I'm pretty sure I have it figured out."

Carl felt a sudden, disquieting, wave bathe his being.

"Speculate all you want, though I think there are better ways for you to be spending your time."

"Can't always be kissin' girls, you know," he said smiling up into his brother's face. Carl's comment had not dissuaded the boy from pursuing the topic.

"I figure you are a secret agent and you work for the government, spying on guys who come to the city to do bad stuff. Bad stuff happens at night. You go out at night. It all makes perfect sense."

"Well, I certainly am *A Gent*, though I don't try to keep it a *secret*."

Carl's attempt at humor was worth a smile between them – not a laugh or a chuckle – just a smile and was more in recognition of the attempt than the result.

'How great to have such a trusting brother and best friend,' Carl thought.

'How great to have a brother and best friend who's a secret agent,' Tommy thought.

\* \* \*

Carl carried his sweat suit and supplies in a black leather 'Doctor's bag'.

That night he walked with a cane – a necessary part of his paraphernalia that would not fit inside the bag. The fire escapes on the back of the building were weight triggered so they could provide easy exit down to the alley but prevented anyone from easily using them to move upward. He could have done it but the time, effort, and hassle suggested another strategy would be better employed.

He entered through a side door and avoided the lobby by taking the stairs to the second floor – a mezzanine overlooking the lobby. From there he took an elevator to the top floor. He made his way to the roof exit – always unlocked according to fire regulations. It would sound an alarm when opened but that was easily rewired.

Once onto the roof he found the landmark – an air-conditioning unit – which told him he was directly above the balcony on which he needed to land. He secured the rope – thinner and longer than the usual – and fed it over the side, carefully, so it didn't dangle in front of any windows on its way. Had it been windy, he would have used a five-pound weight on the lower end to keep it stable. He secured the cane to his belt and tied a plastic bag beside it; it contained equipment he thought he might need below. He carried the cane in his teeth.

Then, it was over the side and down the rope. He was soon standing on the balcony peeking into the well-lit, empty, room. He tied the dangling rope to the railing in a hitch which could be quickly released from there but couldn't be pulled up if anybody happened onto it up on the roof. The door was locked and the window was sealed shut – not constructed to open. There was a slide lock on the inside and a lever-type handle – push it down and the door opens. The drapes were open. They overhung the glass by six inches. That was a plus. It would cover the round hole Carl would leave behind – the little circular piece of glass being set back in place with superglue and clear plastic sealing tape when he was finished. The hole was soon cut – just large enough so he could fit his well-developed upper arm through it. He slid the latch open with the slim metal handle of the cane and pressed the lever down. The door clicked open. He was immediately inside. Out of habit he looked at his watch – 9:11. He figured he would necessarily run over his usual time allotment.

He checked for a safe behind the picture. It was there – open and empty. He worked methodically around the room, drawer by drawer, leaving things neatly in place. The desk drawer presented a felt bag – the drawstring variety in which jewelry is often kept. He opened it. Seven gold rings. Oddly, each ruby – *eight* of them in the bag – had been separated from the ring. None of the settings was exactly like the one for which he was searching. Perhaps it was the missing one. He examined each ruby with care. One of them seemed to be a perfect match to Lady's. He put in his eyepiece and examined it more closely, comparing it with the picture. He was convinced it was hers.

It presented a quandary that required an immediate resolution: Should he

take only the stone? The likelihood a stone would be immediately missed was higher, he thought, if there were suddenly an even number of settings and stones. Why was the matching setting not there? It made no sense to him. He took Lady's ruby and one setting, then replaced the bag exactly as he had found it in the drawer. 9:16. Five minutes but still lots of time if Heir G. was patient enough to last out the hour at the *Luxembourg Café*. It was where Carl assumed the man had gone, intrigued in some way by the phone message. That was not a certainty, however. He quickly searched the remaining desk drawers thinking he might find the setting. Finding nothing of interest, he decided to leave.

Outside, he again used the cane, that time to pull *shut* the slide-lock. He replaced the piece of glass. Eventually the hole would be found when the maid washed the window. That may or may not have been done daily. 9:20

On the way back to the roof he made three stops to rest, each time supporting himself on a railing. 9:24. He was back on top. He drew the rope up into a tight coil and put it back into the black bag along with his sweat suit and other supplies. Once inside he reestablished the alarm on the door, then made his way to the first floor and back out the way he entered.

At home he found everybody asleep. He heated the coffee, knowing it would be sludge. Taking a chair at the kitchen table he examined the ring setting. In every way it appeared run of the mill. Perhaps that was why it had been left behind. It was *Lady's* ring that had been somehow special – specifically, only the far less expensive setting rather than the ruby. But special how?

He secured his take into the bank bag and delivered it to Tommy's pillow. After tucking and kissing all around, he went to bed.

\* \* \*

Carl arrived at the shop earlier than usual. He wanted to research Lady's ring in the reference books Jasper kept in his office. There could be some clue there. One book led to another, which led to several websites. Carl was not web proficient. He knew somebody who was.

\* \* \*

"Tommy my boy," he said as his brother deposited the bag on the counter. He peeled off five dollar bills. Tommy returned two. They understood the transaction.

"You know that stuff you were saying about my night job?"

"Yeah."

Tommy perked up but looked puzzled.

"Well. I'm not admitting to what you're thinking but if I was what you think, would you help me?"

"Of course. In a second. What? What?"

"I need your sacred promise to keep this just between me and you, okay?"

"Okay. You got my sacred promise. Now, what?"



Carl took a copy of the picture of the ring from his pocket.

"I need your computer and web savvy. I – we – need to find out the exact history of this ruby. I've made notes on everything I know so far."

He tore two pages from his little notebook.

"Here it is and a web address that should get you started. Do it yourself. Don't ask the librarians for help. If you can't get anywhere come back to me and we'll try to find some other way to go about it."

"This is great. One question, though. Couldn't your agency do this quicker on its huge computer?"

"Agents working deep undercover don't contact the agency until a case is solved – I mean that's how it would work if I was a agent."

Tommy nodded and flashed a subtle, knowing smile.

"Go. Scoot. Here's five bucks for lunch."

"It costs ten cents a page to print off stuff."

Carl replaced the five with a ten.

"Shouldn't I swear a oath or something – me being a junior secret agent and all?"

"Oh. Well. Yes. Remember I haven't admitted to anything. You have to think of this like it's pretend. If it was like you think, though, you'd have to swear to uphold the laws of the land and the goodness of truth, justice, and the American way. Swear to it."

"I swear to it. This is so great! Do we need code names?"

"You're gonna wear me out before we get started. Of course. Code names. Let's see. You'll be *Little Bro* and I'll be *Big Guy*."

Tommy grinned. He looked at his watch.

"I'll check in at thirteen hundred hours – Big Guy."

"That'll be great. When's thirteen hundred hours?"

"One o'clock p.m."

Carl nodded. Tommy rolled his eyes and left on the trot.

Carl smiled watching the boy disappear around the corner. He was pretty sure it was the first conversation they had shared during the past eighteen months in which Tommy hadn't alluded to girls – specifically, the kissing thereof.

Promptly at one o'clock (thirteen hundred hours!) Tommy came through the door, looking somehow taller and more mature, Carl thought.

"I got lot's of stuff, Big guy."

"I'm going to lunch, Sir. Be back at two," Carl called to Jasper."

"Don't let the kid wear you out. Still got the afternoon to work. Ten minutes with him and his questions, and I'm in need of a nap."

It had been as close to humor as Jasper ever came. It was also his way of indicating that he understood about the brother's special relationship. Carl easily made the translation. Tommy didn't understand and once outside he asked.

“Why doesn’t he like my questions? You always say questions are good – that you have to keep looking for the right one or you’ll never solve problems.”

“He was trying to be funny. Forget it.”

“I guess I never thought of Mr. J. as the kind who tried to make jokes.”

“How about I treat you to lunch at Mary’s Café?”

“Really? Great!”

“I figure we can talk privately there. The kids at home will be way too nosy.”

Suddenly, Tommy felt their bond strengthen. He beamed into his brother’s face.

“We got a good thing, don’t we, Carl?”

“We got the best there is, Tommy.”

It called for spit-laced thumbs to each other’s palms.

After ordering – BLT’s, slaw, and fries – they got down to work.

“This is great stuff,” Tommy began, pulling a batch of folded sheets out from the front of his pants. “It’s like researching a term paper without having to write it. I got twenty pages of info and I can summarize all but the really technical stuff. I had to go and learn about rubies, facets, and carets, before some of it made any sense. TGFG.”

Carl frowned.

“Thank God for Google.”

Carl let the reference go – not really understanding the web-eze his brother was speaking.

Tommy sorted through the pages pulling out several with pictures.

“Okay. While I talk you make sure all these pictures of the ruby are really the one you gave me.”

He slid the relevant sheets across the table.

“During the Second World War the Germans stole lots of art and jewelry – it was the generals, mostly, to live on after the war, I guess. Anyway, see this little crown – they call it a Tierra. It has – had – six matched rubies across the front here and belonged to a princess in Bavaria. It was stole by a SS officer who seems to have made stealing stuff his major contribution to the German war effort – that’s a quote – not original from me.

“When he figured the war was about to be lost, he hid his treasure someplace secret. He had the rubies removed from the crown and set into six rings. The story is that each ring contained the location of his stash. He sent one to each of his children using six different carriers, knowing he would probably be caught and imprisoned or worse. The war was raging and he hoped that at least one of the carriers would make it to his family. One guy – one writer – says he supposes the man’s wife knew something about how such coded messages would be transported. She would know where to look for it and things like that. But, she had already been killed along with three of the children. He thinks it is

doubtful that any of the rings made it further than the first pawnshop each of the carriers came upon. It had become a really bad time when the German people could only look out for themselves. Does that help?”

“That is the best Jr. Secret Agent work I’ve ever heard of. You got all that in just three or four hours?”

“Two actually. Me and Kerstin got in some quality time together up on the library’s roof.”

Carl flashed a short lived smile as he skimmed through several of the other pages.

“The pictures here all sure look like the picture I have. I’d like to know more about the how and who connected with the rings themselves. Did it say if all the rubies were cut alike?”

“All identical – I think I said matched. There is one reference there somewhere about the gold rings all having the same design – *fillygreen* – I think or something like that.”

“Yes. I found it. *Filigree* is the word. It means fancy, open, intricate designs. See it here in the picture? Sounds like there were six identical rings. This one in our picture could be any one of them. I guess that doesn’t matter since they all seem to have carried the same information. I need you to look up how lots of information could have been recorded in such a tiny space back then.”

“In the space under the ruby, you mean?” Tommy asked.

“That’s the only place I can see.”

“Probably a microdot.”

“I’ve heard of them. You seem to know more. Give.”

“I’ll have to go look for more info. What I know is that it was the first technology to compress big amounts of data into tiny areas. Nothin’ like we got now but a real big deal back then. I’d a thought you’d a learned about that back in spy school.”

“Apparently not. Maybe that’s all we need to know. Maybe more about how the process worked and where in Germany it was done – the places. How big were the dots?”

“I’ll get on all that right after lunch. Can I finish your slaw?”

“No. I just haven’t got to it yet, Slug Head.”

Tommy smiled as Carl continued.

“Anyway, if you ate that you wouldn’t have room for peach pie.”

“Really? This is like a feast! You must a got a raise.”

“We’ll just keep this lunch between the two of us. Can you imagine what the twins would do to a place like this?”

It was worth an exchange of knowing nods and cheek busting grins.

\* \* \*

It had been a slow day. Jasper went home early leaving Carl to close up. Tommy arrived at five. He talked while he helped his brother spread the sheets.

"The SS officer was Hilman Berger. His wife was Gert. She worked in the coding section of the intelligence agency. Get this! Her job was making and reading microdots."

"You found that kind of stuff on the internet?"

"Yeah. Most everything is up there somewhere if you just keep following the links."

"Anything else?"

"Well, there are lots of naked lady sites."

"I mean about the ring, Hormone Harry."

Tommy grinned and continued.

"Historians have begun calling the jewels the Barina Rubies – the princess was named Barina and I never could find out if that was a first or last name. I copied a couple of references. Maybe you can make heads or tails out of it. It sounds like she was originally from England and was offered to the Bavarian Prince as a wife in return for some kind of mining rights. Not sure about that. It's somewhere in the stuff I copied."

"Good work again, Agent, Little Bro."

"That's not even the best stuff. Dr. Franklin, a history writer guy, has been doing research on the rings and he says five of them never been found but one was reported brought to America in 1950 by the Barina person's family from England."

"Find a name?"

"Barina, like I said."

"I mean the English family name."

"Oh. I think it's in there – Hamilton maybe."

"Really? Hamilton?"

"I think. What's the big deal?"

"Classified stuff, Little Bro, but I can tell you that you did really, really, good."

Tommy smiled. He needed more positive strokes than most boys his age. Carl clearly recognized that. With one final look around the shop, Carl moved toward the door. Tommy followed and reached out to receive the key so he could lock up. The phone rang. Carl moved to answer it.

"Jaspe's Pawn."

It was Manny.

"I just delivered the human mountain to a gray stone walk-up out on 54<sup>th</sup>. He had me wait – twenty minutes with the meter running. Then I took him back to the *Troy*. Get this. He had a black briefcase with him when he got out at the gray stone. *Not* when he came back though. Thought you'd want to know."

"Thanks. Way above the line of duty, Manny. Thought you were avoiding

him – potential cab damage and all.”

“Well, just between you and me, I made you.”

“Made me?”

“Over the years I’ve driven lots of government agents so I can usually spot one. I’m a loyal American. I do what I can. Like I said, I just wanted you to know. My lips are zipped. No need to worry about that. I got your business card with me. If I find out anything else I’ll keep you informed. Oh. The address is 9867 North 54th.”

“Well. Thanks again. I really appreciate it. That’s 9867 North 54<sup>th</sup>. If you see him moving out of the hotel I’d appreciate a call if you’re willing.”

“You got it, . . . , I guess I don’t have your name.”

“Name. Not a good idea, you understand.”

“Gottcha. Later.”

The side of the conversation to which Tommy had been privy only further convinced him of his brother’s secret agent status.

“Another late night the way it sounded,” Tommy said as they closed the door behind them.

“Fraid so. Won’t have to leave ‘til after ten, though, so I can still do the bedtime stuff tonight.”

As was typical, Tommy kept up a constant patter as they walked home. Carl missed much of it, lost in his own thoughts.

“Why does everybody think I’m a spy? Bro, Manny, and who knows who else. I guess I should be grateful right now and not let it bother me. All I’m really after here is the ring that goes with Lady’s ruby. I’m not after the microdot. I’m not after the stolen treasure. I’m not here to solve any half-century-old mystery left over from the war. I’m just about finding that one special ring setting.

‘Still, Gunther is my only real lead so I need to follow up on Manny’s information tonight. I’ll go by bus. Shouldn’t take a half hour that late. I’ll have to think about what I’ll need to take along.’

“So, what do you think,” Tommy said ending his three block monologue as they approached the door to their place. “Kirsten or Angie?”

“Kirsten or Angie, huh? I’d say look for *nice* rather than *beauty*. That help?”

“Like always. Thanks.”

Tommy understood that once inside, Carl’s attention would be scattered among the other kids. That was all right with him. He had long ago devised his own ways to get and maintain his brother’s attention. He had asked himself the right question; “Since he doesn’t have time for me here at home, how can I go about getting his attention elsewhere?” It had been just like Carl said; you had to ask the right question before you could arrive at the right answer.

By the time Carl finally got around to tucking Tommy in – he shared bunk beds with Carl and was the last in the night-time rounds – Tommy had concerns

to offer.

“You’ll be careful out there tonight, won’t you?”

“I always am. It’s not your job to worry about me.”

“When will you be back?”

“I can’t say – don’t know, I mean. By midnight, I’d think.”

Tommy nodded. They traded kisses and he rolled over onto his side. Carl snugged the sheet around his brother’s neck and left.

The bus ride was uneventful. He sat at the rear. His twenty years as a rider had taught him that folks who rode up front were old and annoying. Those in the middle, were way too chatty. At the rear he was left alone. Left alone was what he was after that night. There were few other riders. He got off at the cross street where the 9800s began. It was a middle class neighborhood – probably lower middle class. Lights behind windows were being turned off here and there as he surveyed the street. The majority of windows were already darkened. He found the building – four floors with one apartment on each. The stairwell was on the left. He climbed the four steps to the front, cement slab, stoop. The mailboxes were numbered and named. He had no idea what he was looking for.

‘Atherton, Kramer, Tarasenko, Barina.’

“Barina!” he said out loud.

Then, to himself, ‘That was the name of the princess in Bavaria.’

It was the fourth floor apartment. He descended the porch steps and circled to the rear. The buildings were no more than two feet apart but that left a sufficient walkway – paved, even, probably to escort the rain water out to the street. He found what he was looking for at the back – the fire escape. He knew there would be one; he just didn’t know what form it would take. In this case it was a steel ladder, the lowest section being a pull-down from some twelve feet above the ground. It presented no challenge for a man of his special talents. He caught it with his rope, pulled it down and secured it at the ground with a large block. No need for the sweat suit; it was pitch dark back there. He left his bag behind the dumpster.

Within minutes he was cautiously peering into the window on the fourth floor. He had noted that the lights were on in the front room. They were off there in the rear. It was a hot evening and the window had been propped open – a cat burglar’s dream come true. It was the bedroom – unoccupied. He could see no light under the door to the middle room, indicating that if anybody was home he was up front. Carl entered the apartment.

In the beam of his penlight he first searched the open surfaces – tops of the dressers, bedside tables, desk, and shelves. He found nothing there. The only two pictures in the room were painted on felt – a red bull and Elvis. It told him the resident had less than good taste in art. That didn’t jive with someone from an aristocratic background. Perhaps that had not been conveyed down through the generations.

He began the systematic search of drawers. He found nothing in the first dresser. The second had two small drawers at each side of the top. A large mirror spanned the dresser above them. He opened the one on the left. Nothing. He pulled on the one on the right. It was locked or stuck. He tried a second time. Still nothing. There were key openings in both of the small drawers. He took a paper clip from the ceramic dish on top and fashioned a pick. It worked. Such locks were not meant to be foolproof – just to keep the kids out.

He pulled the drawer completely out and looked behind it before going through its contents.

‘Bad thing!’ He thought to himself. ‘Looks like a spring loaded alarm. Hope it isn’t working.’

He searched the drawer for only a few seconds and then slid it back in place, heading for the window in case he had tripped a silent alarm.

“Halt!” came a strong, Germanic, voice from behind.

Carl stopped in his tracks. It had been the first time he had ever been caught in the act. Fear and uncertainty filled his being. That was the last thought he had until he awoke to a blinding headache an hour later. He was sitting on the floor, still in the bedroom, tied hands and feet, and secured to a radiator with handcuffs from his right wrist. His clothing had been removed and he could see it scattered about, torn to shreds. His attacker had searched it, more than a little thoroughly, for something.

Why? He had taken nothing so nothing should have been found missing. He was sure the back of his head was bleeding although he had no way of reaching it to make sure.

The doorknob turned. Carl dropped his head and pretended to still be unconscious. The door closed and he heard steps retreating down the hall. It had just been a ‘check on’ call. Things looked bleak.

“Pssst!”

Carl cocked his head.

“Psssssssst!”

He repositioned himself so he could look at the wall behind him.

“Psssssssssssst!”

Carl’s heart sank. There, with his chin firmly planted on the windowsill was Tommy.

“Get out of here, NOW!”

Tommy ignored the order.

“Looks like I got here just in time.”

“Go on. Get out of here.”

Tommy climbed inside and began working on the ropes. Carl’s arms and legs were soon free.

“Got a paper clip?” Tommy asked.

“On the dresser – in the dish. Be quiet!”

In less than a minute Carl was uncuffed and free. He pointed to the window and they exited the room and made their way down the ladder.

"You're naked as a jay bird, you know," Tommy said. "The bus ride home could be very interesting."

"That black bag behind the dumpster."

Carl pointed. Tommy retrieved it.

He was soon decent, fully clothed in his tan sweat suit.

"Out of here, now!" Carl said leading his brother down the alley at the best trot he could muster."

The bus had just pulled to a stop. Without breaking stride, the two of them were immediately onboard, heading back south. They took seats at the rear.

"If you ever pull a bone head stunt like this again I'll ground you for life and withdraw your kissing license 'til you're so old you won't even remember why you wanted to pucker up. You could have been killed up there."

Tommy sobered and eased his hands to his throat, suddenly getting the horrific side of Carl's message.

"You're welcome, Big Guy."

Carl put out his arm and pulled him close.

"Okay, thanks, but never again and I'm serious. If anything happened to me, Mom would have to depend on you. You understand that?"

Tommy nodded suddenly sensing his boyhood slipping away.

"So, you gonna tell me about your striptease back there?"

"I was looking for the ring and got caught – simple as that. They or he or whoever must have thought I had something hidden on me that they wanted so they went through my clothes. All I can think of is that they were looking for the same ring – the setting – I was looking for. I just assumed Gunther had taken it to them, him, whoever. It's why I was there. When I couldn't find it in the bedroom I figured it was bein' kept in some other room – maybe *on* somebody, even. Now, I'm thinkin' they don't have it any more than we do."

Tommy looked at the bloodied back of Carl's head.

"How we gonna explain that," he said pointing.

"We'll stop by the shop first and clean me up. If questions are asked we'll say I slipped and hit my head – I've done that often enough to make it believable. By the way, how did you know where I was?"

"I heard you say the address while you were on the phone with somebody."

"Oh. That's right. How did you figure out which apartment I was in?"

"I figured you wouldn't go in the front door so I went around to the back. I saw the bottom section of the fire ladder weighted down with a cement block so figured you climbed it. The only window that was open was the top one. I climbed the ladder. I looked inside. There you were. Pretty basic secret agent stuff, really."



Carl allowed a quick smile.

What time is it?"

"Almost three. We'll be home before we're missed."

They were.

Carl awoke to the headache of all headaches.

He was standing in the shower letting the cold water bathe his head when Tommy located him. He pulled back the curtain and pulled up a chair.

"So, what's our plan for today?"

"Apparently not privacy."

Tommy smiled and went on.

"Seriously."

"For one thing, you are to stay away from that place and you know which *that* place I'm talkin' about."

Tommy shrugged his shoulders, all quite intentionally acknowledging, but not agreeing to, the dictum.

"That Barina family," Carl began. "See if you can find out more about them. See if you can trace any of them to this country. See if you can find out if any of those other Barina Rubies – in or out of rings – have ever been sold at auction."

"I'll do what I can. Those are really tough assignments."

"I got faith in you Little Bro."

\* \* \*

"Your mind seems to be somewhere else, this morning," Jasper said as the last of the noon browsers left the store.

"Sorry. Yeah. Thing on my mind."

"And a nasty thing there on your head as well."

"A stupid thing. I fell. Sliced a bit of scalp in the process. Lucky I have such a hard head."

"Go to lunch early if you want to."

"Thanks but I'm waiting on Tommy. He sort of needs his big brother this summer."

Five minutes later Tommy was on the scene carrying two plastic grocery bags.

"I made us like a picnic lunch. Thought we could go to the park and watch girls while we ate and talked."

They had soon taken up residence on a green wooden bench under a large tree not far from the volleyball court.

"I got mostly nothin', I'm afraid," Tommy said handing over a half dozen printed sheets to his brother. "There was one ruby ring in a gold, fillygreen, setting sold at auction in London back in 1951. Sold by a man named Benson to a man named Hamilton – a Duke or Lord or something. The really interesting part is that when I looked into the Benson guy's background it turned out that his

grandfather changed the family name to Benson from Barina a generation earlier. Just one more thing. The Benson guy was apparently disowned by his father because he sold the ring. He moved to the US in the late 1950s.”

“I wouldn’t have thought Barina would be involved in all this. Maybe somebody in that household traded the Tierra for safety back in the days of the SS. Maybe after the war the family somehow came to repossess one of the rubies in one of the six rings.”

“That’s a lot of maybe’s,”

“I know. Lots of German’s did change their names after the war though. Grampa Kirkenbaum used to tell me stories about the old country when I was a kid.”

“Grampa who?”

“He died long before you were born. Lived in the apartment above us. No relation, really.”

“So, what about the stuff I got?”

“Excellent work, like usual, Little Bro. I’m not sure how we can use it yet. But too much info is always better than not enough. It seems to give us two possibilities. First, maybe the Barinas are just searching so they can return the ring to their family. Second, somebody may be after the microdot – if there was one – so the SS officer’s treasure can be located.”

“And,” Tommy added, “It might be that *both* are happening.”

“Interesting. Good thinking. That could really complicate things, you know.”

“So, what’s next, then?”

“You take the rest of the day off. Go in search of some willing lips or a good book. I’ll think on it ‘til closing time. Meet me there like usual at five. And thanks for lunch. You make a fantastic baloney sandwich and open an amazing bag of chips.”

Tommy grinned, gathered up the leavings and deposited them in a trash container.

“Later, then.”

He took off on a trot across the grass. Carl walked back to the pawnshop. His momentary, fully selfish, sadness, prompted by watching Tommy run and jump with such ease, was immediately put to rest as he realized how wonderful it was that his brother was so perfectly normal in every way.

## CHAPTER SIX

Carl had been thinking about it all day – the ‘mountain’, the brief case, and then no brief case. What could it mean? One thing it could mean was that Gunther had taken money in the brief case, paid for something – something small – and left with it back to the hotel. If that were the case, whatever it was

would likely be in his hotel room. Carl needed to return and search that room again.

He also wondered about the German connection. Gunther and the man in the apartment who knocked him out both carried heavy German accents – he had heard him talking to someone at the front of the apartment. He also wondered what the man at the walk up had planned to eventually do with or to him. Probably *not* let him go or he would have been dropped off somewhere while still unconscious. The odds suddenly seemed very high. Perhaps he should return the ruby to Lady and fess up to having stolen it. He could pay to have it reset. His family depended on him and he didn't dare put himself in mortal danger again.

Since he never carried identification on his night job the man in the walk-up couldn't have learned who he was or where to look for him. Up to that point, therefore, he and his family seemed to be safe. The sane thing, the logical thing, the reasonable thing would be to cut and run – keep his nose forever out of it. However, something in his head rejected that safe approach. He would return to the *Troy* that night.

Ten fifteen found him on the balcony outside the big man's room. The lights were on but the room was empty. The bathroom door was open and Carl could detect no activity inside. He carefully applied a large suction cup to the previously cut circular piece of glass and dislodged it so he could remove it to the outside. He entered the room and immediately secured the back of the desk chair under the knob on the door leading into the hall. That wouldn't keep the mountain out for long but it would buy enough time to exit to the roof.

Carl moved directly to the drawer where he had found the felt bag with the ring parts in it. He undid the drawstring and poured the contents out into his hand. There it was – Lady's gold filigree setting. Gunther had apparently purchased it. If so, why the brutalizing at the walk-up and the methodical destruction of his clothing?

He put the setting in his pocket and returned the rest to the bag. With it back in its resting place he closed the drawer, removed the chair from the door, and exited the room. The glass patio door was quickly repaired and Carl was soon back on the roof. Shortly after eleven he entered the darkened pawn shop and headed for the back room.

He closed the door and turned on a light. There was jeweler's equipment there and he began examining the setting – telling himself it was strictly routine preparation to reset the ruby. In reality part of him was hoping to find the microdot. He didn't.

What he did find was a strange round, raised surface on which the ruby would be set – a base or build up or cradle he had heard it called. It was covered in a lighter colored gold, which was soft – way too soft to be part of a ring. It just could be that it was covering the microdot – holding it there under a paper-thin

coat of soft gold to hide and protect it. Such soft metal would melt away under very little heat but not knowing what material a microdot was made of he did not dare heat it.

Surrounded by specialized jewelry working tools he smiled as he reached, instead, for his pocketknife. Working under the large, bench mounted, magnifying glass, he carefully made a shallow cut around the edge of the raised, circular, gold disk. With a long, deliberate, sigh, he worked the point of his knife under the disk and flipped it up. It came free. Although he had never actually seen a microdot (he must have been sick the day they covered that in Secret Agent School!) he immediately knew that what he had found was just that.

“Now what!” he asked out loud.

He placed the dot – still covered in gold on one side – into an envelope and slipped it into his pocket. He returned home where the envelope and the ring setting were deposited into the bank bag and tucked under Tommy’s pillow.

Tommy stirred and opened his eyes.

“You okay?”

“I’m great.”

“You do good tonight?”

“I did the best that could be done.”

“Wanna talk?”

“Tomorrow morning at the shop. You go back to sleep.”

Carl seldom had trouble sleeping – he got so little. Morning came quickly. Tommy was lying beside him in the lower bunk awaiting the opening of his eyes. Eventually it happened.

“Hey Big Guy!”

“Hey Little Bro! Your own bed break, did it?”

“Just wanted to be the first to say good morning to you.”

“I imagine this is a good way to make sure.”

Tommy grinned and stood up. Carl followed suit, saying,

“I need to hit the shower. Can you set out the cereal boxes and bowls for the kids? Give me fifteen minutes.”

From the way Carl walked Tommy could tell his bad leg was hurting him. Humidity did that. He assumed they were in for rain that day. Or it could have been left over from the night he got roughed up.

\* \* \*

Jasper left for the bank. Tommy entered with the bag and questions.

“So, what were you up to last night? Did you find something? Did you hurt your leg? I noticed you favoring it this morning.”

Carl ignored the specific questions. He opened the bag in front of Tommy – it was a first. Tommy sensed the importance of the moment and described what he saw.

“The ring! It’s broken. Is that the one we’ve been after?”

“The very same. Look it over.”  
Tommy picked it up.  
“What’s the mess all about – there on top?”  
“Look at the shape of that mess.”  
“Round – well, roundish.”  
“Look at the size.”  
“Small. Tiny. Micro. Really! The microdot? Did you find the microdot?”  
“I think so. You know what one looks like?”  
“Seen pictures. They are tiny circles of film maybe a quarter of an inch across.”  
“Like this, maybe?”  
Carl opened the envelope and shook the contents out into his palm. Tommy’s eyes grew wide.  
“That’s a microdot for sure. What’s this gold stuff on the back?”  
“*Gold stuff*, I assume. It was like plastered over the dot which sat right here.”  
He pointed to the area on the top of the setting.  
“Now what?” Tommy asked.  
“Now we have two things to do. First, get the ruby reset in the setting and return it to its owner. Second, decide what to do with the microdot.”  
“You know who the owner is?”  
“Yes and I’m afraid that’s classified.”  
“That’s cool. I’m just happy I could help find it and all. I did help find it, didn’t I?”  
“You sure did. It wouldn’t be here right now without your help, Little Bro.”  
Tommy grinned and grew an inch.  
“So, what about the microdot?” he asked. “I don’t know how we can read it. I doubt if they even use them anymore – do they?”  
“Doubt it,” Carl said, having no idea, but taking his lead from Tommy.  
“I’d think you’d know about such things.”  
“Different sections in the Agency. We can’t all be expected to know everything.”  
It made sense. Tommy Nodded.  
The agent thing had taken on a life of its own. Carl wondered how he could put a stop to the charade. That would need to wait.  
“One more thing for you to do on the computer, Little Bro. See if you can find out what agency in the US government might still be interested in this microdot. My first hunch is the CIA – they spy mostly overseas. If not them, then maybe the Attorney General.”  
“I’m on it. What you thinkin’? Turn the dot over to the government?”  
“It ain’t no good to us and if the SS officer’s treasure is still hidden it needs to get returned to the proper places – families or museums or what have you.”

"You're a good man, Carl Riggin. I'm proud to be your bro. We are brothers don't you think?"

"You started worrying about that?"

"Been for some time – soon as you had that first talk with me about sex stuff – needing both moms *and* dads to make babies – you remember."

"Here's how I've dealt with it. We have the same mom and that gives us the same blood and that makes us brothers – maybe full, maybe half – but brothers just the same."

Tommy nodded, his face sober. He had a question.

"Suppose we'll ever know who our dad – dads – is?"

"I don't know. I figure that's mom's business."

"I don't agree. I think it's my business to know who my dad is. I get really mad about it sometimes and I want to go yell at mom over it."

"Well, yellin' won't help. However it happened, it gave us life and I'm glad about that. I hope you can live with it 'til you're sixteen. Then if you still need to know, you can go to mom privately, all calm like, and have a talk about it. You already know a lot about him."

"I do?"

"Sure. Probably blond with blue eyes – you didn't get those things from mom. He had an athletic body like you do. He was really smart – you're the smartest one in our family by a long way. He probably had an inquisitive mind – you certainly do."

"I hadn't thought about any of those things. You really think I'm the smartest?"

"You're doctor material if you want to be."

"Wow! Does that mean you think I should get a head start and begin studying the female anatomy up close and personal?"

"You seem to have ways of doing that on-line."

"I'm sure it's not the same as a hands on approach would be."

"And I'm sure you're right but you still have no business touching girl parts at your age."

"You keep saying that. How old do I have to be?"

"I was sixteen so I guess I can't delay it past then for you."

"Two years! I'll be past my prime."

"Believe me, Bro. You'll just be coming into it."

"It gets better?"

"Oh, yes. Now, to that computer and spend at least part of the time on *our* business and not just preparing for your medical studies."

Tommy grinned.

A question popped into Carl's mind.

"How do you find those girlie sights? I thought the library had them blocked."

“Just in the student section. I sneak upstairs in the adult part. Private cubicles up there.”

“I’m not going to tell a guy your age that you shouldn’t be interested in looking at pictures of naked females – that just proves how normal you are. I do think you should think about the fact that you’re breaking the library rules.”

“For a fun guy you can sure be a party pooper.”

“That’s what big brothers are for. I don’t envy *your* job with the twins.”

“My job!”

“You’re *their* big bro, Little Bro.”

“I guess you’re right. I only thought of us as havin’ one big bro.”

“That time’s gone now. This week you’ve moved from little kid to big brother. Welcome to the club and all the responsibilities that . . . whatever that saying is.”

“ . . . that accrue thereto – it means go along with it.”

“See? Smart! What did I just tell you?”

Tommy left. Carl put things away.

Tommy felt ten feet tall. Carl allowed a moment of sadness, knowing he would never be able to afford Tommy’s education.

He wondered if he should wait to return the ring until after the government agency Okayed it. They might want to take it. He wouldn’t allow that. He’d have the stone reset and get it back to Lady Hamilton as soon as possible. There was one jeweler he knew he could trust – Rudy, down the street.

At noon he and Tommy repeated the BLT lunch at the café and then stopped at the jewelers to drop off the ring and ruby. The man asked no questions and wrote them a receipt. Carl was hesitant to require it of a friend. It made it look like he didn’t trust the man. Rudy insisted. Carl figured it covered them both ways so he picked it up and slid it into his shirt pocket.

Tommy went in search of a ball game – or a girl, whichever came into view first. Carl went back to work with three things on his mind: figure out just how to return the ring; get the microdot into the proper hands; and get together with Jenny for a long overdue, romantic, night together.

He would have asked her to marry him long ago if he had been just a little more certain about his feelings and if he hadn’t had so many responsibilities. Jenny said she understood all that. She would graduate in September and get a job as a hairdresser. Then, they would talk more seriously about their long-term relationship.

Jasper went home early leaving Carl alone in the shop. At four thirty, two well suited men in dark glasses entered the building.

One stayed by the door keeping watch outside. The other approached Carl at the counter. He thought they looked to be thugs that could have been sent by a crime boss. His adrenalin began pumping and he moved closer to where the shotgun lay on the shelf under the register. The man reached into his

breast pocket. Carl froze as the man removed a wallet, opened it, and displayed a badge – *Central Intelligence Agency*. Carl had no way of knowing if the shield were authentic but decided not to question it – the best decision, he figured, whether it was *or* wasn't.

Carl Riggins?" he asked in a business like though certainly not a threatening manner.

"Yes."

'Surely the CIA wouldn't be involved in my thievery,' he thought. 'What can this be about?'

"We received an email asking about our possible interest in a microdot and a stolen treasure at the end of World War II. It was signed by a Tommy Riggins, which, we learned, is the name of one of your younger brothers. We soon had you tracked to this pawnshop."

"You guys *do* have connections *don't* you?"

It had been a dumb comeback but Carl was just pleased his vocal cords were still working.

"Yes, Tommy is my brother and yes, I am here."

'Now *that* was moving toward the ridiculous,' he feared.

The agent smiled.

"Relax. We are just responding to the communication. What do you have to tell us?"

Carl cleared his throat.

"A microdot came into my possession. It was said to be connected somehow with a ruby ring – a *Barina* ring I think is what I heard. That was somehow connected with a SS officer in Germany at the end of the war – something about a treasure he stole in jewels and art. That's what I know. I figured the microdot was no good to me and if it really is that one, I hoped it would help you guys find the stuff and return it to its rightful owners."

"The ring?" he asked.

"It's gone and I'll have nothing more to say on the matter. It will end up back in its current owner's possession."

"The ring is insignificant to us. Can you tell us if there are other players – other people involved in the search for the ring or ruby?"

"I have two names and one address. Gunther and a girl – young woman at the *Troy Hotel*. I don't have her name. I call her the *Faux Girl*. A thing between me and a cabby. They both speak with heavy German accents. Then the address is 9867 North 54th. Fourth floor apartment in a walk-up. Way north of here. Another man with a German accent lives there. I believe money – or payment of some kind – was exchanged between Gunther and the man in the walk-up and he received the gold setting that goes with the ruby. He didn't find the microdot."

"Sure you're not one of *us*, undercover."



Carl smiled but did not respond.

"May I see the microdot?" the agent asked.

It had not really been a question though it had politely been worded as such.

Carl removed the envelope from his pocket and handed it over. The man shook the contents into his palm.

"Gold on one side," he said. It was a question.

"Looked that way to me, too, Sir."

It was all Carl was moved to say on the matter.

The second man approached and removed a very expensive looking piece of equipment from his pocket. Three times the thickness of a cell phone. It had two wings that opened – one to each end. The dot was placed under a clear plastic holder. He lifted it toward a light and repeatedly pressed a button on one side of the device. He sighted through it and held his gaze for some time. He then handed it to the first agent. He spent some time in examination as well. They looked at each other and nodded. The second agent took charge of the device and dot and returned to the door.

Tommy leapt down the steps outside and pressed against the door, which was being held closed by the foot of the second agent.

"That's Tommy, my younger brother. Somehow he got the idea I'm a secret agent so if he says things that sound strange you'll understand."

The second agent opened the door and Tommy entered looking puzzled.

"Tommy, these gentlemen are government agents. They got an email I guess you sent to the CIA."

The boy's face brightened as he gave them the once over.

"I'm Bill. That's Brad," the first agent said extending his right hand to shake while holding out his badge in the other. With due deliberation, Tommy studied it and then responded.

"Glad to meet you, Sirs. Fast work by the way. That's what we like to see."

The three men exchanged amused glances.

"You think the dot's the real SS Guy thing?" he continued.

"We have already verified that it is. We're still a bit baffled by how it came into your possession."

Carl clapped a hand over Tommy's opening mouth and proceeded with an answer – not *the* answer but *an* answer.

"The ruby was dislodged from the setting of a ring I had in my possession. It was clearly very old and very valuable. I had Tommy do some research and he found the Barina connection and then found the story about the SS officer and the treasure and the microdot. If I hadn't known the dot part, I'd have probably never noticed the raised circle – the disk just under the gold surface on the ring. I removed it. We decided to contact you, and here we are."

"It appears that you handled everything just right," Agent Bill said. "There will be a reward from a German reparation agency – provided the treasure hasn't been found. No guarantee. Lots of those stashes have been uncovered already. We'll get back to you."

The agents prepared to leave. Bill turned at the door and addressed Tommy.

"You know, son, this is a huge discovery you and your brother, Agent Riggin, have made. We're very proud of you both."

He directed a private wink at Carl. They left. He was a good man.

Tommy did the fistful arm-pull and hopped up to sit on the counter.

"I knew it! Bill just blew it! Now, I *know* it!"

"I have no idea what you're babblin' about."

"Babblin'? Jr. Secret Agents don't go around babblin' especially one that just solved a seventy year old international mystery."

Tommy grinned. Carl spoke.

"Wow! Suddenly it seems you're *full*."

"Full. Full of what?"

"It."

"*It?* Full of *it*. Oh, I get what you're saying. I think I deserve to be full of it for a few minutes."

"So do I. You have 'til we get home."

Tommy's grin grew.

"Then, let's take the *l o n g* way home this after-noon," Tommy said.

"Sounds good to me. How about a banana split down at Angie's to celebrate our first success as a team?"

Angie's? That's a ten block walk. Oh! I see. The *l o n g* way home. Great! Sure your leg is up to it?"

"If it ain't, you can carry me back – Super Dooper Jr. Secret Agent Man."

"So, what sort of a reward do you think Bill was talking about?" Tommy asked as they began the long walk south.

"No idea, really. Maybe five hundred – a thousand. I'll be real happy if we just get enough to fit out the clan with school clothes and winter coats come September."

"That would be good. And Mary's baby. Mom says it'll be here before this time next week. I'm feeling bad for the little guy."

"Feeling bad?"

"Yeah. He won't have a dad either."

Carl nodded appreciating the boy's compassion.

"But, just think of all the aunts and uncles he will have. I predict a spoiled brat if we aren't really carefully and take steps to avoid it."

"I think we'll love him enough to do what's right for him and not just what's fun – like you've done for me."

Carl swallowed hard but did not respond. Tommy continued not anticipating a response.

“Let’s pretend the reward will be huge – like a million dollars. Then what would we do with it?”

“Send you to college for one thing.”

“And get you that operation for another. And let mom stop working so she can really enjoy her family.”

Carl nodded, not so much at what the boy had said as in agreement with his previous statement, which indicated he really had done a pretty good job of raising his younger brother.

“If I do get to be a doctor, I think I’ll be a kid’s doctor. I’ve had a lot of good experience with kids, you know?”

“You have time to make that decision. You have to know that I really can’t see money happening for your college. Maybe scholarships if you study hard and keep making good grades.”

“Has there ever been a problem me and you hasn’t been able to solve, Big Guy?”

“I can’t recall none, I guess.”

“Okay, then. I’m going to be a kid doctor. You’re gonna run again, and Momma’s gonna retire.”

It was all settled in Tommy’s head. It sent a private shiver up Carl’s spine – the second in as many days.

The banana splits were delicious. They lingered over them longer than necessary. It was as if once they started home, reality would crowd out the very special week they had just experienced together.

\* \* \*

The following afternoon Carl picked up the ring. It was every bit as beautiful as its picture. The jeweler had cleaned it up and polished the setting.

“What do you suppose it’s worth?” Carl asked his friend.

“I did some research on it. I seldom see a piece of this quality just walk in off the street. As it sits here, it’s worth ten thousand dollars, give or take a couple. If it has some historic significance – and I think it may – it could go at auction for ten times that. You have an exceptional piece there.”

“I appreciate your time and beautiful work – and the information. I’ll gladly pay extra for your research.”

The man waved off the suggestion.

“My pleasure.”

Carl paid the bill and pocketed the small jewelry box in which it sat. He still didn’t know just how he was going to approach Lady with it. The fact that he could have sold it for a huge amount of money to keep and use never entered his head. The pleasure of returning it to Lady far overshadowed such a thing. He stopped briefly at the shop and then went on home.

Once there, Carl hitched his head in Tommy's direction. He followed his big brother into the bathroom. Carl locked the door. Tommy understood that it was a matter of great privacy. Carl held up two fingers.

"Two things," Tommy whispered in response, nodding that he understood.

Carl removed the case from his pocket and handed it over.

"The ring. You got the ring. Let's see it!"

He opened the box.

"Wow! I don't know nothin' about rings but this is gorgeous!"

"It sure is. I'm going to return it right after supper."

"You held up *two* fingers?"

Carl reached out for the ring box and returned it to his pants pocket. He reached into the other one and removed another little box, again handing it over.

Tommy opened it.

"A diamond ring. I didn't know anything about a diamond."

He looked puzzled.

"What are diamond rings used for?" Little Bro.

"To get engaged. You want to marry me?"

"No, Slug Head. *Jenny*. I've decided to propose to her tonight."

"Wow! That's really cool, Carl."

Tears began spilling down his cheeks. He engaged his big brother in a hug.

"Hey. I thought you'd be happy for me. You're the first person I told – even before mom. This should be a special time for us."

"It is. And I know you said gettin' married wouldn't take you away from me but it will, you know. Not all at once I suppose, but it will. That's how it's supposed to be – you and her goin' off to start a new family life together. I'm really, really, happy for you two. I'm just bein' selfish and really, really, sad for me."

Carl separated from Tommy with one hand on the boy's shoulders. He put the other under his chin and tipped his face up so their eyes met.

"I promised you that I'd always be here for you and you know I meant that. I may live down the block but I'll still be here to help with bedtimes as long as I'm needed. I'll always be here to talk with you and listen to your plans. You got that?"

Tommy nodded and wiped away his tears with his forearm.

"I know that. But that lower bunk is gonna be awful empty, you know?"

"Not if you move into it. I figure that's where the big brother should sleep, you know?"

Tommy smiled – not a grin but enough to acknowledge what Carl was trying to do. He splashed his face with cold water and patted it dry – his way of getting rid of any sign of tears. It worked.

\* \* \*

Jenny's 'yes' warmed Carl's heart. They would wait until January. By then, Mary's baby would be six months old. The twins would be ten and Tommy fifteen. Fifteen suddenly seemed *much* older than fourteen.

On Sunday morning Carl arrived at Lady's apartment. She was clearly overjoyed at his unexpected visit.

"Got news," Carl said smiling. "Deserves at least a glass of your special lemonade."

Lady beamed and bustled off to fix the drink. Carl took out the box and opened it. He sat it on the coffee table turned toward the chair in which Lady always sat, then took his usual seat on the sofa.

She returned, immediately spotting the ring. She sat the tray on the table. Tears began rolling down her cheeks parting the powder along the way. She picked up the box and held it to her heart. She looked at it as if it were the most precious thing in her life.

Carl blinked back his own tears eventually losing the struggle. She approached him and he stood to receive the hug of all hugs.

"You dear, dear, boy. I won't even ask how. Thank you doesn't come close to expressing how I feel. I have something for you I've been saving for a *long* time. Now seems like the *right* time."

"Before that, Lady Hamilton, I have to tell you something about the ring's disappearance."

"That is not necessary, Carl."

"Yes. It is something I have to do."

Lady took a seat, still holding tightly onto the ring box.

Carl moved closer and sat at the edge of the couch leaning toward her.

"I stole your ring. I steal things to support my family. I had no idea your ring was so valuable or I wouldn't have touched it. Of course if I'd knowed about the sentimental value I sure wouldn't have touched it. I am so sorry and I hope you can forgive me even though I know I don't deserve it. If you don't want me commin' around no more I'll understand."

Lady sat the little box on the table and reached out taking his hand, patting it gently. She looked deep into his eyes.

"I've known all along that you took it, dear. Lord had security cameras installed years ago. It was all recorded."

"But . . ."

"But, I knew you were a good boy so I knew you had some good reason to do what you did. I figured it had to do with keeping up your family. Then when you started coming around I could see the guilt sitting there in your eyes. I knew I just needed to give you time to work it out."

"How could you have possibly known I was a *good* boy? We never even spoke before it happened."

"We did. Once. You were about Tommy's age I'd guess. It was a really

cold winter night. I was watching the beautiful snowfall glistening in the street lights when I spotted what looked like a body down in the alley. I put on my coat and went to investigate. It was you, laying there on a snow bank. I knew immediately that you had fallen. I rolled you over onto your side so I could move your leg out from under you. I could tell it had been badly broken. As I turned to go get help you opened your eyes and called out to me. You said, *'Thank you kind lady'*. You reached toward me but then fell back into unconsciousness. By the time I got back with help, you were gone. Any boy who would call out through his pain to thank an old lady just had to be a *good* person, you see."

Carl sat back, dumbfounded.

"Would you slip this ring on my finger, son. My old hands are too unsteady."

Carl obliged, puzzled at her response. No anger. No desire for revenge. Nothing but kindness in her words and tone. How could she have believed in him when, all along, she knew about his reprehensible act? He knew she was a special person but . . . .

"Now, I have something for you," she said.

"After all of this you still want to give me something?"

"I decided that night down in the frigid, snowy, alley that I was going to do this and nothing that has happened between then and now has done anything but tell me my decision was exactly right. I've watched you grow up – taking care of your family like you were the way-too-young loving father."

She went into the bedroom, returning shortly with an envelope. She handed it to him and sat, studying his face as she began sipping at her drink. Carl took out the several sheets of paper he found inside.

"It looks all legal. I'm not sure I'll understand it," he said looking up at her.

"Let me tell you about it, then. It's the deed to this apartment building, the *Hamilton Arms*. It says that from whatever date I insert in it, this place is yours and that there is a sum of money set aside to pay the fees and taxes and such that accrue to the transaction."

Carl smiled to himself. Thanks to his brother he now knew what *accrue* meant.

"I can't accept this. Surely your children or family. . ."

"Got nobody but you, son. You wouldn't dash an old ladies dream, now, would you?"

"I had no idea this whole place was yours, Lady Hamilton. Hmmm. Lady *Hamilton*. *Hamilton Arms*. I suppose I'm pretty dumb for not making the connection."

"I've never advertised it. Figured if word got out that I was filthy rich somebody might try and rob me."

They broke into laughter. His, from the release of months of pent up guilt. Hers, from a decade of love from afar. It worked for both of them. He suddenly

saw college for Tommy. Her vision saw Carl walking straight and true.

Carl decided to follow Lady's lead and keep his ownership a private matter. Maybe he'd tell his mother and maybe he'd tell Tommy. Maybe!

\* \* \*

Several weeks passed. The first month's rent checks totaled something over twenty-five thousand dollars. It was as much as Carl had ever seen in a year. He took Tommy to the bank and they opened a college fund savings account with a sizeable initial deposit. Tommy dragged him to an orthopedic surgeon. The findings were positive, which in that instance meant there was a good chance he would recover almost full use of his leg. Tommy cried at the news. Carl was somehow beyond tears. He had accepted his situation years ago. Being any other way would seem odd.

Carl began the arduous task of going through his records and secretly returning, in cash, the worth of the many things he had lifted over the years. He calculated it would all be paid back by January. He added ten percent per year to each payment. He felt good he was able to make things right in that way. Interestingly, he still felt guilty for having done it in the first place. He decided that was as it should be.

\* \* \*

At two o'clock Tommy came on the run down the steps and into the nearly deserted pawnshop. He waved a large, white, pasteboard envelope above his head to get Carl's attention.

"It's from *Deutsche Reparation-Agentur* – that means the German Reparations Agency. I translated it on AltaVista. It's what Agent Bill said gives out the rewards. It was just delivered by a big white truck. I figured you'd want to open it right away."

"It's addressed to both of us, Bro. You could have opened it."

"I wanted it to be a special moment for us."

"It may just be a note saying thank you, you understand."

"I know but even that'll be the coolest – a thank you from a whole foreign country."

Carl pointed to the pull tab.

"Rip it open."

Tommy complied and removed an envelope.

"A envelope inside a envelope. Like a puzzle, maybe."

"Look inside. See what's there!" Carl urged taking pleasure in watching his brother's excitement.

"Looks like a check. It says, Pay in US Funds."

He handed it to Carl.

"Well, Little Bro. There's your education plus a whole lot more."

"We're rich?"

"Sort of, I suppose," Carl said. "But, just like the apartments, *this* has to

remain a secret between you, me and mom. I need you to swear and spit palm with me.”

Their ritual completed, Tommy voiced a philosophic concern.

“There is a basic problem with secrets, you know?”

“What’s that?”

“They’re always the coolest stuff but you can’t tell nobody. It’s like they’re all responsibility and no privilege, so having them really ain’t no fun. I think I’ll just avoid them in the future.”

“No you won’t.”

“Yes I will. You’ll see.”

“Then you won’t be interested in what I learned about Gunther and the guy at the walk-up.”

“Of course I will. You know us teenagers. We’re fickle! Give! Give!”

“You sure? Wouldn’t want to lay on too much *responsibility* without no chance of *privilege*.”

“Will you move on from that mindless prattle?”

“I heard from Agent Bill. Seems Gunther is actually the bodyguard for Faux Girl who is married to the walk-up guy. Him and her are both agents for the German Mafia. The CIA’s been after her for years. They’ve been taken into custody thanks to us.”

Tommy nodded and flashed a deliberate smile. He became thoughtful.

“It’s odd and disappointing in a strange sort of way,” Tommy said.

“What?”

“I always thought having lots of money would suddenly make me really, really, happy.”

“And . . . the *odd and disappointing* part?”

“It was like a bolt of lightning. I suddenly just realized I was *already* happy – before the money. The fortune won’t change a thing. Odd, you see, and disappointing in a really wonderful way. How lucky can I be!”

Carl sighed and crossed his arms, looking Tommy in the face.

“I think the saying is, ‘You are mature beyond your years, Tommy.’”

Tommy looked up into Carl’s face, clearly sobered by whatever was on his mind.

“All in all I’d say we’ve had a pretty cool *week* together, wouldn’t you, *Big Guy*?”

“All in all I’d say we’ve had a pretty cool *fourteen years* together, wouldn’t you, *Little Bro*?”

The hug lasted a long, long, long, time.

The End