

Fat Chance by Roy Trumbull
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The idea for this story grew out of my boredom with vampire stories. I certainly wouldn't discourage you from reading Bram Stoker's "Dracula", the first chapter especially. As a teenager I enjoyed the American International Dracula movies that starred Christopher Lee. Bela Lugosi was also marvelous as Dracula. I'd like to see the Spanish version shot on the same set. I even paid to see the exploitation movie "Blackula". But there are limits to the genre most of which were covered in Anne Rice's first novel "Interview With The Vampire". TV and the movies will continue to make profits from the teenage fascination with the subject. Although the myth has been modified numerous times there are still essential problems with relationships. Once the damsel becomes a vampire, her lover goes looking for another live one.

I took obesity, the number one problem in the western world, and used it as the basis for my story. Living amongst us are aliens who look like us but they have the ability to metabolize our fat just by touching it with their fingers. Like vampires they can make us willing victims. Instead of sneaking around wearing long black capes preying on the unwary they've turned their means of feeding into a massage business for the fat and wealthy.

This text is a first draft. If I come back to it at a later time I'll change some of the chapters and tighten it up a bit. For now, enjoy and have a few laughs. I'm afraid I've omitted the accents from the Spanish words in the story.

I should mention that I've borrowed a character from Oscar Wilde. Lady Windermere appears in "Lady Windermere's Fan" and "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime". In our story she is Bea Windermere.

Fat Chance – Chapter 01 The Man on the Slab

Coroner Bob was finishing up an autopsy and his assistant Rudy was looking at the photos taken at the crime scene.

"Looks like he never knew what hit him."

Bob looked up, "I'm sure he didn't. I've never seen anything quite like it. Obviously he was grabbed by the throat but there's no other cuts or bruises like you'd see if there'd been a prolonged struggle."

Just then detective Abe Howard came in, He had a large cup of coffee in one hand. Those who think detectives should be glamorous have never seen Abe. He wore a wash and wear outfit that looked slightly slept in. He could have been the illustration on the Wikipedia page devoted to the approach of middle age. Receding hair line, tummy slightly over the belt, and a poor taste in ties. "What did you guys find?"

Coroner Bob spoke up. "Both carotid arteries had clots. That was the cause of death. No blood flow to the brain pretty much stops the show. But its not the sort of thing you'd see as the result of a fight but then it isn't all that natural either. What do you know about him?"

Abe rifled through a file folder that had been under his arm and drew out several sheets stapled together. "As you know is name was Ralph Nixon. He worked delivering furniture for Pulgas Furniture over in Belporcino near Beverly Hills." Abe mused, "Don't know who wrote that. Belporcino is about

as close to Beverly Hills as Anchorage, Alaska.” He was all muscle, a good worker, but a really bad drunk. Two drinks and he was trouble. Several times the drunk tank had him as guest. He was held on assault charges several times but never made it to trial. That's pretty much it.”

“We did find a trace of blood alcohol, it's in the report, but there's not enough to classify him as drunk. But, from what you say, it didn't take much to make him impaired. I'm afraid all we know is that something got him by the throat and precipitated clots in both carotids. It's not something we've seen before.”

Abe shrugged, “Can't say as we'll ever know the answer. He was a nobody. If we do find who killed him , with his history, best we could hope for would be a manslaughter charge. Thanks guys. Back to the two legged google for me.”

“We did look for latent DNA but all we found on the swabs was a rather indistinct hydro-carbon signature. It might just have been contamination from something he used to clean grease off his hands.”

“You're probably right but I'll make note of it.”

“We noticed something else too.” Joe pulled down the sheet covering the body. “He has that stocky build you see on guys in that line of work but practically no abdominal fat. We looked for liposuction scars but didn't find any.” “It's odd. I'd expect a beer gut or something. Maybe he worked out.”

That afternoon found Abe at Pulgas furniture. It was run by John and Martha Mitchell. Ralph Nixon had been a part-time employee. They guaranteed him 3 days a week. If it got busy he'd get more. Normally they used him on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. Abe asked, “Do you know who else he may have worked for?”

“Martha ventured, “He mentioned a moving company that did office moves. Let me look in my desk. I may have their card. We don't normally handle office furniture but we wound up with some in a debt settlement a few months ago. Ralph mentioned it to them and they found a buyer. We gave him a finder's fee and they picked the goods up from our warehouse.” She went into the office and came back a few minutes later with a stack of business cards wrapped in a rubber band. She shuffled through them for a few minutes and pulled one out. It said, “Semple Moving”. They were over on West Temple in LA.

Ralph had lived with his mother Phyllis who was a widow. Abe stopped by to see her. She was a heavysset woman in her early sixties given to wearing shapeless dresses. Her hair showed signs of half-hearted coloring attempts. She held a little dog named Scratch that resembled a barking dust rag. While she couldn't add much to what Abe already knew, she did provide a shoe box containing her son's bank statements, credit card receipts, and phone bills for the year to date. As she was a signatory on all his accounts Abe had her sign a release so he could obtain more information from the bank. He asked her if she had a table he could sit while he looked through what she'd given him. She led him into the kitchen. The tea kettle was still hot and she poured him a cup of instant coffee.

Howard wore odd looking spectacles. Phyllis commented on them. He responded, “They're not just glasses. They're also my computer.

“I know everyone has a computer; even me. But where's the keyboard and the screen?”

“Obsolete. I just talk to my computer and she talks to me. When I need to see data it's projected like I was looking at a screen. Frankly I don't know how that works but it does.”

“What do they call that computer?” “It's a Maija. It's from Finland.”

A voice spoke via bone conduction into Abe's ear. “Good morning Abe.”

“Good morning Maija.”

He looked up at Phyllis. “I'm not nuts. Maija talks to me but you can't hear her unless it's really quiet. Please excuse us for a minute.” He held each bank statements flat so Maija could copy them and also make images of the checks, credit card statements and phone bills. He gave the box back to Phyllis Nixon, thanked her for her help and left his card in case she thought of anything.

Then he remembered he needed a recent photo of Ralph. Phyllis brought out several taken over the past 2 years and Maija recorded them. One full length one caught his eye. In it Ralph had a real beer gut just like what Coroner Bob had expected. Where had it gone?

As he was on the door stoop she said, “I don't know if it might mean anything but Ralph was sweet on a girl named Karen. I never met her. He was going to a massage parlor and a gym to slim down. It surprised me when he actually lost weight. But about three months ago he and the girl broke up over his drinking. She'd had an abusive drunk for a father. Although Ralph was sweet as candy most of the time...” Her voice trailed off.

Maija spoke, “There are checks and credit card transactions to two massage parlors and a gym.

“Thank Maija. Oh, and thanks to you Mrs. Nixon, you've been of great help.

These days people leave behind more records than they once did. Phone bills have numbers that were called. Credit card records can reveal not only the date a purchase was made but the store name and time too. Debt carried over from bill to bill on which interest is paid is revealing.

Abe was afraid that Ralph might have been one of those casual laborers who got cash rather than checks. Some of that probably went on but from the bank statements it appeared he did have two other regular employers. As they were legit businesses they'd paid him by check or direct deposit. The next step would be to contact those employers and have them go through their job logs to see where Ralph had been during the past 4 to 6 weeks. It might come to nothing but it was worth the effort.

It seems a cliché but it was statistical fact that murderers and their victims usually knew each other. Immediate family members and close associates are always scrutinized unless it was something like a robbery gone bad or a burglar caught in the act. As Ralph's only immediate relative was his mother, Abe needed to scrutinize his co-workers and drinking buddies.

Fat Chance Ch02 - Rancho Borracho

The Rancho Borracho Plaza and Mall effected an ersatz Spanish era look. The Spanish tiles on the overhangs were made from composite plastics rather than ceramic. Sheet metal drains to catch runoff were concealed alongside the notoriously bad Spanish troughs. The Rancho's first fortune was that its blueprints and scale model had looked good enough that the city fathers had signed off on its construction without endless meetings. The locals were delighted in that there was scarcely an excess that wasn't catered to by one of the 70 businesses located there.

Trader Juan's was a favorite destination. If it could be dipped in dark or milk chocolate or mole' and put into a plastic box, they had it. In the meat section there was gant kosher cutup chicken alongside packages of pork chops.

There was a convenience store called Bodega Chafa that featured snack food, cigarettes, soft drinks and lottery tickets. It was next door to Senor Chafa's Steak House. If you ever wondered what happened to those cows that have to be prodded to their feet with a fork lift to be taken to slaughter, here you could find out. With massive amounts of salsa and hot sauce they were made as presentable as a homeless bum wearing a thrift store suit.

In the midst of this pseudo Spanish farrago was a French restaurant, The Cafe du Treyf. It wasn't that it belonged there so much as that they'd signed a lease and made prompt payments.

Senora Gigante was a dress shop for women of a certain age who were dimensionally challenged. Next door to them was Evita's Cleaners which specialized in removing underarm sweat stains and their consequent drip lines.

On the ground floor facing the side street was the Manteca Gym filled with sweating gringos doing battle with expensive chrome plated machines. Through a common entranceway but on the second floor was Belporcino Massage.

Belporcino Massage was owned by brothers Horace and Ronald Le. The business consisted of the two of them, and Karen Olsen, their receptionist/assistant. Horace was the older of the two. He stood about 6' 3" was of medium build but his face was round and full. He was in his late forties, prematurely gray and had a comb over that covered his thinning top. He had an engaging smile and spoke in a firm way that told you he was in charge.

His brother Ronald was ten years younger and had the solid build of a tennis player. His face was hard and there was a small scar on his left cheek. To women he was danger made flesh. The kind of danger that attracts them. Over half his clientèle were young ladies. They didn't need a massage but after he'd sculpted them with his firm hands they daydreamed about the experience until their next visit.

On this particular day Horace was practicing tough love on Bea Windermere, an aging socialite on the matron track who was in desperate need of his services. She'd been a great beauty not that many years before but the good life with all too many cocktail hours and canap'es had advanced her calendar pages. She looked 10 years older than she was. Her hair was thinning. She was no longer spending the big bucks to keep it properly colored. Her jowls were showing. She couldn't get into even the most fictional of single digit dress sizes any more. And to add to her agony she'd found that her husband, Wallace, was shopping around for a trophy bride. It wasn't so much the loss of his love she resented as it was the

idea of going to a party as the ex Mrs. Windermere and encountering the new Mrs. Windermere at the punch bowl. She wasn't hiring Horace's services to try and save her marriage. She just wanted to be in decent enough shape to pull hair and scratch eyes when the time came.

Mrs. Windermere was well known for her parties. Her picture was always showing up on the society page wearing a dress previously seen in the Styles section of the New York Times. That is, if the designer had allowed for sufficient expansion possibilities. In the newspaper she might be pictured standing next to a director or actor or some rising artist or playwright. She had a menagerie of social lions at her beck and call and her parties often had Mensa members rubbing elbows with porn producers. A Noble prize winner might be seen engaged in conversation with a starlet who just smiled and nodded so as not to break her vacuum seal.

Horace surveyed Bea Windermere as if he were looking at a used car of dubious lineage. "Bea, the last time I saw you you were going on a cruise. I'd say you never got more than 5 feet from the buffet all the way down one side of South America and up the other."

"Horace, you are being rude to me. I won't stand for it."

"That was my professional opinion. It's the truth. What I see is what others see."

Bea started to blubber a bit. "God damn it Horace, guilty as charged. Now fix it. Please, please fix it."

"Okay Bea. Now get out your meter."

"My meter?"

"Yes, your kit. It's in your purse isn't it."

Her face fell and she fumbled around in a rather full lumpy handbag and brought out a little black pouch. Horace unzipped it and picked up the glucose meter within and stepped through the recorded readings.

"You've been a bad girl. The last reading is from three weeks ago. What would Dr. Monroe say?"

"Oh, Horace, I just hate having to stick myself."

"Well, we're not getting started until you do."

There was silence for a few minutes and then she moved over to a table and used the spring loaded lance in the kit to produce a tiny drop of blood for the test strip. A few seconds later the meter showed a reading of 240.

"It's as I thought. Not only have you let yourself go but you're endangering your health. It's three hours past lunch time. That's a high reading to have three hours after a meal."

Bea looked down unable to make herself engage Horace's eyes.

"Then she said, 'I didn't have lunch today.'"

"I'm afraid starving yourself makes no sense. Your liver is fully capable of supplying the missing glucose. Did you ever have a diabetes class?"

"I went to one five years ago but I never finished it."

Horace frowned.

"This is none of my business Bea. I'm not your doctor. I don't give medical advice. But in your face and figure I see trouble. I will do my part to help you but you must do yours. Now take out your cell phone and call Dr. Monroe and make an appointment."

Bea hesitated and looked sulky but dialed the number and did what Horace had asked her to do. Then he nodded and she went over, took off her outer garments and got up onto the massage table.

"You've been very disagreeable to me today Horace."

"Yes I know."

"I must invite you to my next party. There's been entirely too much fawning lately. You'd help balance it out."

Horace had a hearty laugh.

"We'll work on your face today. You know all the tricks about colors and patterns that camouflage fat and you'll use them. But your face is a dead giveaway. It will take at least 3 sessions for me to treat it and then we'll work on your hips, stomach, and thighs."

As soon as he touched her cheeks and chin she fell into a deep sleep and Horace did what only he and Ronald could do, extract fat by touching it. His moves produced a greenish yellow glow on Bea's flesh and there was a sort of benzine like odor in the air. Horace sculpted her flesh slowly and carefully. He worked on stimulating the elastic nature of her skin so it would contract smoothly as the fat was removed thus retaining a tight surface void of folds and sags.

He pushed on a button and Karen came in. "Bea will awaken in a few minutes. Bring her a warm wash cloth and stay with her while she puts on her face." He handed Karen a multi part form with the billing information for the session and a note concerning the number of subsequent appointments Bea required. "When she's ready call this number. It's her niece's cell phone. She's waiting in the parking lot and will meet her downstairs at the door.

Ten minutes later Bea was ready to go. Ronald saw her in the reception room and, as it was after dark, He offered to walk her to her car. Bea explained her niece was meeting her. "That's okay, I'll go with you anyway, I'm done for the day"

At the door a woman was waiting. Bea said, "Ronald, I'd like you to meet my niece, Laura Roizen." Ronald gave a slight nod and said, "Nice to meet you Miss Roizen." Laura was very attractive, just out of college, and was used to young men flocking to her. She was a brooding brunette caught up in the importance of her youth. Ronald, on the other hand, looked at her as if she were a vase of flowers. For once she became the one doing the looking.

Ch03 – Big Olga

With the decline of education in America nearly all innovation took place elsewhere. It was rare to find an American name on a list of PhD candidates in technical majors. Businesses in the United States had done such a thorough job of sabotage. They'd brought in low priced engineers and scientists from around the globe. Only a fool considered a technical education. Following on their success in treating registered nurses so badly that few wanted to be one, they now could point with pride to the fact that they'd wiped the slate clean of the next generation of American engineers and research scientists. Foreign born students who for decades had come to get a technical education in the United States stayed home. Science and innovation were once centered in the west. Now, as Tom Friedman had pointed out long ago, the world was flat.

The traditional utter incompetence of Congress with its earmarks and lobbyist swayed tendencies meant that when an updated computer system for national security, law enforcement and public safety was needed, there was no one left to supply it. Even if there had been, at an outrageous initial price plus massive cost overruns, the results would have been pathetic. While intelligent design, laws against flag burning, and deferring national bankruptcy a few more years into the future occupied Congress, the rest of the world had advanced.

The longstanding market dominance of Mr. Spaghetti for home and business computers was over. You know you're in trouble when no one remembers your company name but everyone remembers the various slurs of which Mr. Spaghetti was the most popular. It required so much memory to run. Hard drives barely lasted a year after Mr. Spaghetti had them churning away for hours doing God knows what. To the blue screen of death had been added the yellow, orange, and red screens of death. Folks who turned off their computers overnight had timers to start them up at 5:30 so that Mr. Spaghetti would be booted up mid morning.

A consortium made up of companies in Sweden, Finland, Israel, and China had created a distributed computer network known as Big Olga. When Abe needed information, Maija consulted the databases in Big Olga. Local and state governments knowing the perpetual morass along the Potomac had voted with their dollars and bought into Big Olga. Olga was very reliable and very cost effective and global. Abe's Maija computer ran on a subset of Big Olga software.

By checking the business license records for Los Angeles County and the fictitious name filings Maija was able to ascertain that the two massage parlor names in Ralph Nixon's financial records had the same principals. By checking the telephone user database over a five year span it appeared the more recent name had succeeded the earlier one when the business moved from Culver City to Belporcino. Ralph had also used the Manteca Gym. Both were located in the Rancho Borracho Mall.

It was late in the afternoon when Karen went to talk to Horace's brother Ronald. He had seen his last client for the day. Karen was in her late 20s. She'd been leading a direction less life. On paper she came from a good family but her father was currently doing time in Soledad Prison for embezzling \$2 million dollars from trusts he'd been administering. For two years before the embezzlement came to light he'd gone from being occasionally drunk and abusive to making it a routine. Her mother became seriously unhinged by the attendant trial publicity. They still had their home in Belporcino but neither felt they could face the neighbors or become active socially unless the conviction could be overturned on appeal. Even then there would still be a cloud. Ronald knew all this but Karen appeared to him to be more downcast than usual.

“Do you remember Ralph?”

“That guy you dated up until last summer?”

“Yes”

“What about him?”

“He's dead. It was in today's paper.”

She paused as she collected her thoughts.

“I think you might have killed him.”

Ronald looked astonished.

“When you walked me to my car the other night and that guy came out of nowhere.”

“Him, I just knocked him down by throwing him off balance.”

“I'm not sure but he could have been Ralph.”

“If he was that's is pretty serious.”

“What should we do?”

“We should have reported the incident to the cops. I was so concentrated on getting you to your car and on your way that I wasn't thinking clearly. I'm going to have to tell Horace. Then we'll talk about it.”

A few minutes later as they were talking Abe Howard came through the door. He'd been downstairs interviewing the gym manager.

Horace made the introductions and when he got to Karen Olsen Abe picked up on her name and asked if she'd known Ralph Nixon. She had. Ronald jumped into the conversation and told Abe about the incident in the parking lot that Karen was concerned about.

Abe said, “That happened here?”

Both Karen and Ronald nodded.

Abe said, “You should have called us.”

Ronald responded, “Yes I know.”

Maija's voice spoke into Abe's ear. “According to booking records a drunk was taken in on the night in question from Rancho Borracho shopping center.”

Abe looked at Karen and Ronald, “Well, relax. The drunk is alive and well. It wasn't Nixon. Ralph's

body was found near the edge of a strip mall over on West Shicker.”

Horace started a bit upon hearing that but said nothing.

“Is there a place I can talk privately with Miss Olsen? I need need to interview her, if she doesn't mind.”

Karen said that would be fine and the two of them went into one of the massage studios and closed the door. Amongst other things Karen told him was that she'd been working out at the gym downstairs when she first met Ralph. When she told him about Horace and Ronald, he'd become a client. Ronald had done a good job reducing his girth. Thus one mystery was solved.

Horace spoke to the phone and and it made a connection. When the secure encryption ID lit he said, “We need to have a meeting. Can I see you in about an hour from now? Thank you.”

Ronald said, “Was that necessary?”

“Yes, I need to find out what Johnson knows about this. It was a little too close to their location for comfort.”

Ronald nodded his head in a solemn manner.

About a half mile from where the body of Ralph Nixon had been found there was another strip mall. In it could be found “Pepy's Party Goods”, “Out of This World Pizza”, Poly Nomial's Liquors, and 3 other storefronts without tenants, their windows masked with white paper. One of the vacant stores had been CC's Organics. The local buzz was it had closed because the CC meant that the fruits and vegetables in its bins were cosmetically challenged. There was an adjacent professional building whose main tenant was “Johnson Accounting”. Next to it, on a concrete pad, was what looked like a commercial satellite dish.

Across the street was the “GS Coffee Shop”. One piece of their pie was considered equivalent to the bottle of concentrate used for a glucose tolerance test. In a far booth sat Gerald Johnson. Horace parked his car and walked in and went to the booth. The street noise and the jukebox blare was such that even a few booths away no one could hear what they said.

Ch04 – Notes

Abe sat down with a cup of coffee and went over the notes he'd taken during his interview with Karen. Apparently Ralph had not just been a furniture mover. In years past, when everyone wanted a satellite dish, he'd been part of an installation crew. He'd started out digging the holes for the foundation and then learned to set the forms and pour the concrete. Just before the market dried up he was assembling the feed horns and motor controllers plus walking the customer through how to use the dish and receiver. From time to time he'd still done that as a sideline.

It seemed to Abe that Ralph had been pretty smart but had grown up with all too few of the breaks that others get. Liquor was his crutch. Rather than pull himself out of the world he'd been born into he'd just sunk further down. But what took him to West Shicker? Was there a buddy, a girl, some work? “Maija, look at the credit card charges, electronic fund transfers, and ATM withdrawals for anything on West

Shicker or its cross streets.”

“Give me some time Abe. The LA fictitious name filings are in pretty ugly shape.” Abe shook his head. The database was only as good as the clarity of its entries and a lot of that work was done by clerks really low on the food chain. There weren't uniform rules on how to break down complex names for filing purposes either. Maija and Big Olga would have to attempt to recognize entry errors and make sense of them.

Abe was over at Steve's Snacks having a piece of peach pie when Maija spoke to him.

“Abe, I ran into some out-of-state ownership issues and those filings are particularly nasty because all the owned businesses refer back to a common corporate address. I'm going to try and work the yellow pages backwards to see if I can find actual business names. Olga is checking SEC filings. But I do have a purchase at a battery swap station on La Brea about three blocks off West Shicker. I looked at the satellite image for the area and it's at one end of a strip mall.

“Thanks Maija. Save the address of that charge station. I'll have a look later.”

“Will do.”

Strip malls were one of the great puzzles of the universe. They were all over the country and LA had thousands of them. How many people need to have their nails done or rent movies from a really crappy selection? Almost anything could go on in those stores and probably did. Lottery tickets sold in front, stolen car stereos and air bags sold in the back. Abe had seen it all. His favorite was the Chinese laundry with rooms and room mates at an hourly rate upstairs and the click-clack of mah-jong tiles in the basement. The owner paid a weekly tith to a corrupt Sargent who claimed he was investigating the matter but it was too early for arrests.

Maija gently reminded Abe that while he was out he needed to pick up a jug of potable water for his apartment as she'd noticed his supply was low.

Horace met his brother for a late dinner. “I suppose it was inevitable. That furniture mover had installed satellite dishes and was familiar with the typical motor drive and feed horn configurations. When he delivered some desks to Johnsons, he spotted our dish out back. He could see it did much more than move through the geo-stationary arc. What a piece of bad-luck.”

“Wasn't it kind off dumb to leave it out in the open like that?”

“True, it was scheduled to be fenced it but the work got delayed. A few weeks later that Nixon guy wouldn't have been able to see the mechanism.”

“So one of our own guys got nervous and killed him.”

“Yes, but didn't have enough sense to take him way out of the neighborhood before dumping the body.”

“For now we're going to move training to a company we have in Arizona and make Johnson's look a little more like an accounting firm. We'll turn the training center into store rooms and move in some boxes and file cabinets and old desks and such. When this blows over we can convert them back.”

“They would have eventually checked Johnson's anyway because Nixon's employer would have had job tickets on him.” Horace sat back and sipped his after dinner coffee.

Ronald thought for awhile and then said, “So the plan is what?” Horace said, “ We've bought a corporate shell in Baja California. The beautiful people will have no trouble taking trips there were we to move. But it would be harder to build up our influence in the states.”

Ronald said, “It's a decent backup scheme. I just hope we don't have to use it.”

When they left the busboy shook his head. He couldn't understand why someone would order food and then not eat it. This time there'd been two of them. They'd shoved the food around on their plates like anorexic models.

Abe drove by the battery swap station Maija had noted. He saw that the change out was automatic. That was typical. All the batteries and mounts, regardless of manufacturer had been standardized in order to streamline the infrastructure needed to support electric cars. The operator was in a convenience store on the other side of the lot. Not too likely he'd recognize anyone who got a swap unless they were cash customers.

After visiting all of Ralph's known employers, Abe had a list of his work assignments. He saw that one of Ralph's deliveries wasn't too far from where he was and not all that far from where his body had been found. He drove back and forth over a 3 mile stretch of West Shicker to develop an impression of the area. Maija recorded the storefronts and buildings so Abe could revue them later. In that stretch he counted 5 bars. Maybe Ralph had gone into one. Maybe his killer had too.

Karen Olsen was in a deep funk. It wasn't that Ralph had been the great love of her life. But when someone is snatched away like that for no reason you can't help but feel a void. She was sitting on a bench in Pershing Square tossing popcorn to the pigeons and listening to the crackpot orators expound when her thoughts wandered. How was it Horace and Ronald could make people slim down when no one else seemed to be able to do that? She'd watched them do it again and again. More often than not chauffeurs and limos were waiting down in the parking lot for their clients. The word had gotten out to the very rich. The move from Culver City to Belporcino had been precipitated by the Le's increasingly upscale list of regulars. But how did they do it? And why did their touch invariably induce sleep?

Ch05 – The Party

True to her word Bea Windermere invited Horace and Ronald to one of her parties. In the drawing room there was a string quartet. Out on the patio was a New Orleans style jazz band. In her third floor ballroom Sly Grey's society orchestra presided over the dance floor. No one was permitted to be seen with an empty glass. A platoon of waiters aggressively poured the bubbly and sterner rations. The palm balanced trays of hors d'oeuvre hovered like flying saucers leaving cocktail napkins in their wake.

Francis Bacon once made a statement to the effect that money was of little use unless, like fertilizer, it was spread around. Bea bought into that concept. She swept down her grand stairway with a Nobel Laureate on each arm trailed closely by a man who'd invented a foolproof way to give a pill to a cat. The NLs were brainy. The cat pill man was rich beyond measure. Bea was wearing a dress from the latest collection of Araise au Plafond (idiom for bats in the belfry) . It was a stunning silk brocade with cleverly placed bits of tread from a radial tire to give it texture. She embraced Horace and gave

him a kiss on the cheek. Through the combined efforts of his magic fingers and Dr. Monroe's supervision, Bea was down two dress sizes. While her guests were drinking champagne, Bea was drinking flavored seltzer.

When Ronald entered, Laura could look at no one but him. Later when he was on the dance floor she cut in. She was more than a bit spoiled. No less than four men sought her hand. But having this dark rugged man look through her like a window was more than she could stand.

Horace was soon in his element. Enough of his clients were on the guest list that he could move about and have a word here and there and thus be introduced to others. The resulting low buzz about the man who could actually help you regain your shape passed from mouth to mouth about the room.

While, like the other guests, he held a drink and a small plate with something on it, an hour later the glass was still full and the morsel uneaten. Keeping an eye on the time, he thanked his hostess and was on his way before 11. He understood it's one thing to be talked about and quiet another to hang around and risk becoming a bore.

Before he left he had a few words with the lady known as La Bonita. She was rumored to be the governor's mistress. The sands of time had been shifting her figure toward the senora look. Horace had made her into a *cielito lindo*. She was very grateful. He told her he would soon have a studio in Sacramento staffed with masseuses he'd personally trained. He'd give her more information soon. She too kissed him on the cheek.

Ronald had been persuaded by Laura to leave the dance floor and go outside with her. One thing led to another and soon they were in the backseat of her coupe. If this was throwing yourself at a man so be it. Ronald held her and kissed her. He knew she expected something more so he slowly unbuttoned her blouse. She sighed. He placed his hand a bit below her navel and she felt a tingle. He eyes opened wide and then closed. Her breathing became shallow and rapid. Her pulse rate increased. There was the barest scent of burnt lilacs in the air. She let out moans that increased in intensity until her whole body shuddered. Then it was over. Ronald withdrew his hand and buttoned her blouse. In a few minutes she stirred and her eyes opened.

"What happened?", she said.

"I think you fell asleep."

She looked down. Her clothing was intact as was his. But she knew something had happened. Try as she might she couldn't wipe a satisfied smile off her face for the rest of that evening and all the next day.

Ronald wished they could have had intercourse as had been Laura's intent. But he knew it wasn't possible. The act might give her a potentially fatal adrenalin cascade. Although he could control what his hands did when they touched flesh, the sex act was primitive driven from the sub-cortex.

Far from the champagne and hors d'oeuvre, Abe sat at his Formica kitchen table watching a rerun of *The Rockford Files* on his thin screen. There was an open beer and a salami and cheese sandwich. A bag of stale taco chips was nearby. Abe drew randomly on a small notepad. He was contemplating the "why" of Ralph Nixon's murder. Who wanted him dead? There wasn't any money, just a modest insurance policy. He wasn't known to have been carrying anything of value. If he'd been shot or stabbed

his death would have been filed with a number of similar deaths. But the way he was killed was so unusual that Abe couldn't help but look for some connection that would open the mystery.

Perhaps there was a ninja for hire who did such killings. Maybe someone who'd been in special forces training who'd learned all manner of ways to end life. It all came back to why such a method had been used. If he had nothing of value maybe he knew something. That was more likely. But what would a moving man know? What could he have seen that would make him worth killing? There was no pattern of deposits or expenditures to show he'd suddenly come into blackmail money.

Karen had dumped him. Could there be a jealous boy friend worried they'd make up? Worth looking into. What about her employers? Could one of them be a lover? So many things to think about. But not so many as to make him not notice that the taco chips were very stale. He took another sip of his beer and dumped them in the trash.

Just then the bell rang. It must be Marilyn. She'd called earlier saying she might come over. Maybe they'd talk. Maybe they'd do more. It all depended on her mood. She'd been cast adrift when her husband Charlie Morgan died two years ago. Abe and Charlie had been partners. But one day Charlie dismissed his chest pains as heartburn when he should have headed straight to the ER. It was his only chance and he'd missed it.

Marilyn had been a legal secretary in the DA's office. Not long after Charlie's death two of the young prosecutors had left to start their own law practice. She went with them.

What she and Abe saw in each other wasn't defined. They knew each other. They were both lonely. The fact that he was another cop probably made her hesitate. Abe wondered if the paunch over his belt line was a turnoff. Nonetheless they'd kept each other's company and sometimes made love.

As he went to the door he heard Maija's voice.

“Abe, I was looking over Ralph Nixon's job tickets again. There was a note on one that was hard to read. But I think he made two trips to Johnson's Accounting a day apart.”

“Thanks Maija.”

Marilyn came in. She was in her late 30s with a serious demeanor with a quick smile. She'd kept her figure but you could see gray in her auburn hair. She gave him a hug. Abe saw she was carrying a small soft sided bag with her. Yes, it would be an overnight stay. He poured both of them a drink and then excused himself for a minute. He gave Phyllis Nixon a call and made an appointment to see her the next day. Why did he always forget simple stuff? What an idiot he'd been. Maybe it was too late; Then, maybe he'd thought of it in time.

He sat down next to Marilyn. They raised their glasses and clinked them together and gave each other a hug before retiring for the night.

Ch06 Another Day

Abe awoke to the sound of a hair dryer running in the bathroom and the smell of fresh coffee. He put

on his robe and shuffled into the kitchen. There was an empty cereal bowl and coffee cup. Abe had just poured himself a cup of coffee when Marilyn appeared fully dressed with her bag packed. She gave him a kiss and went out the door on her way to work.

Abe told Maija he wanted the news. A virtual LA Times appeared in the air in front of him. It was amazing how well it resembled a printed one. The top of page 1 was national news and political stories but below the fold there was a local story, "Nick the Pick Arrested on Suspicion of Murder". Nick had been on the pro-wrestling tour in years past and was known for going beyond the theatrics of the ring and inflicting real harm on his opponents. One night he'd beaten up a wrestling card promoter over some money he'd been promised. The guy pressed charges. Nick already had a rap sheet so the judge gave him a year and a day in the state hotel. He'd gotten out about six weeks ago and had been going around settling scores.

When he was younger he'd been drummed out of the military for enjoying his work too much. Killing was part of any battle but Nick added his own calling cards. In one of his boots was an inside sheath where he kept a hunting knife. In the other boot was a icepick like weapon whose handle was customized to fit for his fingers. He claimed he could punch clean through a leather jacket with it.

Two days ago he'd been in a fight at the Black Belt Bar with Vincent Walters, who wrestled under the name Vinnie the Bear. Vinnie had later been found with his nose shoved into his brain. He was dead. There were witnesses making Nick the prime suspect.

Abe rolled his eyes. It was God's gift to an otherwise slow news day.

He had some breakfast, showered and shaved, and got dressed. Ten minutes later he was down in the garage disconnecting the twist-lock power plug to his car.. Then off he whirred down the street on his way to see Phyllis Nixon.

Before he got there he received a call from Karen Olsen.

"Did you hear about Jerry Jackson?"

"Who is Jerry Jackson?"

"He was a friend of Ralph's. I met him a few times. He's in intensive care at a hospital in Orange County."

"What do you know about him?"

"I think he had something to do with wrestling."

Abe pulled his car over into an empty loading zone. Slowly he said, "Was Ralph ever a wrestler?"
"Yeah, he was. But it was before I knew him."

"Did he ever mention a guy named Nick the Pick?"

"I'm not certain. He didn't like to talk much about it."

“Thanks Miss Olsen. I may need to call you later.”

“Sure, I'll be at my work number.”

“Maija, see what you can find on Jerry Jackson. Scan the wire services and online files for newspapers in Orange County and see what they have. Search the pro-wresting web site too.”

“I'm on it boss.”

Phyllis Nixon was very helpful. Ralph's nightly habit had been to dump the content of his pockets on top of a chest of drawers in his bedroom. Phyllis couldn't bring herself to disturb any of his things just yet so it was just as Ralph had left it. Two matchbooks caught Abe's eye. One was from the Black Belt Bar and the other was from Jack's at West Schiker Lanes. It was a bar in a bowling alley. Maija imaged all the items atop the chest of drawers for future reference.

Maija gave Abe a quick summary of the news reports on Jerry Jackson and put him through to detective Jack Wayne of Orange PD who was heading the investigation. Jackson was in intensive care. He had trauma to his neck and face as if he'd been grabbed from behind in a choke hold. Circulation through both carotid arteries was impaired. One appeared to have a clot and the other a dissection. Abe told Wayne about the case he was working on and asked if he'd heard of Nick the Pick. Wayne thanked him and said he'd contact LA PD. He'd call Abe if any of Jackson's friends knew of any relationship he might have had. Jackson might regain consciousness and then again he might not. The doctors weren't all that optimistic.

Later that afternoon near the end of the day a woman came into Belporcino Massage. She was tall and willowy almost to the point of looking gaunt. Her hair was a natural blond which is to say it looked like it belonged to her. It wasn't in-your-face blond. She was pleasant enough but there was a hard edge to her. She asked to see Horace. Karen explained he wasn't seeing any more clients that day. She said, “Tell him Gretchen is here; he's expecting me.”

A few minutes later Horace came out and apologized to Karen saying that he'd meant to tell her to expect Gretchen. He explained that Gretchen would be working in their new Sacramento Studio. Then he said, as if he'd just thought of it, “Would you be willing to let Gretchen give you a massage so I can show her how we contour our clients?” Karen smiled, “If you could take a little off my tush and thighs I'd appreciate it.”

A few minutes later Karen was on a massage table in just her undergarments. The heat lamps were on so she wouldn't feel cold. Gretchen tried to retain her composure as Karen submitted to her touch. But just before Karen found herself slipping off into slumber, it seemed to her that Gretchen had a hungry animal-like look in her eyes.

Gretchen was in fact hungry and Karen's fat was to be her food. Her slowly moving hands set up a temporary change in the structure of Karen's skin which allowed fat to migrate upward to the surface and enter specialized pores in Gretchen's fingers. Horace instructed her on how to move her hands so as not to leave sagging pockets of empty flesh. Gretchen listened to Horace but she was also excited. It had been such a long time since her hands had been on rich fat human flesh.

As Karen's fat passed into Gretchen's fingers, strings of complex nucleic structures were infused from Gretchen's hands and took up residence in Karen's body. Next time no subterfuge would be needed.

Karen would be a willing host.

Ch07 – Time for a Drink

Abe had a flash and asked Maija to playback the footage of his drive along West Schiker. He saw that when he'd passed the bowling alley where Jack's bar was located there'd been a big paving roller tamping down some newly laid asphalt in the parking lot. If that was the crime scene, there'd be very little left to find. Nonetheless he drove out there.

He showed Ralph's photo to the day bartender but he just shook his head. The owner, who tended bar in the evening, happened to come in. He couldn't be sure but thought he might have served him. There'd been another guy there too. Nondescript. A typical desk jockey. If his memory served, the big guy had a boilermaker and the other guy just some soda. They'd seemed to have been on friendly terms. Couldn't tell if they really knew each other or not. That was all he could recall.

Abe's next stop was the Black Belt Bar. It was kind of a sinkhole for the denizens of Matt's gym down the block. The bartender introduced Abe to Lanky Davis who was a regular. Davis was in his late 70s. He'd trained his share of boxers and had a few he could brag about. When a boxing career didn't happen he'd retool a guy for the wrestling ring. No glamor. No big bucks. But it was pretty steady income for a lot of guys. They'd work a warehouse or load trucks days and do a couple of wrestling cards on the weekends. To stay in shape many of them worked out at Matt's.

Lanky knew Nick the Pick. He shook his head and said, "Hothead. You can't go nuts all the time. For one thing, you lose your concentration and give your opponent an opening. He couldn't take a solid punch to the midsection or a punch to the nose. If he let down his guard it was all over. He was about as subtle as a coiled rattlesnake. He couldn't learn from his mistakes. He ignored everything I ever told him. But boy could he hold a grudge."

Had he known Ralph Nixon?

"Gentleman Ralph. Oh sure. He was always Mr. Nice wrestling Mr. Nasty. The fans loved Ralph. The script was he'd take fall 1, get pummeled when Mr. Nasty took fall 2 and then he'd come back and take the third fall. I think he gave it up when his doc told him his right knee couldn't take it anymore."

Did Nick have it in for Ralph?

"I really don't know. The local circuit runs up the San Fernando Valley out as far as Ventura. It goes down to San Burdo and Santa Ana and Long Beach. Other than that promoters do onetime cards almost anywhere. So if something happened out in the stix I never heard about it.

Vinnie I heard about. We all heard about it. Real bad blood. If Nick hadn't gone into the pokey it would have happened 2 years ago."

And Jerry Jackson?

"I think Nick had given up a card in Vegas because Jerry had promised him a minimum guarantee plus a percentage to do 5 cards here. The advanced ticket sales were pretty grim for the first two and he canceled the rest. Then he told Nick he was mistaken about the guarantee. Nick took a poke at him but

some other muscles pulled them apart.”

Abe heard Maija in his ear, “Sergent Wayne just left a message. Jerry Jackson was dead.” Abe thanked Lanky and excused himself. Once out in his car he had Maija connect with Coroner Bob. He asked him to get in touch with Sergent Wayne who would put him in touch with the Orange County Coroner.

Coroner Bob said, “No problem. That's my cousin Bruce from my mother's side of the family. I'll link to him right away.”

Two of Abe's associates spent the afternoon playing good cop bad cop with Nick the Pick. After talking to his attorney, who'd judged the strength of the case against his client, he confessed to killing Vinnie the Bear. He wasn't forthcoming about the Jackson murder. The DA was going to have to sweeten the pie with a plea deal. That might take weeks. The DA needed to consider what Orange County had before making a move. Abe requested that Nick be asked about Ralph Nixon's murder. While Nick had been evasive about Jackson he gave a flat no regarding Ralph.

“Damn”, Abe thought. It would have made a neat little package to put the three murders together. Just then Coroner Bob's image appeared to Abe via Maija to say that Jackson's death was the result of a brute force attack whereas Ralph's death had been a matter of almost surgical precision. While the same person could have killed both of them, Bob thought it unlikely.

When Marilyn got to work she had an email from her boss telling her to contact Larry Sharp in the mayor's office. She knew Larry. He was a troubleshooter and fixer. Very good at multitasking. She anticipated she'd soon be doing something that wasn't quite within her job description.

Three o'clock found her at the home of Roland deFarge, a man known for his financial support of candidates and also for his personal stinginess closer to home. Something was wrong. Marilyn had been sent to determine the nature of the problem as Roland's communication skills left much to be desired. Just because you're rich doesn't mean you can string words together.

The house was in Porcino Viejo at the end of Carnitas lane. It had been built in the 40s. While the outside gave you the era it didn't tell you the entire story. Inside it was clear that all the finishing work had been done by the lowest bidders or not done at all. Roland kept an office in his rumpus room. True to the period it was lined with knotty pine panels and the floor was covered with some much scuffed brick patterned linoleum.

Marilyn walked past a faded picture showing the happy newlyweds. Their marriage had been a merger of old family portfolios but was reported to have been short on conjugal bliss. Betty deFarge in a more recent photo looked like she could spit nails or do the Wicked Witch of the East better than Margaret Hamilton. There was an unkind cut floating about her circle that she'd never be as old as she looked.

And the problem? She'd had an attack of mellowness. Roland lit a cigar and got down to matters.

“We have been yelling at each other morning, noon and night since our honeymoon. Two mornings ago she smiled at me at breakfast and asked how I was. I damn near choked on my oatmeal. I tell you something is very very wrong with her.”

Marilyn covered her face with a hankie while she worked to suppress a laugh. Then she said, “Could she be on some medication?”

“Not likely. If there's anyone she dislikes more than me it's our quack doctor.”

“Could she be seeing another doctor?”

“I approve the bills for our accountant and the only thing I'm aware of is that she's been getting massaged down at the mall to try and de-wrinkle that face of hers. Seems to be doing some good. I think she only threw her hand mirror at the wall once last month.”

So there it was. Two staccato trumpets blowing at each other for decades and now suddenly one was a bassoon. She laid it out for Larry Sharp but she didn't know what he'd do with it.

At Johnson Accounting Horace was reading the security report prepared by security officer Steves. Steves was a middle aged man with a high forehead and gray hair. He was given to wearing neatly tailored three piece suits. He could have been an insurance salesman. But he was a keen observer and analyzer sent out as a trouble shooter. Defending a group that was in plain sight yet hidden was a full time task.

Steves spoke, “As you can see we've narrowed our list of suspects down to three men who were in contact with the murdered man. My essential question is why someone would administer a class Carn death hand and not report it? The only answer I could come up with was that the individual was already in trouble. One of these men was on probation. You can see I've circled the name of Ed Berlant. He got into a fight with another worker last month. But the real reason I suspect him is that Mr. Nixon came here twice. The first time he delivered furniture to receiving. The second time he came to reception and signed in to see Ed Berlant. Unfortunately I'm due in New Orleans tomorrow but when I come back I'll interview Berlant.

Ch08 – A Voice in the Night

Three weeks later Marilyn lay awake in Abe's bed. Something wasn't right. Abe was actually looking more attractive to her but he seemed a different person. She thought about the deFarge family; trumpet to trumpet. Musical instruments were really a good metaphor for a relationship. A man and woman come to expect a certain range of responses from each other. Even a bad relationship that was predictable was better than sudden changes or randomness. Abe was always on the same key. But he hadn't been there recently. It was like she no longer knew who he was. For awhile she listened to the traffic noise and aircraft on approach to LAX and distant sirens and then she fell asleep.

About 3:30 in the morning she just barely heard what sounded like a woman's voice calling her name. She thought she was dreaming but she could make out her name being called again and again.

“Marilyn, Marilyn.” She roused herself enough to concentrate and locate the source. It seemed to be coming from the nightstand on Abe's side of the bed. It was his glasses. It must be his computer; the one he called Maija. She got out of bed and went around to the other side and picked up Abe's glasses and put them on. Then she walked out of the bedroom and into the kitchen.

“Maija, is that you?”

“Thank goodness you heard me. Us girls have got to talk.”

Marilyn smiled. Whomever had decided to give an artificially intelligent computer a woman's voice

and personality was some kind of genius. She'd read that the graduates from computer science and artificial intelligence programs were 80% women, therefore it had been inevitable.

“Marilyn, I have Daphne IV software that attunes me to my user. All the heavy lifting is done by Big Olga. It's my job to anticipate what my user wants and to mesh with him as much as possible. Recently there've been unaccountable changes in Abe's profile.”

“Marilyn said, “And I thought it was just me.”

“No, he's changed. It started right after his first massage.”

“His what?”

Maija then explained about Belporcino Massage and their reputation for removing fat.

“After each visit he's slipped further from his profile.”

“So you think they're the cause?”

“I don't know, what else it could be?”

“Hold on, let me check something.”

Marilyn retrieved her purse and extracted her notebook. Betty deFarge had also been going to Belporcino Massage.

They talked some more and then Marilyn replaced Abe's glasses on the nightstand and got back into bed. It took her some time to get back to sleep. She didn't know what she was going to do but she would do something.

Two days later Karen told Horace that there was a woman there to see him. Her name was Marilyn Morgan. She wasn't there for a massage but she needed to talk to him. Marilyn always wore a suit to the office and she looked very no nonsense and very official. It was a look that dated to her days in the DA's office. Horace was inclined to say he was too busy to see her but after cracking the door a bit to look into the reception area he decided he'd better talk to her. They went into one of the studios and closed the door.

“What can I do for you Ms. Morgan?”

“I'm here about Abe Howard.”

“Are you a family member?”

“No.”

“I'm afraid it would be improper to talk about a client in absence of an express consent from the client to do so.”

Marilyn's legal brain understood that but her emotional one didn't.

“Well, let's talk about me then. I'm close to Abe, I'm his girl friend and he's changed. Since you started treating him he's been different. I want him back the way he was. I hold you responsible. I'm prepared to do some digging.”

She reached into her valise and pulled out a folder filled with papers.

“This is what I've found so far. Do you want me to continue?”

It was the end of the day. Horace was fatigued and quickly becoming very uncomfortable. It was all he could do to keep from telling this lady where she should go. He considered carefully before he responded.

“Ms. Morgan, sometimes when a client loses weight there is a period of adjustment they go through while their body balances things out. I'm sure that's what your seeing. Let a few more weeks go by. I'm sure Abe will become just like you remember him.”

Marilyn wasn't sure if she should believe him but it took the edge off her attack. They engaged in some verbal fencing and made nice with each other. Marilyn would go for now but left the impression she'd be back with guns blazing if things didn't improve. After she went out the door Horace turned and found Ronald behind him.

“How much of that did you catch?”

“Enough. Thank god you were at your tactful best. I did an Olga on her and found she'd once worked for the DA's office. She's capable of doing some real damage.”

Professor Fendl from Golkrem stroked his beard as Coroner Bob pulled down the sheet covering Ralph Nixon. The professor was in the country for a series of lectures on bizarre murders. That evening he was being hosted at a dinner by screenwriters who were in desperate need of some new material. He was a small man and his face had a craggy seriousness that changed little whether he was viewing a corpse or a fresh piece of strudel. But when the sheet got down to Ralph's svelte waistline, his eyebrows went up. Then he asked for the magnifying lamp to be bent so he could examine the scars on the throat. His raised eyebrows were complimented by some serious head nodding.

Speaking softly, almost to himself, he said, “I read a story about a man who was killed in this way. The author had gotten the idea from an unsolved crime that took place in a small Polish village. The villagers suspected some newcomers who'd recently moved there and kept to themselves. They formed a mob and killed them. Researchers have exhumed the remains in an attempt to identify who they were. We may know something soon.” With that he excused himself and left. Coroner Bob was relieved. He'd half expected the old man to invoke vampires. Come to think of it he was the spitting image of Van Helsing in one of the old Dracula movies.

Ch09 Los Angeles

Abe remembered stories his father had told about Los Angeles and how large it had been, heavy with smog and freeway traffic. He found it hard to imagine. Now parts of some communities and neighborhoods had reverted to desert. The loss of Colorado River water and the need to keep the crops irrigated in the Central Valley meant fewer businesses and dwellings could be supported. The water lotteries had determined who would stay and who would go.

Nationally the deteriorating environment impacted reproduction. Much of the United States had birthrates below replacement level. Subdivisions built on marginal land had empty houses abandoned long ago by families who'd moved to better locations. It had been a buyer's market for 20 years. Online deal making and speculation had left empty storefronts where once there'd been real estate offices.

In Las Vegas, when they culled the casinos because of water and power rationing, they'd done it differently. They convened the highest stakes poker game ever held. Each chip was worth 10 million dollars. The result was that the strip had a third of the casinos it once had.

In Los Angeles the water in the tap was gray water. Good for many purposes but people didn't think that drinking was one of them. The desalinization plants at San Pedro and Costa Mesa provided much of the potable water but you had to haul it yourself or pay a service to deliver it. There was a limited supply of spring water but it was more expensive. The installation of a separate potable water system wouldn't happen in Abe's lifetime.

Global warming had greatly altered the snow pack in the Sierras leaving even the ability to water crops in doubt. Long droughts were followed by winters in which the rainfall overwhelmed the means of containment and storage. Dikes had to be blasted open so that water could flow into buffer fields. That bought much needed time but it was bad news for the farmer who'd leased the field.

Long Haul trucking had vanished when Abe was a teenager. The cost of fuel plus the lack of funds to maintain the interstate highway system had spelled its doom. Rails assumed a dominance they hadn't enjoyed since the late 19th century. There was even some talk of reviving barge traffic on major rivers.

Abe thought he'd tasted meat when he was a boy but he wasn't sure. It was cost prohibitive to raise and transport beef. That aside, the corporate cattle barons had bred for quantity rather than quality. Even devoted beefeaters said today's steaks tasted like aged carpet padding. After the bird flu epidemic that had killed 60 million people, chickens and ducks were hard to come by. No one wanted to be down wind of a poultry farm. Pigs have always been a major disease vector. In China where lamb is unknown, pork is dominant. More Chinese had been killed by pig borne disease than by the bird flu. In the place of beef, pork and fowl were meat look-alikes made from lentils and wheat and soybeans. The portobello burgers were especially good.

His conversion to vegetarianism had been out of necessity. Abe remembered the year without chickens. The poultry stock had no genetic diversity and one year a super bug had cleaned house. Now chickens were from stocks that hadn't been bred commercially for decades.

The one thing that hadn't changed was the need to investigate crime. Even with fewer people the competition for resources continued and murder and crimes of property went on as before. As good as Maija was providing information in seconds, much of what one needed to know was what made people tick. Maija was good at jogging his memory regarding the facts in a case but he still spent much of the

time staring at the wall thinking of the whys and hows.

There was a lot in common between crime and investing. Human behavior was similar in both cases. Just because there was a logical and reasonable course to take didn't mean that it would be taken. So much of what goes into a person's development plus the emotions of the moment leads to very non-linear outcomes. After 15 or 20 years on the beat, cops come to expect anything. Over the same span the stock market had gone from bubbles to bust to bubbles again. And every time a new bubble inflated people still wanted to believe, "It's different this time."

Marilyn hadn't told Abe about her visit to Belporcino Massage. Abe was better and she didn't know if she'd anything to do with it. Horace had given her a plausible explanation for the changes in Abe. But after her years in the DA's office sitting in on depositions and interviews, she had honed her intuition and somehow what Horace had said just didn't feel right. One night she'd borrowed Abe's glasses and set Maija to work looking at corporate filings, fictitious name statements, business license applications and property tax records. What she'd found wasn't easy to understand. But for a small massage business there were a lot of connections to other enterprises.

Horace was on a conference call to businesses in 6 states. He had no concern about the line being monitored. The language spoken was unknown. "We must proceed with caution concerning the amount of infusion a client receives." He related the incident with Abe. "Obviously we want to be able to influence our clients. But if we go too far the effects become apparent to those who know them. We must be prudent and not call attention to ourselves.

Please keep in mind the fate of our first expedition. Sooner or later we will be exposed for who we are. There is no way to prevent that. But when the time comes we will need the support of those who wield power and influence. Tell your subordinates to be cautious. That's all I have for now."

Professor Fendl sat in the office of a colleague who was digging through a file on his desk. "Yes, the bodies were exhumed. That was about 2 years ago. Samples were taken of tissue and bone marrow. The DNA test results were quite interesting. You've probably heard that there isn't much difference between our genome and that of a mouse. It's even less between us and the chimps. But such differences as there are can mark the broad origins of people. East Asian, African, European, and Native American are some of the classifications. The samples we sequenced from the corpses pointed to none of them. We still have no idea who those people were." Professor Fendl stroked his beard and nodded his head.

On TV and in the movies a detective works on just one case at a time. In reality that never happens. Abe lost most of one day testifying in court. His 10 o'clock appearance became a 2 o'clock that was delayed even further by a recess. And there were always meetings. Meetings with his peers were usually productive. Meetings run by a bureaucrat getting his ticket punched were a total waste of time. But, good or bad there were always meetings. The pieces of evidence carefully gathered and in need of assembly often became cold and confused by the routine interruptions that were part of the job.

Ch10 Big Bear Lake

After Coroner Bob had gleaned everything from Ralph Nixon's body that was possible, it was turned over to phosphorous recycling and a modest memorial service was attended by his mother, a few of his

co-workers , and some old wrestling buddies. A day later Coroner Bob received a copy of the test results on the mysterious exhumed bodies from Professor Fendl. While it was interesting it didn't shed any light on the murder of Nixon.

Abe needed a break to try and clear his thoughts and he made a call to Carlos Zeit. Carlos had become something of a recluse but was always glad to see old friends. Abe and Carlos first met in high school and ever since they'd bounced ideas off each other. Sometimes 5 years might go by but eventually they'd rekindle their friendship.

Carlos had been the man the news services called to find out why the stock market had moved up or down on any given day. Sometimes the reason was rather pregnant. But most of the time there was no reason. Carlos had been good at making up short pithy headlines to fill the space reserved for them on the financial page. Now he was something of a philosopher. He'd suffered the tragic loss of his wife and youngest son in a car accident and several years ago had been diagnosed with cancer. He'd had surgery. He was waiting out the five year clock all cancer patients watch. The things he'd reveled in were no longer important. Now he sought to reflect and find his direction. In the late spring and through the summer he was at his cabin at Big Bear Lake.

Abe valued Carlos as one who could provided keen insight when Abe felt he'd lost his direction. Abe took the train to San Bernardino and rented a car. The winding road up to Big Bear Lake would consume most of the battery pack but Carlos had solar panels and a wind-turbine generator so no problem. Marilyn stayed in LA because she had an early meeting Monday morning and couldn't count on getting back in time.

As he was driving he thought about the time he'd gotten a call from Carlos. He was considering suicide. Abe could understand that. But Carlos said that when he'd applied to the state for a permit the obstacles had been formidable. First there was a questionnaire to be filled out that had nearly 500 questions. Plain old questions were fine. It was the continuum questions he hated. One was most likely and 10 was least likely with 5 being neutral. There was no option to say a question didn't apply. Without that option you just had to figure some grocery store was missing a bagger who instead was writing these idiotic questions. He pinned the questionnaire on a tree and used threw darts at it. Then he crumpled it up and put it in his charcoal starter.

The other requirement he hated was that the state wanted him to go for 8 weeks of psychiatric counseling. A psychologist would have been okay, but paying someone \$150/hr to say "Why did you say that, or feel that, or think that?" was like listening to the echo in a tunnel and almost as valuable. How they managed to keep that dodge going year after year since the 1930s was a puzzle. Obviously a shrink had been in a key spot on the committee and got that written into the rules of the Suicide Bureau.

Carlos had considered just doing the deed and stiffing the state its fee. The downside was that he might mess up. We lack training on how to take our own lives. There's a lot of folklore but little useful information. The Suicide Bureau had come about because of the complaints from the emergency room doctors who were getting sick of patching up botched attempts. They were weary of the endless string of amateurs who'd done the deed yet were still kicking when the ambulance brought them in. As a result of the ER doctor's lobbying, one had to take a class, Self Extinction 1A before a permit could be issued. If you still screwed up they'd dock your estate for costs incurred at the hospital.

Carlos, with encouragement from Abe, had finally thrown up his hands and decided to live. That was

three years ago. When Abe pulled up the gravel driveway he recognized Carlos though his black hair was now more salt and pepper. He hadn't put on any weight. His 6' 2" frame was pretty much as Abe remembered. Carlos craggy face hadn't changed. The two friends greeted each other with first a handshake and then an embrace.

Abe had a laugh at the boat dock that extended out from the front porch. The lake hadn't been within 150 feet of the end of it for 50 years or more. Carlos hadn't bothered to tear it down. There was a screened porch facing the lake where one could sit in the evening minus the mosquitoes. The front entrance opened on a sitting room with a small couch and several easy chairs. There was a small fireplace that Carlos used only if he was there in winter. Off to the right was a hallway leading to two bedrooms and a bathroom and straight ahead was a small kitchen. Abe went into the kitchen and unloaded a bag he was carrying that contained wine and spirits Carlos favored but couldn't get at the local liquor store.

The lake was stocked with trout and Carlos knew several avid fishermen who wouldn't be caught dead eating a fish. Therefore the fridge was stocked with fresh fillets ready to cook. Carlos heated up a pan and got busy. He didn't like to cook over an open fire as the results were often uneven. He felt much more in control using his propane stove. Abe had brought some fresh spinach and other veggies and set to work on making a salad. Then he slit a loaf of sourdough to make garlic bread and stuck it in the oven. Soon the kitchen was full of the kinds of smells no stomach can resist.

After dinner they sat out on the screened porch. The sound of crickets predominated. In the dusk Abe saw bats swooping to pick off the moths and other flying insects attracted by the cabin's lights. Carlos contemplated his beer and said, "The Egyptians brewed beer back in the days of the pharaohs. Of all the things we consider so important today, a thousand years from now only beer, wine and booze can be counted on to still be with us." By his third beer Abe mellowed out and the mystery of the Ralph Nixon murder became just another murky shadow.

Maija listened to the guys talk for awhile but then decided to call it a night and drifted off into the closest thing she knew as sleep which was power save mode.

Ch11 Breakfast

Carlos scrambled some eggs and toasted the bagels Abe had brought with him. A little cream cheese and OJ and all was right with the world. While Abe sipped his coffee Carlos went through his junk mail pile. He held up a disk for Abe to see. "Ever get one of these?"

"What is it?"

"It's sample lectures from a company that sells college courses. They're pretty deadly. Some of the profs must still be working off the notes they took as grad students. If you know anything about the subject you quickly realize how superficial their lectures are. If you know zip, I guess they're better than nothing."

"Did you ever subscribe to a course?"

"No, I've been tempted a few times. There was one on philosophy that wasn't half bad. Come to think of it there was something I heard on a demo that was right up your alley."

“What was that?”

“Ever hear of a guy named Occam?”

Miaja said softly, “14th century Franciscan friar William of Occam”.

Abe feigning scholarship said, “Do you mean William of Occam?”

“That's the guy. He's known for a principle called Occam's Razor. Essentially the simplest answer is the most likely answer. You pile up assumptions and complications at your peril.”

Abe mused a bit. That was really SOP for police work. You usually didn't have to look too far away to find the guilty party. That was why random acts of violence or serial killers unknown to their victims were so troublesome. There wasn't an obvious connection or motive. He'd be glad to write Ralph Nixon off as a guy in the wrong place at the wrong time but for the way in which he'd been killed. It was too clean; too professional.

Down the road Bea Windermere in her leased mansion away from home was in a quandary over some missing wine. She was about to send her chauffeur out to look for it. The servants had things pretty much in hand for tonight's party and it might be fun to go out looking for that wine just to find out who was at the lake. Staying in the house was so boring.

While they were having their second cup of coffee and reading the newspaper a limousine pulled up into the driveway. Abe thought he recognized the passenger. She looked like Bea Windormere whom he'd crossed paths with several times at Belporcino Massage. She and the chauffeur got out. It was definitely her. They came up to the door and Carlos let them in.

Bea spoke, “Did a case of wine get delivered here?”

Carlos said, “Sure did. I thought someone would be by for it otherwise I was fully prepared to drink it myself.”

Bea laughed.

Carlos said, “There was a kid driving the delivery truck. Stan the regular driver had some surgery last week and he's the only one who knows who's renting the houses up here. That kid knew nothing.”

Most of the old places along the shore were owned by folks who were wait-listed for the cemetery. Their houses were almost always rented by an agent as they rarely came to the lake anymore.

Carlos said, “I take it that you're at the Johnson place over on West Sheol.”

“ Yes, that's the place. We're having a wine tasting tonight and I believe the case delivered here is some Shiraz sent by the Australian ambassador. He's going to be at the party so it would be very embarrassing if it were missing.”

“Well I've got it in the garage.” Carlos and Noah the chauffeur went and retrieved the errant wine and loaded it into the limo.

Bea looked at Abe and said, "I know you."

"I'm Abe Howard. We've seen each other at Belporcino Massage."

"Yes, yes. I remember now. You're a detective aren't you?"

"That's right."

"There'll be some people at my party that you'll know. How would you and your friend like to join us?"
"His name is Carlos. I'll ask him. Might be fun."

When Carlos came back in Abe told him what was up and Carlos said, "Sounds like a deal." So Abe told Bea they'd be there.

The Johnson place had a tennis court whose surface had a cover so it could be used as a patio for parties. It was screened in to keep out the bugs but otherwise open to nature and the stars above. It was a warm evening with no wind. Very pleasant. The first people Abe spotted were Horace and Gretchen and next to them was a fellow wearing a gaudy Hawaiian print and shorts who spoke with an accent. Carlos thought the accent might be southern Austrian. Then they both realized it was the governor. He was being rather familiar with Gretchen. While Abe was watching he patted her on the butt twice. Carlos translated some of their conversation. It was pretty seamy.

Off to one side he saw Horace's brother Ronald with a young lady he didn't know.

He was surprised to see Luis Basu otherwise known as his honor the mayor. With him was Larry Sharp his spokesman and point man who was kept busy saying what the mayor meant to say. Even in Bea Windermere's circle there were bloggers. A private party quickly became public on the internet.

Luis was born in the United States. His father came from Bangalore India. His mother was descended from the historic Figueroa family. Luis spoke both Hindi and Spanish and had managed an acting career from Bollywood to Hollywood. Now in his early 50s he'd started down the well worn path from acting to politics. His party was already talking up a possible run for governor. Needing to look his best, he too was a client of Belporcino massage.

A fleeting shadow moved about. It was the invisible man Skip Jennings. Tall, slender, and dressed in black slacks and tee shirt, head topped with a backward black baseball cap, his camera saw everything. Whether he'd gotten the inspiration for his dress from traditional Kabuki theater, Abe couldn't say. But he was agile and never called attention to himself. At first you would see him and then he'd cast his spell on everyone and become virtually invisible. When the link light lit on his Tuli camera it would transfer his latest photo cache to his Big Olga account. Skip's wife Rusty would cull the file and negotiate user price for the best pictures. While Skips regular clients could access his thumbnails, they needed a rights key from Rusty to download. Those who'd known him for decades had trouble recalling anything he'd ever said. They said Skip had a shutter where most people have a mouth.

Just then Bea came down the staircase from the second floor and as she neared the bottom she started a corkscrew spin and fell to the floor. Just at that moment Dr. Monroe came through the door and rushed to her side. Observing a spilled wine glass on the rug he called for Noah.

“Did Bea have wine?” Noah nodded.

“Do you know if she had her medicine?”

Her maid Clara spoke up, “I think Madam took her pills this morning but I'm not sure.”

“Great!” said Dr. Monroe somewhat sarcastically. “I'm assuming she had the wine on an empty stomach. Clara get me her kit. You know, the little black bag.”

Clara returned and Dr. Monroe took out a spring loaded lancet and a test strip and the meter and drew a drop of blood from her finger and put it on the strip. Her blood glucose was below 50. Down in that range the meter wasn't linear so it was hard to say just how low her blood glucose actually was. Horace knelt down across from the doctor. Monroe was totally preoccupied with figuring out how to get some glucose into Bea. He ran out hoping he had a vial of it in his bag in the car. Abe saw Horace put his hand up under her sleeve. It looked as if he was pinching a roll of her flesh. Less than a minute later Bea was fluttering her eyes and wondering what the fuss was all about. Her blood glucose had mysteriously risen to 110. Horace looked very pale. He went outside followed by Ronald and they came back in 15 minutes later with Horace looking much better.

Abe made note of all this. There was much more to Horace than met the eye. Abe recognized the police commissioner's wife having a conversation with Horace. Then he saw Bennie Hermosa from the mayor's office. Bennie had been called El Burrito behind his back but now he looked to be only slightly overweight. Abe saw a state senator and two assemblymen talking to Horace. Horace was becoming very well connected.

Wallace, Bea's husband, knelt down beside her giving comfort. It was unusual to find him at one of her parties. During a recent fling he'd had a serious attack of angina. For the moment he was sticking closer to home and remembering to wear his nitro patch. There's nothing like a constant nitro headache to put your mind off of almost everything.

After dinner, over on a bench by the lake, Laura was talking to Ronald. “So why have you made yourself so scarce?”

“I was hoping someone else would catch your eye.”

“I've got two eyes and they're both on you.”

Ronald smiled, “I was afraid it was like that.”

“But why?”

“Haven't you noticed a slight difference in our ages? I'm 35 and you can't be more than 22.”

“I'll be 23 next month.”

“Nonetheless when you were entering first grade I was a senior in high school. If I was worldly and cynical I'd say let's go. Instead I put myself in your place and anticipate your eventual disappointment.”

“I still want you.”

“I admit my desire is for you too. Let's put it to the test. Give it a month. We won't see each other. If it's real we'll find out.”

Laura pouted and slid over next to Ronald. They hugged and kissed. In the back of his brain was the thought that this was a complication he and Horace didn't need. But then, she was such a pretty complication.

Larry Sharp had noted the importance of Bea Windermere and the circle being formed around these two men who massaged the wealthy. They needed to be cultivated. Luis needed powerful friends with money to further his political career. Larry intended to ride the mayor's coattails all the way to the Washington. At home he had a framed picture of the White House press office. He'd look at it on his way out the door and proclaim, “Yes!”

Horace had a problem most businessmen would like to have, the need to expand. Four new Belporcino Massage Studios were set to open adjacent to tony enclaves in the LA area. They would not be enough. The society page had used one of Skip's photos which showed Roland DeFarge dancing with an attractive woman of a certain age. When it dawned on the smart set that they were looking at the Belporcino sculpted Betty DeFarge, Karen couldn't begin to handle all the calls for appointments.

Ch12 – Code A

Abe let Maija do the driving back to San Berdo so he'd catch his train to LA on time. Several times he almost said something about women drivers but he held his tongue. He just closed his eyes whenever a curve was coming.

The next day he was back in his office unaware that not far away a drama was underway that would provide unexpected information.

In Culver City there was a medical building in a rather unpromising part of town. The sign on the front wall said “Dr. William Blake and Associates, Private Clinic” There was a side entrance by the parking lot and an ambulance was parked there covered with a tarp. Thus, one could surmise, the ambulance was used infrequently. In a filing cabinet in the office were durable powers of attorney for health care for every one of the “employees” at Johnson Accounting and Belporcino Massage and other associated businesses in California. In each a “parent” or “sibling” had been appointed as decision maker if the person executing the document were rendered unable to make decisions regarding their medical treatment.

Also on file were papers partially filled in that contained blanks so that in a pinch one of 6 staffers at the various companies might also be a parent whenever a faux parent was needed. The ruse was pretty air tight. Team members had visited many of the ERs in the greater LA area to learn their procedures for a patient's release to an outside medical clinic.

The concern was that it was highly likely that any accident victim or person needing acute care would be taken to radiology for diagnostic imaging and also have blood drawn for tests. The garden variety tests wouldn't betray the alien nature of the patient but a CT or MMI scan or some of the more

specialized blood panels would raise eyebrows. It was the clinic's job to present paperwork and a "parent" if need be and retrieve the victim while he was doing time on a gurney in the hallway of an ER awaiting the triage supervisor.

Getting to this level of preparation for an incident that might never happen had taken 15 years of hard work. William Blake and Arthur Brown enrolled in pre-med and worked their way through the process. It was ironic, as they were both qualified to teach any course they took. Their knowledge could advance medical science by 500 years. They held their peace, assumed a low profile, did their internship and residency, and remained associated with the university while establishing and licensing their clinic. They were also co-authors on a number of important papers. They were well respected by their colleagues.

The luck of the draw didn't mesh with the plans. On a clear afternoon in Santa Monica, Ed Berlant stepped off the curb into a pedestrian crosswalk. A sedan, whose driver was making illegal communications in a moving vehicle, didn't even slow down. Ed's co-worker Jim Coffy saw the accident and initiated a Code A.

Beyond their control was the fact that in California it's the ambulance crew who decides which ER to go to. There were two possibilities and drivers have been known to head for one location and then change course en route depending on traffic and how serious the person is injured. That uncertainty cost the response team some valuable time.

In the end it didn't matter. A sheet covered Ed's face. He'd been DOA. An autopsy would be performed to establish that the cause of death was the accident. They considered body snatching but it would have had consequences no matter how cleverly done. All that could be hoped was that the obvious injuries from the accident wouldn't lead to an in-depth examination of the body. By its very nature an autopsy isn't cursory. Abnormalities would be discovered.

A pathologist would immediately see differences in the shape of the liver. But without actually doing sectioning it wouldn't be obvious that it was distinctively different. The internal structure of the pancreas was also different but externally it looked deceptively human. The largest organ of the body is the skin. It was there that there were major differences. What would have been subcutaneous fat in a human was in fact an organ that permitted the skin to both feed and infuse. It was most highly developed in the hands.

There were witnesses to the accident and the driver didn't dispute their reports. The only open question was whether the trauma of the accident had been the cause of death.

In Sacramento, in a room adjoining the governor's office, there was a massage table where Gretchen was trying to restore his Teutonic flesh. Even with both his wife and La Bonita for sex he was insatiable. Gretchen had bruises on her butt to prove it. It was better to control that urge while she could rather than submit and maybe give him a heart attack. She didn't want to be his terminator. Her massage had put him into a light sleep. She removed the towel covering his mid section and placed her hand below his navel much as Ronald had done with Laura. Soon he was breathing heavily and she repositioned the towel so she wouldn't get wet when his bratwurst exploded. About 30 seconds later, it was over. Getchen slipped out of her shorts and panties and was putting them back on as he awoke. Appearances are everything. He looked like Wotan after he'd scored with Brunhilda. She feigned looking coy and sheepish. He grabbed her and kissed her and her butt sustained another bruise.

When Marilyn next saw Abe her folder of documents on the Le's business interests had grown. She said, "For all the information I've gathered I really can't find anything that dates before 15 years ago. Beyond that there's really nothing about Horace and Ronald. It's like they just materialized."

At Johnson accounting several employees were disassembling the satellite dish and its related electronics and loading them onto a truck. Before noon it would be bound for Arizona.

Bea Windermere had just gotten off a link with her sister Kate who had given her a tongue lashing about Laura's involvement with Ronald. Laura had a photo taken by Skip showing her and Ronald on the dance floor at Bea's house. She was spending all her time mooning over it. Bea had protested that she really wasn't responsible for that match. But now as she mulled it over she brightened a bit and said to herself, "How perfectly delicious!" Little lights danced in her head and they spelled out, "Engagement Party".

Horace was pacing the floor. There was no way to plan against fate. Now it was time to pull the strings of his puppets. He started with the mayor and worked his way down to Abe Howard. Within two hours doctors Blake and Brown were looking over the shoulder of Coroner Bob as he examined Ed Berlant's body. Just then Coroner Bob was interrupted to receive a priority link. An autopsy wouldn't be necessary. The driver of the car had waived certain rights of evidence and accepted responsibility for Ed Berlant's death. Not that there was any doubt. Berlant's fatal injuries were pretty graphic. While the driver would take his legal lumps he was being well compensated to do so. Doctors Blake and Brown showed signs of palpable relief. The body would be turned over to the next of kin without delay. None of this was lost on Abe. The heat had been turned up very quickly. There had to be a reason.

Ch13 – Class Time

A resort south of Phoenix, AZ near Casa Grande built during the time when tech stocks were blasting past Pluto had been through a number of owners. The original concept was meeting rooms and accommodations for business seminars for which a princely daily rate would be charged. Before the golf course and tennis courts were finished the business plan was kaput. Even with lower rates they couldn't attract enough clients and were soon behind in their mortgage payments.

Now with a humbler business plan and a recent cash infusion, the resort was now styled the Casa Gabacho. Parked in their lot was a typical highway tourist bus. Inside one of the meeting rooms wearing shorts and gaudy shirts and doing their best to look like company stalwarts at a planning meeting were the students who'd recently departed Johnson's Accounting on West Shicker.

Today the subject was American culture and the presenters were Christi Elegans and Ed Coli. They had a portable holographic radiator for Holo Point presentations. Mister Spaghetti had tried to make Holo Point stick but everyone called them holies instead. Some used a 3 letter prefix before holies. The images could be made to spin, flip, and genuflect. The speaker used a hot dog sized control wand with built in pointer. Being yellow it was called a banana squirter. By pressing a button a spoken phrase could be texted and embedded within the hologram being displayed. This was considered far cooler than animated arrows and underlining from days of yor.

The program was under the auspices of the widely advertised University of Truckee. The presenters had various qualifications. The most important of which was they were out of work and needed a job

and therefore couldn't be too picky about salary. A few had actually been teachers but the rest had just enough chutzpah to make presentations.

The University of Truckee had started at a Sierra storefront used for kipping by a bunch of college students who couldn't pay the going rate for lodgings at Squaw Valley and Donner Summit. Then a ruse was needed to convince parents paying big education bucks that the trip to California involved academic work. In their real life, several of the founding grad students had campus jobs that involved hammering out articulation agreements. They knew all the right buttons to push. UOT was thus created and looked as legit on paper as any other young adult daycare center in the country. Some of the letterhead names actually had advanced degrees. The others at least had multiple degrees from a variety of diploma mills.

Even after the fish odor was detected many big name colleges that had recognized UOT felt that backing away would cause a major embarrassment. Rather than remain in a tenuous condition, UOT did the only thing they could do, expand. There was hardly a vacant office building in the 11 western states that hadn't hosted a UOT class. The curriculum was frozen into sets of lecture binders, class notes, and tests. The main campus remained at the original storefront in Truckee between a bait shop and a western wear store. The founders still reserved the right to kip there during ski trips.

Christi Elegans was a perky young thing with a vacuous stare, she had all the makings of a future real estate lady. A major part of her income went to hair maintenance. She followed the east coast rule of hair coloring which was never to let your part turn natural. The west coast was more relaxed about such things as no one believed anyone was a blond unless they were traveling on a Scandinavian passport. Christi was also a slave to the rag trade, a true designer label whore. Today she had on a yellow top with extended shoulders, a black skirt, and yellow stockings. She looked like a yellow jacket in search of fresh meat.

Ed Coli wore shoulder length black hair which didn't seem to be any more natural than Christi's blond. He had on an acid washed denim suit and a shirt with seersucker stripes. He looked like he might have made his last car payment by check kiting. His was not an occupation that oozed millions. About as good as it got for him was when he found a family style buffet for dinner. Two weeks ago he'd had a gig in Boise, Idaho. If there was a gay bar there he hadn't found it. He'd wanted to do stand-up but the closest he'd gotten to it was inserting his lame jokes into presentations.

All would have coasted right along. Christi and Ed reading off their graphics, the waiters refilling the coffee urns at regular intervals, the nibble table supplied and resupplied with muffins and cookies, and the supplicants suppressing yawns. Just one thing was wrong. When Ed opened the back of the lecture binder to extract the dime chip and put it into the slot on the projector, the number on the chip and the number on the binder pocket were different. It was a true WTF moment.

Ed punched through the first few images so he could see what they were. Damn, it looked like vacation photos from Las Vegas with a day trip to Hoover Dam. Obviously out of someone's camera. Christi was over getting coffee. Ed pulled her out into the hall and explained the problem.

“Can't we just cancel?”, she said.

He gave her a look of horror. “No. I ain't going back to selling Kirby's in Bakersfield. We're going to tap dance.”

“Tap dance?”

“Yeah, we're going to fake it. The dime chip for the afternoon is the right one. Now just blink your pretty eyes, let your mini skirt ride up and move those hips for all they're worth. We're going to need all the distraction we can muster.”

The morning was spent explaining American's fascination with gambling. The holographic images taken inside the casinos were so good you could almost smell the cigarette smoke. Ed had once flunked out of a probability class but remembered just enough to touch on odds and the fact that the casinos took an edge. For the player it was a gamble but for the casino it was always a sure thing. As long as they could bus in enough hags who played three slots at once, they were in fine shape.

There were a number of images of the casinos as seen from without. Many took the form of famous buildings or struck a particular style. But in reality they were little more than theme parks for slot machines. The only thing truly original about Vegas was speed bumps. They'd been invented there long ago to keep speeding cab drivers from killing the rubes. The next time you read about some outrageous crime, burrow down into the account and find out if the perpetrator had ever driven cab in Vegas.

Christi was thankful there wasn't any text. The course designers crowded too much of it into each image anyway. It couldn't be read past the second row. Anyway, Christi's contacts were giving her fits. She'd forgotten her eye drops.

Whenever Ed faltered, Christi flipped madly through her note binder and tossed out non sequiturs about Lincoln Center or Disney World as Ed punched through shots of Caesar's Palace. Just about the time he got to the replica of Michaelangelo's statue of David, sans fig leaf, she was blathering on about the Liberace Museum in Vegas. Their audience sat stunned. The waiters had to come and go quickly since they were having a hard time suppressing laughs.

Ch14 – Doctor Samuel White

Abe was set to go to Johnson Accounting and follow up on Maija's finding that Ralph Nixon had been there twice.

He had a personal problem to take care of first. He was feeling pretty constipated from his recent car and train travel. Once upon a time he would have gone to a pharmacy to get something. No longer. Stores routinely sell their shelf space to the highest bidder. The products with the biggest displays just have more push money. Finding something efficacious in an OTC product was unlikely. He remembered his dad telling him about an article on cold remedies in Consumer Reports. Those few OTC products with useful ingredients were not to be found in any of the local drug stores.

Dr. Samuel White was the first doctor educated as such to set up practice in the state of Vermont. The virtual Dr. Sam was named after him. The Daphne software that made Maija possible had been enhanced to create a physician whose specialty was home remedies for common ailments. The first time you used Dr. Sam you had to answer a number of questions to determine how serious your problem was. Your answers were analyzed to determine if you had the common sense God gave a squirrel. If you did, next time Dr. Sam would let you bypass many of those questions.

The drug companies and the OTC snake oil cartel hated Dr. Sam. But he was credited with saving many millions of dollars per year for consumers so, try as they might, they couldn't kill him off. To software writers, Dr. Sam was held up as the model of what good AI ought to be.

Abe said, "Maija, I think I need Dr. Sam."

"Okay boss."

A few seconds later Maija imaged a sixtyish man wearing a white smock seated at a desk. There was a bookshelf behind him loaded with medical books. He had a stethoscope hanging from his neck and the careworn face of a long life and extensive experience.

"Good morning Abe. What seems to be the problem?"

He looked so real and natural that Abe had no trouble accepting him and explaining his condition. After some discussion, Dr. Sam said: "You've probably got an upset colon. The reason could be almost anything. Here's what I'd suggest, it's a remedy I got from my grandmother. Try about 2 or 3 drops of grocery store peppermint extract in a glass of water. You just want enough of the extract to get a slight peppermint taste. If it's too strong, dilute it. It's a very gentle remedy and works in about 6 hours or overnight. Try that for a few days. If you still have a problem, let me know. We'll try something else."

Abe thanked Dr. Sam and Maija broke the link.

Over at Johnson Accounting security officer Steves was meeting with Horace and Gerald Johnson. Horace had his head in his hands.

"I think you must have been right about Ed Berlant but now we'll never know what set him off. I'll have to report our suspicions to that detective who was here the other day. I'm expecting him.

Steves, did you find anything else?"

"I'm afraid I did. We've got a bigger problem than murder."

Horace looked up at Steves. "How so?"

"Some of our people are looking beyond their personal needs and exploring other things they could be doing. While they realize they can make good money in the massage business it makes us guilty of a one-size-fits-all error. We're in danger of breaking up and dispersing just at the time when cohesion and control are important for building influence. Some of our people are on the verge of leaving."

Johnson looked concerned. Horace tapped his pencil on the table.

"I've been afraid of this. You think Berlant was one of them?"

"Yes. I think he knew Nixon from something he was involved in outside. Perhaps he'd said something

to him and then got worried about it. He was on probation at the time. I think he panicked.”

“That’s possible. I’m so worried that if we lose control something else will happen. Humans have always blamed outsiders for their problems. If we become stigmatized as "the other", we might all be killed. As our numbers increase the chances of something bad happening also increases.”

Both Steves and Gerald nodded their heads.

A few minutes later Abe came in and joined their meeting. He would have been surprised to see Horace there but, as a result of her research, Marilyn had recently told him there was a connection between Johnson Accounting and Belporcino Massage.

They admitted to him they’d just become aware that Ralph Nixon had been there a second time. That he’d signed in to visit Ed Berlant. When Abe asked about Berlant they explained he’d been killed in an auto accident. Abe asked to see Berlant’s cubicle. He asked permission to check his desk. There wasn’t anything of interest except a magazine in a side drawer. It was a sports magazine with a boxer on the cover.

Jo-Anne in the next cubicle had just come back from vacation that day and was shocked to hear Ed was dead. She told Abe that Ed had been into body building and she thought he might have worked out somewhere as he often came to work carrying a bag with a sweat suit in it. Abe made note of that.

Before going Abe asked for a photo of Berlant. They told him they would get one from his personnel file. It was a head and shoulders shot. Nothing striking about him; just an average looking office worker.

As he was getting into his car to leave, the phrase “desk jockey” came into his head. “Maija, where did I hear someone say “desk jockey”?”

“I’m pretty sure it was at Jack’s Bar. The owner had described one of the men as being a typical desk jockey.”

Abe said, “You’re right. I’m sure you’re right.”

He got a positive ID on the photo from the bar owner at Jack's. Then he was off to the Black Belt Bar. Lanky Davis was just putting on his jacket to head home when Abe came in. Abe showed him the photo.

"Yeah, I remember him. Just knew him as Ed. Came in to Matt's Gym kinda regular. At some point he and Ralph became friends. He paid me to act as his trainer a few times. Did some sparing with one of the regulars. He knew how to move his feet and duck a punch. But he seemed afraid to go on the attack. From his stance and body movements I'd say he knew martial arts from somewhere. Made me feel if he really connected he'd do serious damage. I haven't seen him since Ralph died."

Abe thanked Lanky and told him he'd be in touch.

He called Phyllis Nixon to find out if Ralph had ever mentioned anyone named Ed or mentioned a

friend at Matt's Gym. She wasn't sure. She'd think about it and let him know. He called Karen and got nearly the same response.

Bea Windermere had been mortified at having fainted at her own party so she'd become determined to exercise and try and get her blood glucose under control. After shopping for some stylish sneakers and an exercise suit she showed up at the Manteca gym. She had the money to build her own gym but she didn't want to buy equipment she'd never use. She gave a try to the stairstep machine and didn't like it. Next she got on the treadmill which she could manage at its slowest speed. She quickly found it tedious. Maybe she could do it and watch TV at the same time. The chrome weight lifting thing didn't do much for her either. In the end, with the help of her maid Clara, she showered and dressed and left.

The next day she tried walking her corgi about the gardens of her estate. It was ever so much more civilized. But she was going to miss seeing all those nice young men with their fabulous abs.. On the other hand she could still see them through the window when she went for her massage.

Ch15 Another Doctor

Doctor Monroe specialized in diseases of the rich. He hadn't started out to do that, but the need to pay for his medical school education quickly clashed with his youthful sense of idealism. In the end he did what his dad had advised and followed the money. He found a direct relationship between how much money his patients had and how much money he could earn. Surprise, surprise. From then on it hadn't taken rocket science to move up to a nice house and eat at stylish restaurants.

He found that the rich and the poor shared certain health problems. Given thirty years of a rich diet and alcohol and little activity, the rich fared no better than the poor who suffered from poor nutrition, alcohol, smoking, and general neglect. The only difference was that the rich could pay for all the tests and medicines and operations needed to keep going. As for their respective end-games in the last years of life, it was all the luck of the draw. When you've treated someone with a university education who was in great physical shape and had all the advantages in life but nonetheless died at an early age it gives you pause, especially when Alzheimers was the culprit. Doctor Monroe knew one woman with a modest education who'd been a store clerk all her working life. She lived to be 102 and kept her marbles all the way to the end.

Bea Windermere was on his mind. Diabetes plays out in different ways. Some can use diet and exercise to stave it off for years or decades. Others require medicines as soon as they are shown to have elevated blood glucose. Past a certain point insulin injections are required. To say who would go down which path was difficult. There wasn't any single marker that would tell you just how much insulin reserve a person had or when their body would no longer respond. It was important that the patient actively engage the enemy. Being passive never works under any medical circumstance.

Gringo Island in Los Angeles consists of the government buildings bounded by Alameda and Figueroa on two sides and by E 1st St. and E Temple on the remainder. That doesn't make it a rectangle. To calculate its area would make a nasty question on a trig final. Outside lies Mexico City del norte and on the other side of the Harbor freeway, Seoul, South Korea. Seated at a sidewalk cafe on Figueroa were La Bonita and Gretchen. They were sipping Mexican chocolate and chatting.

"Another bruise? Me too. Although He doesn't squeeze as hard as he used to.

Gretchen raised her eyebrows. "Are you complaining? The next time he does that to me he's going to get a barbell on his cajones."

"You wouldn't. He's just a guy getting older and trying to act young."

Gretchen said, "And what about you?"

"I get older too. You fix my looks but I still get older."

Gretchen looked puzzled. "So why do you do what you do? Why are you his lover?"

La Bonita put down her cup and thought a minute. "When I was a girl I loved rock stars and movie stars. Usually one gets over that but I never did. So here I am in my thirties, my clock ticking away, making love to a man I can't marry." She shrugged then changed the subject. "Are you here long?"

"Gretchen replied, "No, just through Tuesday. I have to see Horace and Ronald then it's back to Sacramento." She looked up and waved at a man passing by. He came over to their table. "Hi Bennie." It was Bennie Hermosa from the mayor's office. After 3 months of treatment Bennie was looking pretty good. Like most people in California politics he knew who La Bonita was. They exchanged greetings in Spanish. Bennie was a goodhearted soul, loyal to Luis Basu, and a hard worker. His eyes drank in La Bonita's charms. Although she was certainly no longer naive and innocent, she felt color coming into her cheeks.

Before Larry Sharp left the office he made a call on his cell phone. It rang a long time before it was answered. The voice that answered wasn't the one he'd expected. "Hi, this is Larry Sharp. Could you get Danny for me?" He waited almost a minute before a gravelly voice came on the line, "Hey word-man, how are you?" Word-man as his moniker went back so far neither of them could remember how it started.

Larry first met Alan Arkin Daniels (aka Danny) when they worked on a political campaign 15 years ago. At that time his hair was already shoulder length and his lifestyle unconventional. He had talent in math and a solid understanding of statistics and probability but would suffer no fools. Politics is full of fools. Danny went off to do music and writing but was forever broke. Larry could lure him back into campaigns. The work was, by definition, temporary. Danny had a masterful hand at analyzing poll results tempered by his own fieldwork. Candidates ignored him at their peril.

No one could coax Danny to do this full time. As he got older he just got more scruffy and more stubborn. He preferred doing janitorial work because, at the end of the day, there was nothing about the job that came home with him. His companion and co-worker was Milt Eccles, who had many skills. A few of them were legal. They'd toughed out some hard times together. Danny's only luxury was a cell phone so people could reach him.

"So where the hell are you guys?" Larry asked.

"We're back on Mt. Lee above the first L in the Hollywood sign."

"I thought you got kicked out of there."

"We did but yesterday Milt cracked the new combination lock on the chain going across the road."

"So I won't have to hike across the rocks off of Mulholland to get to you?"

"Correctamento. But I won't talk to you unless you fill that shopping list I called into your secretary."

Larry scowled. He'd happily pay Danny thousands of dollars for his advice but instead the guy derived some pleasure out of having his groceries delivered.

"Okay, you're on. See you at dinner time."

Larry drove over to Trader Juan's at Rancho Borracho. First he filled an empty case with six bottles of Two buck Carlos Shiraz and the remainder with Merlot. Next was a case of Dos X. Then he worked down the rest of the list.

Dr. Julian Black was, in the common parlance, a plastic surgeon. His office was down the hall from Dr. Monroe's office. He'd suffered for years as business was lost to that drug made from the botulism toxin. Before, there'd been good money in wrinkles. When the drug had been initially approved there was no information on long term effects. It was known that a person had to be re-injected at intervals. Now enough time had elapsed that a syndrome had emerged. In the press it was known as pruneface and to the more literary minded as the Dorian Gray effect. About the only known cure was to wear a paper bag over your head so people couldn't see your face. Dr. Black injected collagen which helped somewhat. He couldn't achieve the degree of relief available from Belporcino Massage. He'd investigated them thoroughly. They made no claims and did no advertising. Their original location at Rancho Borracho was booked three months in advance. He had to know their secret.

Abe was certain that Ed Berlant had killed Ralph Nixon. Lankey Davis had said he appeared to have martial arts skills. He called up Coroner Bob and the two of them met for coffee.

"Abe, the essential problem is that any kind of a blow would not have done the damage we found. The discoloration of the flesh suggest a thumb and index finger were applied to the carotids. The only way they could have been held there more than a few seconds was if Nixon was immobilized. Now imagine that you approach me from the front or the back. You are going to put your hand to my neck. That leaves you with one hand left and I've still got two. How do you put me out of action with your remaining hand? "

"Could he have been knocked out?"

"There was no evidence of a blow that would do that. We didn't find any drugs other than alcohol in his blood. While he had a reputation for becoming drunk after a few drinks, I doubt he would have passed out from the amount we found. "

Abe said, "What if there was a second assailant?"

"That might even things up but consider, Ralph was a wrestler. He'd have been pretty good at throwing a hold. I'd expect to see bruises and lacerations from the tussle if someone had held him."

Abe sipped his coffee before he spoke. "You said something about hydro-carbons back when you were examining his corpse."

Coroner Bob thought a minute. "Yes that's right. We did pick up something but not enough to identify." Maija spoke in Abe's ear and he reacted suddenly like he'd been kicked.

"Can we go back to your lab right now? I want you to take some samples from my stomach and hips and have you test them for hydro-carbons."

Ch16 Cash Card

The Inept Bureaucracy Act had weeded out those government agencies with big budgets, many employees, and no discernible impact on their mandated portfolio. The Immigration and Naturalization Service headed the list. The number of illegals in the country remained nearly constant. The number of downright dangerous people who had done all the paperwork and waltzed in the front door stayed the same. After folding it up and fumigating the marble halls, the INS mission was turned over to Internal

Revenue.

The U.S. had a declining population and the only way to prop up Social Security and Medicare was to have more tax payers. Immigration became a cash cow. To immigrate immediately required a \$100K bond which would be forfeit should you apply for any welfare program. To become a citizen required paying taxes on earned income for 5 consecutive years. If you missed paying one year the clock reset to zero. In the meantime you accrued no benefits.

The old slow path to immigration remained in effect but became much more difficult to pull off. The orange card that marked those here as bondsmen was known to all as a cash card. Needless to say the bondsmen were in hock to whomever paid for their bond and thus were indentured servants. A circumstance not much different than from the days of colonial America.

Any legal document signed by a bondsman had to be co-signed by his bondholder to be legal. In her research Marilyn turned up a number of bondsmen employed by Johnson Accounting or their related businesses. Try as she might she could not find anyone born in the United States. She also turned up adoptions of minor children by bondsmen. Horace and Ronald Le, and Gerald Johnson had co-signed many documents. They in turn were naturalized citizens who'd come here after posting their own bonds.

Larry Sharp kept a few extra shirts and slacks in his closet as well as other clothes in his bottom drawer for Danny and Milt. They would come to his apartment and shower, trim their facial hair, then go with him to whatever gig he'd was providing.

Today they were seated at a long table in the mayor's outer office going over raw poll data. Danny had his nose buried in a stack of computer printouts. Milt sat nearby eyeing the secretaries and the office safe. He soon lost interest in the safe, he wasn't into legacy tin cans.

Luis was on the phone and saying something far too candid. Larry was out of his chair and standing next to him trying to shove in the damping rods. "Louie, Louie!"

Without looking up Danny said, "Kingsmen 1963. I think they're still doing it at Beach Blanket Babylon." Larry didn't get it but Luis started to laugh. It was the all time classic sight gag. In San Francisco the curtains would open at the Club Fugazi. You'd see the French king in his royal robes with curled hair piled a foot high and dangling down below his shoulders posing for all he's worth. And then you'd hear Louie, Louie. Hard to believe its composer Richard Berry only got 750 bucks.

Later, Danny and the mayor were talking.

"Don't assume you have the Hispanic vote tied up. You'll carry much of it and maybe the majority. You'll need to meet with a lot of community groups and appear at public events to shore it up. The Indian businessmen are important too. Up in Silicon Gulch there are plenty of Indian entrepreneurs. They're a good source of campaign money.

When you get away from the major cities the remaining counties are just like red states. If you can campaign enough to increase your percentage in those counties by 5 to 10% it would divert the energy and funds of your opponent who could no longer take them for granted. Organize your supporters in those areas to get out the vote. It'll put the heat on.

Bennie Hermosa was sitting at the other end of the table taking notes. He had a dreamy look in his eyes. In his jacket pocket he had a piece of paper with La Bonita's cell-phone number on it.

Abe looked at the lab analysis of his skin. Maija had been right. He'd been to Belporcino only hours before he'd met with Coroner Bob. The samples taken from his skin were close twins to what had been taken from Ralph Nixon's body. He needed samples from just one other person to verify his suspicion that some chemical was involved during a massage.

When Abe had been a rookie his beat had included the produce district. It began at 2 in the morning. Trucks came and went all night. In front of each stall were open boxes with apples, grapes, pears, lettuce, melons and so on. If it had been a good night the stocks were depleted and the order came to sell the flash. That's what they called the boxes on display. They were supposed to be representative of the stock but they'd been cherry picked to look really good. Since then Abe realized a lot of things in the public eye were just the flash. The ordinary were the world's real stock in trade who got things done.

He was walking past a coffee shop when he spotted Milt Eccles sitting at the counter. He'd caught Milt fair and square once in what could have been a felony rap. Milt traded information for a plea bargain. It helped Abe with some otherwise dead cases. The DA reduced the charges and Milt got off for time served. Abe sat down beside him and ordered coffee.

Milt turned and said, "Hi Abe. Much nicer to see you on the outside than on the inside."

Abe asked him what he was doing now. Milt told him he had a gig in the mayor's office. That raised Abe's eyebrows but when he found out it was really Danny who had the gig, he understood.

"How are you at databases?"

"You must mean cracking databases. Which ones?"

Abe leaned over toward him and said "INS".

"Doing a little genealogy I suppose."

Abe smiled at him but said nothing.

"They're part of IRS now but they haven't integrated the databases yet. A twelve year old hacker could bust in."

"I've got a short list of names. They're all naturalized citizens. I just want to know their countries of origin. I'll owe you one."

"You could do this legit you know."

"To do it I need to make a case before the chief and then before a federal judge and I'm a little short on hard evidence. I need your research skills to see if I'm on the right track."

"Meet me in the computer room of the main library tomorrow at 2. Either I will or I won't have something. It's clean that way. No phone calls. No emails. No traceable files."

Abe had something else on his mind. Marilyn had been an occasional visitor in the past and now they were together most of the time. Which of them should give up their apartment? Were they ready to make it official? She hadn't said anything and neither had he. They'd reached a point of mutual trust. He'd found out about her visit to Horace. She'd exercised her right of "He's mine!" Well damn it, she was his. He thought of all the short and long-term relationships in his past. This was different. It's one thing to be on the prowl in your 20s but quite another to be alone in your 40s. He wanted a companion. Someone who was strong and steady. He didn't have to look too far to find her.

Bea Windermere had a massage from a nice young man named Michael. He had dark curly hair and was very handsome and muscular. He had a firm soft voice and Bea just melted. He touched her and she fell asleep and dreamed she had a 5.2 on the Big O scale. When she awoke and realized how very wet she felt, she couldn't stop blushing. As she was leaving she told Karen that if Horace wasn't available the next time, she wouldn't mind having Michael again.

Karen reached into her drawer and penciled another line on a tally sheet. That was 23 so far.

Out in the parking lot she ran into Abe. He was holding a jar containing cotton swabs. He had a favor to ask. Bea didn't know what it was going to be but at the moment she was inclined to agree to almost anything.

Ch17 Laughter

Sid Green was just coming back into the security office after a round of door knob rattling. His partner Julio was still out doing his half of the complex. After 10:30 at night there were only a few businesses open at Rancho Borracho and most of the offices on the upper floors had been closed since 6. He'd gotten an alert from the system when he was 100 feet from his office door. He looked on the tally board and saw there was a door open at Belporcino Massage on the second level of building 6. The tracker showed Julio was just leaving building 5. Sid linked to him and asked him to take a look. If it had been a legit entrance a cancel code should have been received within 30 seconds.

Julio linked back a few minutes later to say it looked suspicious. Might be burglars. Sid linked to the police station and made a report. He and Julio just kept their eyes open. They didn't do weapons. It would take the cops at least 10 minutes to get there. Sid checked the surveillance server for the nearest camera. He went back to a few minutes before the alarm had come in. He saw two men at the door. One was tall and looked like a business man. The other was short and rather unkempt. He was crouched down doing something to the lock on the door.

The cops took 12 minutes. Sid thought, "I should have told them I have doughnuts." They pulled up in front of his office and he led them to the building. They went up the stairs and Julio met them on the landing. Then they heard laughter coming from the open door. The tall man was unconscious on the rug and the short one was giggling uncontrollably. The Sergeant recognized him as Bruno, a local who'd been picked up before for breaking and entering.

Ronald and Laura were having dinner together at her townhouse. She did the cooking.

"I'm surprised you can cook."

"Me too. I wanted to be one of the idle rich but it didn't work out that way."

"How come?"

"Some in our family, including myself, have an allergy to gluten. They call it celiac disease. I have a mild case. If I was in Europe I could eat bread but here most of the wheat is the hard red variety which is high in gluten. Over the past 50 years the number of people in America with celiac disease has gone from 1 in 200 to 1 in 50. I can tolerate a little gluten. Others are less fortunate. Any gluten provokes a severe reaction. For purely personal reasons I taught myself to cook. There's only a few restaurants I can go to. I do a lot of Chinese food, hold the chow mien.

Ronald looked sympathetic. "I have a similar condition. I can't tolerate simple starches and sugars. Fruits and vegetables are fine. So much of the American diet consists of sugar, fat, and starch. It makes for a lot of fat people."

"But your business is slimming them back down again."

Ronald laughed. "Right now Horace is in Mississippi, the obesity capitol of the United States, signing leases and letting contracts to remodel space for studios in Jackson and Hattiesburg."

"So that leaves you to mind the fort."

"Well, I have help. There's a new man named Michael."

"My Aunt's mentioned him. I think she's in love."

"She'll have to get in line. Half the female clients are ahead of her. If he plays his cards right he can become a kept man. He told me he'd seen the movie Pal Joey so I think he's clear on the concept."

"And what about you?"

"Me? I'm just trying to keep out of the clutches of a very lovely but misguided young lady."

"And are you successful?"

"No. I've failed miserably."

"I'm glad to hear it." Laura looked pleased. "You know I love you and want you but I don't know anything about you. Where do you come from?"

"The simple answer is Canada. But actually my home is a place as close to you as the air you breath yet farther than the farthest most star."

"You're either being poetic, enigmatic or both."

Just then they were interrupted by a link tone.

"Damn, I thought I'd turned that off. I'd better take it. It's got a priority marker."

At that moment Abe and Marilyn were coming back to his apartment after having had dinner at a restaurant. Maija alerted Abe to the break-in at Belporcino massage. He apologized to Marilyn for an abrupt change of plans. Maija notified central that he was going to the scene.

Within minutes of each other Ronald and Laura and Abe and Marilyn arrived at Rancho Borracho. Ronald introduced Laura to Abe and Marilyn and then he and Abe headed for the stairs. There was an ambulance parked nearby and the attendants were bringing someone down on a stretcher. Laura saw his face and said, "I think I know who he is. He's the doctor who gave my mother a nose job. I'm think his name is Black."

The Sargent on the scene had already examined the unconscious man's wallet to check his ID. It was Doctor Julian Black.

Abe walked through the various rooms with Ronald and had him open drawers and cabinets to see if anything had been disturbed or taken. Ronald said everything was in order. Abe had been hoping to find some containers of chemicals that would identify that hydro-carbon signature the lab had found on himself, Ralph Nixon, and Bea Windermere. Aside from a first aid kit that contained alcohol and antibiotic cream, there was nothing.

The ladies had gotten into Ronald's car to stay warm in the cool of the evening. They were both girl friends in possession of a potential spouse. That gave them lots to talk about.

As luck would have it, Dr. Black was taken to LaBrea Memorial Hospital where he had full privileges. It was the elective surgery center of the elite. After 4 hours on a gurney in the hallway the triage nurse green lighted Dr. Black being wheeled into an examining room. They'd already taken his vitals three times. The consensus opinion was that he was suffering from an acute stress reaction which in common parlance is known as shock. It in turn had probably triggered some other underlying condition. He knew who he was. He didn't know where he was. And he was blank about what had brought him there.

Nurse Medea got out a hep-lock kit and struck a nice vein on the back of the right hand and taped it down solid. You never know about these shock cases. She started a sodium drip with a branch off the line to permit an injection should it be needed. He didn't object. As he was a doctor, that in itself proved he was sick.

After assaying his medical bennies they determined the hospital would be reimbursed for a CT scan and sent him down the hall to radiology. Had to pay for that damn machine somehow. He was a hundred watt guy dimmed to maybe 40 watts. Might have a brain tumor. He deserved the best. No test that they could stick to his insurance company would go undone.

Everything from tissues to the hep-lock had a barcode on it and was scanned. He'd a page and a half of itemized tests and gear applied to his account while he'd still been in the hallway. A typical quick ER in and out usually results in a 5 page bill. Twenty four hours in a hospital bed with staff enforced sleep deprivation required at least 20 pages single spaced. At 3AM they found a bed and admitted him. Thus began the routine of vital sign checks and blood draws punctuated by monitor alarms that rarely got reset. One could make a small fortune with alarms that only became audible when a nurse or doctor was in the room. Didn't do much good for the patient to hear them.

When Flame the orderly came in at 7AM he checked the census sheet for notables. Not seeing any he spotted Dr. Black's name and read the codes next to it. Might be a candidate for shock treatment. Flame loved to watch shock treatment. He liked Dr. Black. He'd fixed Flame's friend Steve up with a nice set of nipples.

Ch18 Horace Explains

When Abe met Milt at the library, Milt just pointed to the screen he'd created. As he paged down Maija recorded each screen image. For many the country of origin was Canada; for others what was known as East Germany prior to unification. Most of the place names meant nothing to Abe. He thanked Milt. Milt ran a program using the flash drive from his pocket. It turned the cache into scrambled eggs. The two of them adjourned to a coffee shop nearby.

Abe asked Milt if he'd ever heard of a guy named Bruno. After he'd described him, Milt said:

"Oh, yeh. He's been in and out of the government hotel more times than I have."

Abe told Milt about the break-in at Belporcino Massage.

"Must have been a pretty simple lock. Bruno's hands shake pretty badly. Plus he wouldn't have known how to foil a motion detector. I'm not surprised you got him."

"Does he know you?"

"I'm sure he does. We both were custodians in the county jail at the same time."

"Well Bruno's seriously up a tree. I thought a familiar face might help bring him down."

"Abe, you want me to visit him in the bucket?"

"No. He's at the county hospital getting shrink wrapped."

"That's better. Okay, I'll go with you."

Noah and Clara had been mapping out the gardens and designing a walk with signs posted every tenth of a mile. Bea had managed to do two tenths after 10 days of trying. Now she was attempting to get up to half a mile. Clara couldn't see why they needed to do this.

"Who treats you more kindly? The master or the mistress?"

"The mistress of course."

"And are the master and the mistress in the best of health?"

"I'm afraid they're not."

"Well, I assume you wish to remain employed. Therefore the health of your mistress is very important."

If she died and the master lived, would he keep you on?"

"Oh, I hadn't thought about it like that. Now where does the next sign go?"

"I think just before that clump of lavender."

The governors, the senators and representatives were all in a froth. The Competence In Government amendment to the Constitution was making its way state by state and looked like it would be adopted. There was already a federal law that required those running for office to post the results of a Wassermann test. The amendment would require anyone running for state and federal office to take the far more comprehensive Bates test that detects a marker for brain lesions caused by syphilis. This was particularly worrisome to those from safe districts who'd been in office many terms and held powerful committee posts.

The amendment wouldn't have gained traction but for the antics of younger congressmen with their mistresses, various girl friends, prostitutes and compliant interns. The public was no longer amused by public servants who swore chastity yet cavorted with abandon. Based upon the peculiar logic and behavior of certain senior members of congress it became obvious they'd reached the age when syphilis hits the brain. An inspection of the budget and its earmarks led one to conclude that had happened to any number of them.

No politician could openly be against the amendment but privately how to kill it was the first topic after the scotch had been poured.

Laura felt anxious over her relationship with Ronald. It wasn't something he'd said. It was more what he hadn't said. Marriage is more of a change than one bargains for. Nothing is ever the same afterward. But in the case of Ronald her intuition told her she would be crossing an invisible threshold after which there could be no turning back.

So there it was, desire and danger. She thought of the young men in her life. How unformed and green they were. Perhaps one of them would make a good husband but it would be pure luck picking the right one. She couldn't commit to any of them. Ronald was different.

She opened her sliding terrace window and looked out into the lights and heard the sounds of traffic. A voice spoke to her.

"I sense some music would be appropriate."

It was Kasey her virtual music master.

"Yes Kasey. I'd like some music. How about Duke Ellington?"

"With Duke you also get Billy Strayhorn."

Laura smiled. Her dad had told her about the two of them. So different and yet so complimentary.

Kasey played "Never No Lament" and then the vocal of it that emerged later, "Don't Get Around Much Anymore". Her virtual butler poured her a glass of Merlot and she sat there and listened, a dreamy look in her eyes.

Danny and Milt had their bed rolls at Larry's apartment. They were having a beer when Larry came

home with a pizza.

"Hey Wordman, where you been?"

Larry seemed somewhat flustered. "At another damned cocktail party. Luis was just saying anything that came into his head. I thought I'd explode."

Danny said, "Listen up Wordman. You worry too much. People like Luis just as he is. Remember Reagan? Half of what he said came from the plots of old B movies. Even when the press picked up on it it didn't matter. People liked him. He was the Teflon president. Luis has a lot of that going for him. Don't worry about every speech or conversation being pitch perfect."

Milt popped open a beer and handed it to Larry.

"I guess you're right but I'm just so uptight about him doing something and blowing his chances."

Danny frowned. "His chances? Give me a break. It's your chances and you know it."

Larry started to say something but just loosened up and started laughing. He knew he couldn't BS Danny.

Danny asked Milt, "What happened with the cop?"

"Abe and I went to the county hospital psych ward to see Bruno. Boy was he nuts. Kept on raving about seeing guts and brains and eyes moving about without a body. He must have done some new drugs since the last time I saw him."

Larry asked, "When did he start having these delusions?"

Milt said, "I think it was right after he picked the lock at Belporcino Massage."

At 7 o'clock that evening there was a meeting between Dr Black and Horace at Belporcino Massage. He was represented by the law firm that Marilyn worked for and she was dispatched as an observer. The goal was to convince Horace not to press charges. Without betraying his intentions in the matter, Horace did a bit of probing.

"Why did you want to break in here in the first place?"

Black frowned, "I wanted to find out how you manage to remove wrinkles. What apparatus you were using. That sort of thing."

Horace smiled. "You could have just asked. I would have told you."

Black was stunned. "You would have told me?"

"Yes, but it wouldn't have done you much good."

"But why not. I'm a surgeon. If I knew the technique I could do it."

Horace folded his hand and looked at Black and at Marilyn. "Why don't I tell you what we do. Then you can judge."

"I'm afraid the story is long. Do you have the time?"

They both nodded.

There was a bowl of fruit on the desk. Horace picked up a peach.

"This is a freestone peach which was developed by Luther Burbank. If you were to visit his home in Santa Rosa you'd see a cactus without thorns and a small sampling of the thousand of varieties he developed simply by selecting traits and keeping the best of each succeeding generation. He was a genius.

Where you out in the mall when the shoppers were about you'd have seen many varieties of dogs whose traits were selected. But all of them can be traced back to the wolf.

This type of selection has been going on for ages. Yet Darwin shocked the world by pointing out in the Origin of Species that it also took place naturally. Such traits as conferred even the tiniest advantage generally got passed on. And so it has been for man.

If we go back as little as a hundred years the preservation of food was done mainly by smoking and salting. The refrigerator was one of the major accomplishments of the 20th century. Prior to its invention the most likely source of illness was contaminated food.

Going back several thousand years the limbs of living animals were cut off for food. The living animal was the means whereby the rest of the meat was kept fresh. We know this was being done because the bible forbids it in the book of Deuteronomy.

Both Marilyn and Doctor Black were beginning to wonder where Horace was going with this ramble. But then he got to his point.

"Suppose the DNA dice were thrown and the settings of the RNA switches were such as to produce a mutation that gave one the ability to extract fat from an animal without killing it. That is to say the ability to mobilize and extract fat through the skin of the animal. Would that confer a survival advantage? Would the trait be preserved into the future?"

Dr. Black sat up straight in his chair. "Why that's impossible."

"And suppose further", Horace went on, "That the process could be reversed and the fat could then be infused into different tissue. Using a human example, say the fat from the stomach or thigh being transposed to a wrinkled face to flesh it out."

Marilyn made a note to herself. Black just shook his head.

Horace looked directly at Black and smiled, "Do you suppose you could adopt that technique and make use of it in your practice?"

Ch19 Carlos Comes to Town

Abe didn't know what to make of what Marilyn had said about the conversation with Horace. Was he

putting her and Dr. Black on? It looked like he intended not to press charges against Dr. Black. A letter would be forthcoming to the DA on that question. The rest of it was frankly beyond anything he'd ever heard before.

Abe had a call from Carlos Zeit saying he'd be in LA for a few days and they'd arranged a lunch date. Presently he was testifying before a legislative committee in Sacramento. Not satisfied with having sucked all the classified ads out of newspapers, the internet news sites were seeking the status of general circulation newspapers with regard to legal advertisements. The newspapers were naturally fighting back and Carlos had been called in as an expert witness.

When Sid Green, the security guard at Rancho Borracho, reviewed the security camera file he didn't noticed that two minutes after the two men entered Belporcino Massage that a tall woman had exited from the second door to the suite further down the same hall. An easy mistake. That door was more in the shadows. But in marking the segment to be saved he missed her departure entirely. That was a shame. He would have liked what he saw. Her beauty was like that often depicted in Grecian art. That is to say she had ample meat on her bones as opposed to the heroin chic models used by the rag trade.

Her name was Cozbi. She was the one whose partial appearance sans flesh had caused Dr. Black to pass out and sent Bruno off into hysterics. Ronald was in charge of training her. He regretted she'd come out of the shadow world at such an inopportune time. It was something they'd avoided doing in the United States because a paper trail had to be created after the fact. It was much preferred to come out of the shadow world at safe houses in thinly populated communities in Europe and Canada.

Ronald dimly remembered his own time in the shadow world, neither here nor there, neither alive nor dead, just waiting for the moment of what was really another birth. He gave Cozbi credit that having handled the trauma, she quickly sized up the situation. Fortunately she found the clothing laid out for her and had made a quick exit. Ronald would have been there to receive her but for faulty communications. She'd been expected to transit the following evening.

It so happened that Laura had come up into the reception area late one afternoon hoping to see Ronald while waiting for her Aunt Bea. Instead she saw Ronald and Cozbi. A boy scout can use dry bark and a bit of tinder and the friction of sticks rubbed together to start a fire. With a woman just the sight of another woman in the presence of her lover will suffice. Ronald realized he'd better get Cozbi trained and posted to Sacramento if he knew what was good for him.

When he took Laura out to dinner that evening she was like a coffee pot that was done speculating but nonetheless still burped an occasional bubble into it's glass dome.

Abe and Carlos had selected a restaurant near the Hall of Justice. When he walked in he was surprised to see Carlos with Gretchen and at another table Bennie Hermosa with La Bonita. Carlos had met Gretchen in Sacramento and they'd hit it right off. La Bonita had had a reality attack. Good safe steadfast Bennie was looking much better than a governor headed for his last hurrah. Plus there was the fact Bennie liked to hug and kiss and so far wasn't the pinching kind. Maija spoke softly in Abe's ear and suggested, as this wasn't a guy fest after-all, that Marilyn should be invited to join them. Abe acceded to her superior machine wisdom and Maija linked to Marilyn's office.

The talk at the table was all about the mosquito attack that had taken place the day before in Sacramento. The old pol known to one and all as Senator Boondoggle had been the target.

Every so many years the military gifts the world with some new weapon system which gives them a slight edge until everyone else copies it after which the world becomes an even more dangerous place than ever before. In Afghanistan, drone aircraft had been used equipped with various weaponry. They quickly added smaller drones as spy-craft. The initial procurement contract was coded MSQT and someone coined mosquito from it. From then on small drones were known as mosquitos.

Three years ago on a steamy August day in Washington, DC, a mosquito with a wingspan of less than 4 feet handily sailed along at treetop level and flew into the entrance of the capitol building and set off several ounces of C5 explosive killing three tourists and a guard leaving a hell of a mess. That led to collective sighs in the halls of Congress and in the labyrinths of the Pentagon when all realized they'd opened Pandora's box once again.

The Sacramento attack was really ingenious. The drone was modeled after a bi-plane crop duster. If you've ever driven down the Central Valley during growing season, it's hard to stay on the highway when one is flying over nearby fields. Watching the pilot's insane moves is far more interesting than watching the car ahead of you. As a crop duster is maneuverable so too was the drone that pursued Senator Boondoggle across the capitol lawn. It flew around him like an angry hornet before dumping its load of pepper spray and flying off. They think it might have been homing in on his cell phone but they weren't sure. Later the same day the drone made a repeat attack, this time on a lobbyist, and doused him with really cheap whorehouse perfume. The press loved it.

Marilyn joined them and while she and Gretchen were talking Abe leaned over to talk to Carlos. The ambient noise was such that neither pair could hear the other. Abe told Carlos he knew Gretchen but didn't know anything about her. Carlos said he'd asked her where she'd come from. She'd told him she was an alien from another world. Carlos didn't even raise an eyebrow as she said this, after all this was Los Angeles.

In Sacramento the Governor had grudgingly accepted Cozbi as a replacement for Gretchen. But to Cozbi's credit, a week into the job her butt had no pinch marks. Despite her more voluptuous figure she'd triggered an emotional chain reaction in the man. On the very couch that had received more than its share of starlets and senator's wives, he lay with his head in her lap as she soothed his furrowed brow with her graceful hands and sang lullabies to him in German. The frightened little boy inside the hulking figure of a man had found mom again.

Cozbi in turn was learning what most Belporcino employees already knew. The fat of the rich was a delicacy. While a chemist might discern gross markers that separated good wine from bad, it took a trained pallet to do the fine grading. Likewise, to one whose diet isn't fat, all fat is the same. When you ingested fat deposited on a body from a diet of high quality beef and fine French sauces, organic produce, Fifty dollar Cabernets, and Viennese pastry, it was just as good as what had produced it. But fat from a body fed on high fructose corn syrup soft drinks and artificially created snacks, and pepperoni pizza could drive one's face into contortions.

When lunch was over, Abe asked Marilyn if she had a few minutes before she went back to work. He took her by the hand and they walked into a nearby government building and got on the elevator. They went up to the 2nd floor. He gave her a smile and said, "Will you?" Then she realized they were walking in the direction indicated by a sign that said "Marriage Licenses". She threw her arms around him and they embraced. "Oh yes Abe, most certainly yes."

Maija was thrilled all the way down to the root folder of her Daphne software. If that was being anthropomorphic so be it. After all a woman is a woman is a woman.

Ch20 - An Entertaining Death and A New Beginning

The next Tuesday afternoon Gretchen showed up for an appointment with Dr. Black. She carried a folder with a copy of a letter written by Horace to the DA's office in which he indicated he'd met with Dr. Black and didn't want to press charges. Dr. Black was pleased when he read the letter. How he'd worked himself into a froth and hired that incompetent Bruno still baffled him.

Since that misguided night he sometimes woke up from sleep in a cold sweat. It reminded him of when he was a boy and had nightmares of being pursued by some nameless formless thing. That had passed. He hoped this too would pass.

Gretchen volunteered that she could show him the technique that Horace had revealed to him. He was intrigued. Minnie, his rather maxi receptionist, had pounds to spare and was willing to donate some of them to science. Gretchen came by once a week and worked on Minnie as the doctor watched. He thought if he could do what she was doing he could almost throw away his scalpels.

Sensing his intense gaze, she asked him what he was thinking and he told her. She said it might be possible for him to do just that. He was puzzled as he thought it could only be done by one with special genetic traits. She told him he could acquire the ability from her. She could impart it to him but would have to keep renewing it. His hands would become like her hands. She warned him, should he wish to proceed, to expect a marked change in his appetites.

Maija alerted Abe to a message from dispatch that he was needed to investigate a death in Porcino Nuevo. The body would be removed shortly and he was to meet the officers on the scene along with Coroner Bob.

Porcino Nuevo was resented by the residents of Belporcino just as Belporcino was resented by the residence of of Porcino Viejo. It was the classic case of older, newer, and newest money. Porcino Nuevo consisted of some of the worst considered McMansions on the planet. Money and taste didn't combined any better than oil and water.

The house in question had been voted the one most likely to need a massive planting of ivy and the sooner the better. It belonged to Albert Goniff. His father Big Tony had been a lobbyist for the tobacco industry and young Al had become acquainted with two legged pond scum and its money while he was still in diapers. When a young man he'd become his father's partner at Goniff and Goniff. When tobacco began to bleed millions in law suits they'd switched sinking ships and established a praisery for patent pill makers and the health insurance cartel. They knew how to place the odd ten grand on capitol hill where it would do the most good.

Al had masterminded the scheme of using medical hacks to write glowing papers about products and procedures while paying real doctors to put their names on them. He had one writer who'd wax eloquent over the efficacy of a product based upon totally imaginary test data. Then there were the out of work actors he used effectively to propagandize against single payer health insurance. Goon squads were always available to break up any public meetings that threatened the monopoly.

When his dad finally slid down the express coal chute to Dante's inferno, Al carried on. He'd been an apt student of his father and kept on raking in the chips. But now, suddenly he too was sailing across the river Styx without a paddle. He'd been the victim of a most bizarre accident.

The public, businessmen and congress had been trying to reign in health care costs for decades but without results. The health care cost curve always lofted above that of the economy. It was a mystery. But to a forensic accountant it was an open book. It was exactly the curve you'd expect when the mob takes over a business and skims the profits. Books had been written about the handle in Vegas versus the income reported for tax purposes. No one had looked for the mob in health care but it was there.

The typical medical practitioner was getting a pittance per office visit. Surgeons retired early because they weren't even breaking even. Good doctors were forced into group practices or threw in the towel and worked for HMOs because they couldn't cover their office overhead from what they were getting in insurance reimbursements. The bill for health insurance kept going up and up. The money had to be going somewhere. And it was.

Al had been to industry gatherings at Vail where seminars were conducted on slimy new ways to deny claims to policy holders and also stick it to doctors and hospitals using disclaimer type so small as to make the fine print all but invisible. A more sinister group never hung on any gallows. Turf wars broke out. One insurance administrator was blown up in his sports car as he left the parking lot of his country club. Another had both wings blown off his private jet.

DAs were smelling blood and Al realized he knew too much. Twice over a three week period he'd found a bullet taped to his car's windshield when he got in. He was running scared. The alarm system at the house was on full time.

He'd bought a semi-automatic pistol. It hadn't been a great idea. Either you're into guns or you aren't. Having one around was dangerous if you didn't understand and respect firearms. Al was a classic newby.

He'd been watching a movie in his den while loading an ammo clip. He decided he'd like an espresso and headed for the kitchen. One of the hallmarks of a McMansion was gratuitous level splitting. Up two steps here and down two steps there. He was coming down steps into the kitchen with the gun in one hand and a box of ammo in the other. He was wearing cotton sox and no shoes when he stepped onto the kitchen linoleum. The Maxy-Waxy machine had waxed, buffed, and polished it a few hours before. Cotton sox met freshly waxed linoleum and Al went flying. The gun flipped into the air, the butt hit the stone counter edge and fired nailing him in the upper arm. The bullets littered the floor and the carpet in the adjoining room. Al was sore and bleeding. He sat up and began to take stock of the situation. Just then the I-Suck robotic vacuum cleaner came on the scene, drew in some bullets from the carpet and administered a coup de grace with a shot right to his heart.

It would have taken forever to figure out this sequence had it not been for a recording from the security camera system. The cops played it back again and again for each new comer and all had a healthy laugh at the expense of the deceased.

When the word got out of Al's death it was time for others to sweat. His closest associates knew there were at least two caches of documents with enough of the goods to give any DA a slam dunk. To whom had he revealed their secret location?

Laura had been feeling rather off. She couldn't face breakfast anymore. On the other hand she found herself salivating when she saw one of her chubby cousins at a party. What was going on? She picked up a couple of boxes at the drugstore and came home. Time to pee on a strip. Both trials yielded solid

lines. When Ronald came by that night she told him she had something to tell him and he'd better be seated. His reaction wasn't what she'd expected. He just sat there a bit and considered the news and then he broke into a broad smile and hugged and kissed her. "I wasn't sure it would be possible. You can't possibly know how important this is." Cryptic as usual. By God she knew how important it was. She was going to be a mother.

Ronald took her hand and asked if she'd like to take a drive. There was much he had to tell her. "There are two doctors I want you to see right away." Laura said, "But I have my own doctor." Ronald replied, "Yes you should see your doctor too. But more is at stake than you realize. You'll need special attention."

Hours later, when she was alone again, she stared at herself in her dressing room mirror thinking, "What have I gotten into? I never even suspected. What will my baby be like? How did he put it? The first child of a new species. It seemed like a sort of lab experiment and she was the white mouse. Her joy at having Ronald's baby was tinged with a fear of the unknown and the unknowable. In addition she would be privy to their world. She would be the only human being to know who Ronald was. Who they all were.

Sleepless, she stared out into the array of lights that belonged to a world that was no longer alone yet didn't know it.

Ch21 - A Plastic Wedding

Not only had the lack of water reduced the excesses of Los Vegas but even those casinos that were left were mere shadows of their former selves. Buildings 20 and 30 stories tall had closed off their upper floors to save on utilities. It was pretty rare to fill such floors as were left. It wasn't so much that people had given up on gambling as it was that the cost to make the trip was no longer trivial. In the countries adjustment to reduced circumstances the stupid had died off first without leaving progeny to flock to the casinos or play the lottery.

One afternoon Laura and Ronald made the trip and checked into the Emerald City, which was modeled on the Oz stories. The payroll for midgets in costumes had been cut so you were lucky if you saw the Cowardly Lion, the Scarecrow, or the Tin Woodman. You never saw them at the same time. One actor played all the parts with only a break for his costume change and make-up.

The casinos still had wedding chapels. A happy couple with their guests could make their vows and be playing slots within the hour. Nothing brings joy to the heart so much as watching a bride and her bridesmaids playing the dollar machines.

It was to one of these chapels that Ronald and Laura repaired. The paper work was quick and the ceremony quicker. All that's needed is for someone with the legal authority to pronounce you man and wife. All the other stuff is either traditional or window dressing. In the time of the biblical patriarchs a couple simply entered a tent in the presence of two witnesses and thus were wed. Today you could have an Elvis impersonator sing "Love Me Tender" but it would cost extra.

To Laura a wedding was a wedding. She'd seen true spectaculars costing hundreds of thousands of

dollars. They never guaranteed a happy outcome. In fact the reverse seemed to be true. She also knew that her parents were suffering from some financial distress at the moment. While her mother would berate her for eloping, her father would probably pour himself a double scotch first chance he got. There was also the more practical matter of having some parental financial support in setting up a household versus blowing it all on a big wedding.

She didn't bother with a wedding gown. She wore what was to her a shmatteh. To other women it was a stunning dress. The only thing in the world she wanted was Ronald. She felt her youth and her obsession with the man. With a child on the way she knew she was in for a crash landing with reality. Like a moth who sees a flame, she couldn't help herself. The night before, Kasey, her robotic music master, had played Noel Coward singing "A Room With A View". In it was the line, "Poor little rich girl, don't drop a stitch too soon."

They ate at a restaurant in the hotel and shared a bottle of champagne. Trout, asparagus, and new potatoes suited them both for dinner. After breakfast in the morning they headed back to LA. The thought of spending any more time in a casino than could be helped was their common denominator.

As predicted, her mother had a hissy-fit but her father had a hard time suppressing a relived smile. The jungle drums had been heard by her aunt who offered to host a reception. Bea issued a call to arms and soon caterers and ice sculptors and society orchestras, and set designers, and lighting directors were on the march.

Engraved invitations were taken around by Noah, her chauffeur, to the most important families. God forbid they should have to open an envelope that had been in the common post. A team of servants went to work polishing the silver. A working floral clock near the front gate, originally slated for the following spring, was installed practically overnight. A back-hoe and crew arrived to plant two full sized royal palms on either side of the driveway. After 6 days of intensive labor, Bea saw that it was good and rested.

The caterer making the wedding cake consulted with Yahahkov Kuh-Shoo regarding the top layer of which the bride and groom would cut and eat a piece as is the custom. He would oversee its creation. It would contain no wheat. The celiac community often benefited from recipes developed over the centuries for use during Passover.

A far less ostentatious gathering was held at Johnson Accounting so Laura could meet her new extended family. That afternoon Ronald and Laura met with Horace in his office and he told her why they were so excited she was pregnant. Horace was no better than Ronald at explaining their origin except by simile and metaphor. The physics were vague at best. To think of the multi-verse as a daisy with each petal its own universe was perhaps too simplistic. Their penetration of the shadow world where time and space were barely abstractions had been accidental.

Their world had suffered a textbook case of catastrophic failure well known to biologists. Population had increased, resources were sufficient, but space was finite. The outcome was always the same whether the subjects were fruit flies, mice, or humans. After peaking there was, for a variety of reasons, a drastic population decline from which no recovery was possible. They could go on with their depleted gene pool for perhaps another century. Then inbreeding would take its toll and in a few more generations they would be no more. Transit through the shadow world to a parallel universe was their only possibility. Even then, finding a species sufficiently similar to permit mating was a long shot. Laura was feeling a bit less like a bacterium on a petri dish and more like a pioneer.

For Abe and Marilyn it was another trip to city hall. This time to be wed before a judge with Carlos and Gretchen as witnesses. Then Carlos asked Abe for a favor. It came as a total surprise. Carlos and Gretchen got married too with Abe and Marilyn as witnesses. Abe had thought Carlos would live out his days alone. They celebrated at a nearby Italian restaurant and while their brides talked, Carlos told Abe a most amazing story.

Carlos and Gretchen had been walking down Flower street and this guy came out of an alley with a gun. "He was concentrated on me with a demand for my wallet but Gretchen forced his hand down with such speed my heart was in my throat. Her hand was wrapped tightly around his wrist and he started screaming and dropped the gun. I thought his eyes would pop out of his head. Then he collapsed on the pavement like a rag doll. I thought to myself either she's one hell of martial arts master or she really is an alien from another world. After the cops carted our assailant off I proposed to Gretchen on the spot. Come what may, I knew our life together wouldn't be dull."

Abe didn't know what to make of Carlos' logic in picking a mate but he was more certain than ever about how Ralph Nixon had died. Those hands that so cleverly removed fat could also kill.

Danny had been out among the people to ascertain Luis Basu's chances if he ran for governor. His appraisal was that "former movie star" wasn't enough. The public wanted someone who was going to do something. It would require a bold move. Luis was willing to take chances.

The following day he held a press conference about an initiative petition he was sponsoring to modify the California constitution. Some history was needed. The California legislators had been bought and sold by major monied interests of which the railroads headed the list. Hiram Johnson, heading a reform ticket, became governor. To insure the public would always be able to bypass the legislature, the initiative petition was made law. But subsequently special interests had perverted it. Paid canvassers circulated petitions and quite a collection of junk was added to the California constitution.

The initiative petition in question tackled super majorities. Much of the work of government was hamstrung by the need to have at least 66% of the legislature agree to pass a budget. There were plenty of other examples. Luis specified in his initiative that no required majority could be set higher than that given by the voters when it passed. Thus if an initiative got 53% of the vote it couldn't require more than 53% of the vote regardless of its language.

Danny had one more up his sleeve, bond issues. The public was always being asked to approve bond issues for special purposes. The state was burdened by debt. In addition Luis proposed that no bond issue could be put to the voters unless the state had a budget surplus for the last 3 out of 5 years.

Now it was up to Luis to travel the state and use his considerable charm to convince voters he was right and also to fluff up his chances for running for higher office.

Meanwhile all of the servants were gathered out on the lawn cheering Bea Windermere as she broke the half mile barrier in less than 20 minutes. She wore a very stylish track suit by an Italian designer and her water bottle was styled after an Etruscan vase.

Ch22 - Roland deFarge

Every politician hits the money trail. Today Luis Basu was meeting with Roland deFarge who was

wealthy but more importantly was something of a king maker. Approval by Roland would open up a lot of checkbooks. Danny had to practically sit on Larry to keep him from intruding. "Look Wordman, there comes a time when the candidate has to start his own fires. He's a big boy now. Cut him some slack."

Roland liked Luis. He'd been measured in his response to crisis. He didn't quickly retrench from a position. He was fairly spontaneous and that's important with the public. Today Roland wouldn't make a decision. Luis had made his pitch and Roland had listened. Now they were in the deFarge sitting room having coffee and the conversation was less formal but nonetheless probing.

"What would you say you've learned out of being mayor of Los Angeles?"

Luis frowned, "I'd say the title is nice but it doesn't confer much power. The power has to be created with a lot of jaw boning. In that regard it's a lot like moving up in the pecking order at the studios. Nothing was ever just handed to you. You have to go after it. I recall Brando paying for his own screen test for "The Godfather" and having Coppola direct it. Amazing hutzpah, but he got the part."

Roland gave a dry laugh. "What have you learned about the limits of government?"

"I think the most important thing is how little discretionary money is available. To expand one program you must curtail another. It's very zero sum. Building a new government building at the expense of keeping the sewers repaired is crazy."

"How are you at fending off jackals?"

"I take it you mean the lobbyists and special interest groups. I've done okay but I need to be better at it. One of my staffers has been building up a database so I can understand who they are, what their power-base is, and how likely they are to be helpful or disruptive. Some have money and teeth and the rest are all noise and gums."

Roland smiled.

"Let me ask you a question Mr. deFarge. You've done well for yourself. What have you seen that others have missed? How do you size up where you want to invest."

Roland motioned to his butler who brought in a carafe of fine brandy and the brandy snifters required for its proper consumption. He swirled it around as did Luis. Each had a bit and warmed to the liquor. Roland said, "I suppose you've heard of Warren Buffet and perhaps of Graham and Dodd. What they bought had to be at the right price based upon the present value of future projected earnings. No chasing after growth stocks or initial public offerings. They were classic traders. While I don't compare myself to them I'm like them in that I have to see a return from an investment rather than just have a vague hope it will do okay.

The market is very much like a roller coaster. It goes way up and way down. A few get out at the top, most get out at the bottom, but many who do stay on find themselves back where they started. Meanwhile the commissions and other fees the investor has paid for the ride to nowhere have bought new sports cars and personal jets. I swear the motto of brokers who talk you into trading is "Churn baby churn."

A few stocks do well and enjoy a big run up. But the price is all froth. Investors desert quickly at the least sign of bad news. My ability to predict price moves is no better than a coin toss. I stick with value. There are times in the market when I move into bonds when they are unloved. I go back into equities after the inevitable blow-off and pick and chose the best values. I'm a realist, not a dreamer. I've never believed "It's different this time." In short, to make money you must be positioned so as not to lose money. It's all about risk."

"It sounds like politics."

"I guess it is in some ways. You have to keep your focus and ignore the meaningless noise."

Horace, Dr. Monroe, and Bea Windermere had had a meeting months before in which Horace had laid out the limits of what Belporcino Massage could do for her. The problem was skin elasticity. It declines with age. It can only stretch and shrink so many times before it fatigues. Horace was glad for her business but agreed with Dr. Monroe that she had to take matters in hand.

It had the effect of sobering Bea up. She started taking exercise seriously and was building up her stamina. In weight loss it's small things done over long periods of time that count. Dr. Jean Mayer at Tufts University had coined a phrase concerning those who gained and lost and gained and lost. He called it, "the rhythm method of girth control". Better to set a steady course and stick to it.

By the time of the reception Bea was down 15 lbs and proud of it. She was walking a mile a day and had curtailed many of her snacking habits. Her blood glucose excursions were greatly curtailed. Dr. Monroe told her if she kept up both diet and exercise that she might overcome her bodies insulin resistance. It hadn't built up in a day and it wouldn't go away in a day. Only time would tell. In the meantime she was able to cut back on her oral medications. She was amazed at how much more energy she had.

Carlos Zeit had a condo in Long Beach near Bixby Park. It was his as long as he could cover the maintenance fees and taxes. It was his home when he wasn't at Big Bear Lake. He and Gretchen moved in there and Gretchen set about make it habitable for a woman. Things that a man might ignore for ages are major pains to a woman. The curtains were first to go. The sliding windows put in by Carlos' father in the 1950s had to come out. A contractor installed high quality double glazed replacements using molded frames that were built to last. After it was done Carlos had to admit the old windows had had moisture build-up on the inside of the glass during cold days. You could see where the paint had peeled from the drips.

There wasn't enough closet space. Let closet space for a man = N. Closet space for a woman = 10N. The same is true for drawer space. Part of the solution was to put space organizers in the closets. There was enough room in the bedroom to install a free standing wardrobe. The idea was a hundred and fifty years out of date but it worked.

From the look in her eyes Carlos could see the kitchen makeover would be expensive. He called a halt for the day and they had sandwiches and beer at the kitchen table. Then they walked down Cherry to Ocean and strolled along by the water enjoying the sea breeze and watched the setting sun.

Carlos asked, "How is it going with Dr. Black?"

Gretchen replied, "I think he'd like to do without me but he can't."

"You have to touch him to give him the power to use his hands."

Gretchen nodded. "Now you, on the other hand, could go to work for Belporcino Massage."

"I guess that's right. We do touch each other don't we?"

Gretchen smiled, "You will be more like me as time goes by. I, on the other hand, will become more like you. It will happen between Laura and Ronald too."

Carlos laughed. "It's said couples wind up looking like each other. Think that will happen?"

Gretchen thought and said, "I'll let you know in 20 years."

"How was it that any of you came here." Grechen thought before speaking. "First you must understand that we have more of a collective consciousness than humans. Quorum sensing drives our decisions. It's not unlike that which bacteria employ when mounting a concerted attack. We are individuals, but in matters related to survival we act in unison. Over a span of months we conceived knowledge of the Shadow World and how to use it. Prior to receiving the knowledge we had no awareness of the Shadow World.

We were trained in the vocalizations needed for human speech. Anthropologists taught us what was known about humans. In the Shadow World we could watch and observe without completing the transition. One day the overwhelming urge to complete suffuses us and we come through. Many of us came through Germany because our native tongue uses similar phonemes."

"Can you ever go back?"

"I don't know. Our world was still livable. We hadn't destroyed the environment. But there were too few of us to be viable. Perhaps some day we can return. We might all suddenly have the urge to do so. But I wouldn't go there without you."

They hugged.

Ch23 The Big Party

On the morning of the day of the party Laura and Ronald were at the private clinic of Doctors Blake and Brown. Laura's own doctor had been rather sanguine about her pregnancy and told her not to worry. But these doctors knew the entire story and they were much more concerned. First of all this was her first pregnancy and her body had to make dramatic changes. Second was the battle for resources between her and the fetus. That would have to be monitored closely. In their lab they had constructed much of the analytical equipment common to their own world by cobbling together a lab kluge. It didn't look pretty but it was far in advance of what conventional labs could do.

The entire future of a people was at stake. Either intermarriage and procreation could be accomplished or they couldn't. For her part Laura was determined not to disappoint Ronald. She would carry to term or else.

Bea was getting edgy as the hours ticked by. This was going to be the affair of the season. When her butler Freddy retired months before she'd been relieved that Noah had filled in the void while she searched for a new butler. It wasn't so much that she lacked applicants, it was just that most of them were such sticks.

Noah had once been a waiter and he had the knack of remembering people by their drinks. Using only his memory he programmed Joe the Bartender, a new AI device essential for large parties. Going down

the quest list he split it into scotch and soda, single malt scotch, dry martinis, vodka, bourbon, champagne, Cabernet, Merlot, sherry, Chardonnay, and beer domestic and imported. He added a number of odd mixed drinks as they came to mind. People generally can be counted on to be more loyal to their liquor than to their political party.

That evening Noah announced the guests as they came into the ballroom using a head mounted mic like those seen at rock concerts. Joe the Bartender, triggered by his voice, started mixing their drinks. When they received their libations from a waiter minutes later they frankly couldn't remember if they'd ordered them or not.

Laura had grown up in a world of wretched excess. Fashion headed the list. She had seen her friend's closets full of gowns worn once. She was good at sustaining the fashion illusion while being economic. This evening she wore fine Ethiopian lace over a topaz colored strapless tea dress. The dress came from J. C. Penny. The Ethiopian lace was actually from a machine loom in New Jersey. The dress and lace had been altered and mated by a seamstress in Studio City. The effect was stunning without costing a fortune.

Ronald wore a tux. Men don't have much choice when it comes to formal wear. A tux was equal parts of uncomfortable and ugly.

As Laura was greeted by her girlfriends she caught many of them making covetous glances at Ronald. And while some might look down upon him as a masseuse and a businessman they all melted to his rugged handsome looks. She, of course, headed the list.

She mused that she was reversing the long established trend by having a child in her twenties rather than in her forties. It had long been the fashion to push the biological clock to its breaking point. A young mother, what a novelty.

Abe Howard was there but not as a guest. He looked out of place in his off-the-rack suit as did the other two detectives who circulated through the crowd. They were there at the behest of the mayor. Luis was worried about something but Abe didn't know what. Mayor Luis was rubbing elbows with the very crowd who might support him for Governor.

The current Governor was there with his wife on one arm and Cozbi on the other. In New England having wife and mistress at the same party would have been considered bad form, but this was LA. In this case wife approved of mistress because, by some agency, she'd managed to imbue the governor with acceptable social graces. Having Luis and the Governor in the same room was like having a dog and a cat in the same house. Rubbing salt into his mental wounds the Governor watched La Bonita dancing with Bennie Hermosa. She'd gone over to the enemy.

Unbeknown to Abe, Horace had supplied two men at the Mayor's request. One was Scott Berlant, Ed Berlant's brother and the other was Jim Coffy who'd been Ed's friend. Also present were two police reserve officers hired through an agency by Bea. Abe knew both of them. There was also a regular security guard keeping an eye on the parked cars.

Also circulating through the crowd in his invisible mode was Skip Jennings the society photographer. He was dressed all in black as usual. Abe had to admit he had to really work hard to see Skip.

One unsettling note had been sounded the day before when Nick the Pick had escaped while being

transported from Orange County to Los Angeles. From his former cell mates it had been learned he had one more score to settle. He was after a guy known as Lazy Dave. These days Dave was a healthcare wiseguy but he'd once been a wrestling promoter. It figured.

Luis had thought he'd have to put a collar on Larry Sharp and chain him in the back yard to keep him from tagging along to the party. Larry was preoccupied with something involving Danny and Milt; mainly Milt and hadn't mentioned the party in weeks. It was like having a night off but now he had to censure himself.

Laura excused herself from the party and walked down to the gardener's cottage to visit her old friend Victor who'd been so kind to her when she was a girl. She'd learned a lot about plants from him. They sat at his little round kitchen table. He poured her some tea and wished her a good marriage. There was a knock at the door. She saw two men. One was supporting the other who was bleeding. It was Danny and Milt. Milt helped Danny to a cot. Then Milt explained to Victor they had something important for the mayor. They were being pursued. Victor called Noah.

Noah motioned to Abe who came over to him. Maija had just told Abe that Larry Sharp had been found dead in his apartment. The place had been torn apart. The outside fire escape had been lowered so someone had gone out that way. When Noah reported what Victor had told him it all snapped into place for Abe. If the killer had followed Danny and Milt then Laura was in danger. He signaled his men to join him. He told the reserves to stay put for now. Then he told Maija, "It's up to you kid. I'm going to be busy. Put out a team call. I need at least one sharp shooter. Have them come code 2."

Maija said, "No sirens."

"That's right."

"You got it boss!"

Within a millisecond Maija had linked to the nearest Big Olga repeater and shortly thereafter dispatch had Abe's request plus all the details known to Maija.

Bea had been fairly generous with the guest list. Included were Carlos and Gretchen. Gretchen was holding his arm when he felt her suddenly stiffen. "What is it?", he asked.

"Laura's in danger."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

Gretchen had told him about the collective consciousness of her people but Laura wasn't one of them. Then Carlos thought, "My god, it's her fetus calling to them."

Sure enough, when they got to the door they were within a few steps of Ronald, Horace, Scott, and Jim. Then they heard shots.

The glass in the sliding door that looked out into the garden was shattered and Victor could hear movement outside. He told them to get down and switched off the light. He'd once lived in a war zone.

Milt was worried about Danny. If he could get care before he lost too much blood he'd be okay. He pulled a foil packet out from under his shirt and handed it to Victor. "This is your place. I need you to hide this well. If you get out of this alive, give it to the mayor." Then he looked at Laura and said, "Do you have a link in your purse?" She nodded "yes" and handed it to him.

"I'm sure cops are on the way but I'm going to sic the goddamn air-force on those bastards." So saying

he made a call to news central, gave a terse summary of the situation, and pressed the button that transferred their GPS coordinates. While the police team was still 2 miles away, helicopters were rising into the air from the roofs of TV studios all over LA. Reminiscent of the classic O.J. Simpson freeway chase decades before that was tracked by a traffic copter, the media was once again airborne.

Skip Jennings, not having been born yesterday, was soon out the door. He set his Tuli camera for video with auto lo-light switched on. He also had the option of going to infra-red.

Ronald was the first to reach the cottage and as he came through the door another shot was fired and he fell. Laura screamed "No!"

Ch24-Bea Rolls Up Her Sleeve

When the first news helicopter arrived and lit up the garden, those in the cottage could see the outline of the gunman at the broken sliding door. He'd been calling to someone saying "Come here!" but got no response. Then a second helicopter added more light and Laura and Victor could see the body of a man face down in the dirt. The gunman was known to Milt. He was called Nada. He'd been hired away from a Mexican drug gang by the health-care mob. He was especially vicious. He looked at Laura who was kneeling beside Ronald. "Senorita, I think you must go with me. You make nice shield." Just as he was about to step into the room the outline of another man appeared behind him with arms in motion. Nada uttered a cry and fell forward, a knife up to its hilt buried in his back. Victor switched on the light revealing the gnarly face of Nick the Pick. "It's been a busy night. I settled an old score and this guy was my good deed. Now gents I'm going for a smoke before the cops get here." So saying he stepped out into the garden.

When Mayor Luis was clued in on what was taking place his first thought was he should offer himself as a negotiator. He'd been one in the movie "Blue Autumn". Then a chill ran up his spine when he remembered how poorly Christian had done wooing Rozanne without Cyrano de Bergerac coaching him. Oh, where was a screen writer when he really needed one?

When the shooting stopped, Abe had Maija update dispatch and call an ambulance. Horace had already called Drs. Blake and Brown. They were soon underway in their ambulance. Doctor Monroe, who'd been at the party, checked the vitals of Danny and Ronald. Danny was in a bad way but hadn't lost consciousness. Ronald was out cold and looked very pale. His blood loss had been greater. The first ambulance took Danny to LaBrea Memorial along with Milt. Milt remembered Danny sometimes donated blood and there was a card in his wallet that gave his blood type. The information was called ahead to the ER as they were en-route.

Ronald presented a problem. One of his people should be the donor but the blood type records of everyone at Belporcino and Johnson's were in a file at the office and would take a half hour to retrieve. They didn't have the time. When Doctors Blake and Brown arrived they conferred with doctor Monroe. The consensus was that it would probably be safe to give him O negative blood. People with O negative are known as universal donors. If he could get a transfusion now, it would probably be safe to move him. He was first taken to the ambulance where his doctors used some unusual pieces of equipment plus their own hands to stop the bleeding.

With all the uproar caused by gun shots, helicopters, and police arriving, Bea Windermere was at her

wits end. She came down into the garden with Noah and stood at the edge of the crowd about the cottage. She overheard some of the discussion about Ronald needing a transfusion. Then she piped up and overrode the babble of voices in a loud voice saying, "My blood is O-negative." Everyone stopped and looked at her. Doctor Monroe said, "Now Bea, I really must object."

Bea responded, "Doctor, if you value your next co-payment just shut up! Noah, clear the dining room table and add a leaf. Get a couple of mattresses from the patio chairs. We're going to do this. You boys have a transfusion kit? Don't just stand there. Get Ronald up to the house!" She was in rare form.

Skip Jennings caught every word with his Tuli camera and it was up-linked live via Big Olga and carried by TV and cable systems as far away as Christchurch, New Zealand. The next day her picture would be on every society page. After taking some more pictures at the crime scene Skip moved to the dining room and shot the transfusion being done. Naturally he favored Bea's good side. Within an hour Ronald and Laura were in an ambulance also headed to LaBrea Memorial.

Milt had a lot of anguish to handle. He should never have let Larry know about Al Goniff's packet. Larry had gotten all excited. He saw an opportunity for Luis to have a major press coup. Then he'd told Luis about it. The old rule of a secret not being a secret if more than one person knows it held true. How had he gotten into this? Then with shame he recalled the 5 one thousand dollar bills that came with the packet.

Abe collected the rest of Nick the Pick's arsenal and told him he'd saved the state some court costs by killing Lazy Dave and Nada. He'd do what he could to see he got time in one of the state's more modern concrete hotels. Where he could rub elbows with politicians, hedge fund managers and investment bankers.

A day later Milt delivered the packet of evidence to Judge Nelson. Milt knew he was honest because he was the same judge who'd sent him to the county jail twice. Judge Nelson could see that as soon as a grand jury sat on the evidence, a team of high priced lawyers would seek to seal the record before the case came to trial thus keeping it from the public's eye. The judge told Milt he had a computer and scanner in his office should Milt want to use them. He just didn't want to know the details. That night there was one really hot URL on the Internet.

Trials are all about who has the most money for a legal team. They rarely concern who is right and who is wrong. A company might receive a judgment against it but the next step was appeal. And so the game was played. The public was rarely served. But having your dirty laundry spread all over the Internet is a fate companies and shifty executives richly deserve.

Doctors Blake and Brown received permission to provide care for Ronald at LaBrea Memorial. They'd explained that his vital organs were different but they were familiar with his unusual physiology. His recovery was slow but he made steady progress. Laura's heart melted every time she saw him. Horace looked in on him every chance he got.

At LaBrea Memorial Laura was being counselled by Hannah Berg, clinical psychologist. After their first meeting Dr. Berg wondered if besides being severely stressed by her pregnancy and her husband's brush with death she might also be delusional. Additional sessions proved Laura to be sane and rational and Dr. Berg became yet another human brought into the inner circle of what was becoming a very leaky secret. Going over her notes she tried to imagine the mental workings of a mother who had no idea what she was giving birth to. But then every mother faces that problem even when they aren't one

half of an inter-species marriage.

Coroner Bob admired Nick the Pick's work. So many murders were done by amateurs. Nick had strangled Lazy Dave, probably for the sheer pleasure of doing so. Nada had gotten a knife blade sideways through the rib cage. Coroner Bob guessed Nick picked that up from his military training. Now the only question was who would play Nick when the movie version was made?

Luis spoke at Larry Sharp's memorial service. Larry had been cremated and later Milt would secretly scatter his ashes along the Mall in Washington, D.C.. Danny took Larry's place and eventually became the Mayor's number 2. Milt went on an extended bikers revel so he could come to terms with Larry's death.

Bea was feted by the Red Cross. Her turns in the newspapers and on TV had done more good than 5 years of promotional work for the blood bank. She'd done the talk shows and given interviews until she was quite exhausted. Horace found she wasn't so busy as to be kept from also acting as a match maker. Michael, whom all the dowagers lusted over, was dating Bea's maid Clara. Dr. Monroe was happy with Bea's progress. She might be able to reduce her meds someday if she stuck to her diet and exercise plan.

Gretchen found herself visiting Laura more than she'd intended. In fact, the unborn babe had called to her. She couldn't recall that ever happening before. This kid was going to be something.

Maija, though she was just so many nano-particles suspended in Abe's eyeglass frames, found that she had an opinion of all the goings on. But the Bard had been there already when he wrote for Puck, "What fools these mortals be."

And that's the end of our story for now.

Oh, I almost forgot. Karen Olson, Ralph Nixon's former girl friend and the receptionist at Belporcino Massage, walked by the Manteca gym one day and saw a buff young man skipping rope. He lost his concentration while looking at her. The two of them are now dating.

