

His Place in the Sun
by Hugh McGovern

HIS PLACE IN THE SUN

A NOVEL

BY

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Chapter 1 – Wakes in his apartment

Nicholas Martin, 1986 Leinster debating champion, Bachelor of Arts (second class), and apple of his mother's eye, shivered nervously in his twin bed. He pulled the covers until they were tightly wrapped around him, cocooning for warmth, his body in fetal position. One hairy foot protruded to test the temperature. It withdrew quickly inside like a nervous rodent peering from its hole only to scamper back within.

His oversized cranium nestled snugly in one arm. It housed the brain that posed most excellent questions in high school. Father Morrissey wrote in his report that Nicholas was "a gifted, insightful child" adding "the sky was the limit with a boy like that."

The report card was kept along with other chosen mementos. He stored them in a Jacob's biscuit tin in the closet, opening it only when the world was unforgiving. Then he reviewed each, handling it reverently, carefully re-reading those past words of promise.

Now he drifted still on a warm balm of sleep. The covers rippled, a swell of blue on the ocean of his bed, as he turned over. A hand surfaced to massage his nose, pointed in relief. It ranged over the wildly tousled hair; sheer forehead and wide cheeks, caressing pools of green deep set beneath furry eyebrows.

"He'll be President some day, my Nicholeen. Won't you?" He'll show you, my Nicholeen. looked like JFK his mother said.

A drunk was singing on the street below. A bottle dropped and smashed. The singing stopped. It resumed, breaking in on his thoughts. His voice carried bawdy and shrill, as he staggered home to his bed before dawn. Above Nicholas's head, the lights of a passing car played across the bedroom wall.

The rising sun as the room gradually gave up its secrets to the new day. Small and simply furnished. "Temporary digs only" was how he described it to Sonia when he first moved in. It was just a means to an end. As soon as he got his act together he'd get one of those condos on Lakeshore Drive, or down by Navy Pier.

Soon the clothes rumbled on the chair tossed carelessly the night before. The hanging jackets in the closet lost their sinister shapes becoming cheap suits, marked down in the sales. The fading shadows uncovered a desk buried in a mess of unopened letters, newspapers and magazines. Random heaps of paper spilled onto the floor below it. Some were liberally covered in red ink and stamped "overdue" in bold capitals. Some attempt was made to order them, once, but now they merged into a formless mound. A battered stereo peaked out from underneath, partially hidden. The carpet was mottled beige like the coated lungs of a compulsive smoker.

The alarm went off suddenly without warning shattering the silence to pieces. A skinny arm shot out from the covers and slammed down on the clock. There was silence.

He cautiously opened sleep-encrusted eyes. Their greeny-blue lens contracted harshly in the morning light. He lay, motionless, the bland white of the ceiling engulfing his vision. Its geography was as familiar to him as a city map.

A long crack ran from the light fitting, meandering through wetlands where water leaked in before splitting into many tributaries. Some petered out lost in spider's webs. Others disappeared from view crossing the border of his vision beyond the curtain.

Could easily have been the sight that he woke to as a boy. The color was the same. It might have been his home in Donnybrook. Any moment his mother would call him to come down for breakfast. If he were very late she would tramp up the stairs and rattle the bedroom door.

"Nicholas, your porridge is getting cold."

He always hated porridge.

The big splotch of grey in the corner of the ceiling gave it away. Water had leaked in last winter and his landlord; Mr. Murphy had finally fixed the tiles on the roof. He said he was going to repaint the ceiling too but somehow never got around to it.

He was full of excuses. They were varied and complex.

First his wife was having her second child and he was needed at home. Then it was summer and he went to Milwaukee for the Irish festival. It was an annual pilgrimage. An urbanized Irishman like Nicholas wouldn't have any interest in the Gaelic culture, he knew. The British beat that crap out of them a long time ago. Mr. Murphy, by contrast, took his heritage very seriously.

In the end Nicholas gave up asking him.

No, it was the ceiling in his apartment. The boy had begrudgingly become a man. The passage of time had given him a resounding kick into manhood. There was no security such as mother's big florid face and strong almost masculine arms might provide. She no longer stood between him and an unforgiving world. She was thousands of miles away a romantic vision of her son firmly implanted in her mind.

It was Monday. The charade of his job, of his life was about to begin all over again.

In less than an hour he would have to be at work. He groaned quietly. It was too early. Much too early to get up. Another few minutes of sleep were crucial, vital to his well being. He begrudged each second of wakefulness. His head throbbed with a dull, numbing sensation. He drifted off to sleep.

The alarm sounded again. The pale-grey of a winter's morning shone feebly through the chinks in the blind. His clothes lay bundled in a heap where he had left them the night before. He knew it was cold. He could sense it in the sharp intake of his breath, the numbness of his exposed

flesh and the faintest of plumes formed by his breath. Winter had come early and had fallen hard. The world outside his bed was frigid and uninviting.

His room was a mess. The dull grey winter's morning exposed the double bed. It was too big for the room. He bought in a fit of largesse one bored, Sunday afternoon. There was one chair. It doubled as a resting-place for his clothes. On the wall hung a Monet print. Sonia gave it to him for his twenty-ninth birthday. She was always trying to brighten up his apartment. He would live in complete squalor if it weren't for her.

Sonia bought "meaningful gifts." These were gifts purchased with care. They demonstrated a sincere interest in another person's needs. Nicholas was guilty of buying meaningless gifts. She succeeded after many conversations and complaints to correct that deficiency. Thereafter, dutifully each year, he made subtle and not so secret inquiries of her friends and relatives. One year her mother, who was intimately involved in Sonia's life, told him that a set of wine glasses from Marshall Fields was acceptable proof of his interest. Next year it was a CD player. At least it showed he cared.

"Some people need to be shown how" she told her daughter.

In front of the window, but only a foot from the bed, stood the desk. It was a source of shame and guilt. For six months he sat there religiously every evening. The result of that prodigious labour lay in the bottom drawer.

Dog-eared and greasy it was a hundred pages of his first and only novel. It was a vague, autobiographical tract full of digressions and tangents. It was laced with the bitterness of an undiscovered talent. Even in its heyday it maintained a love-hate relationship with its creator. Bursts of activity were followed by long, fallow periods.

Often he reread what in another frame of mind had seemed like incisive prose, only to discover that his characters were cardboard cutouts and his writing was plagued by long-winded and ineptly constructed sentences.

Lately he had, like most unpleasant facts in his life avoided it altogether. The drawer remained closed. The idea of reopening it filled him with dread.

He dragged himself out of bed. Seven forty-five. He was already late. He fumbled for the door of the bathroom. The tiles felt cold under his bare feet. He turned to contemplate his visage in the mirror. He was thirty and looked every bit of it. He smiled deliberately at himself, forcing the corners of his mouth into a mirthless grin. Thirty years old. He tried to ponder the significance of that. He took a razor out of the cabinet, behind the mirror. He inspected it critically, unsure how many times he had used it. Finally he rejected it in favour of a new one. At least he would face the world clean-shaven.

Thirty. Thirty. What did it mean? Did it have to mean anything? What had he achieved in thirty years? He paused his razor held in mid-air.

Einstein had already published four research papers. Beethoven had a few symphonies under his belt. Hemingway was a successful writer. What had he, Nicholas Martin, to show for thirty years on the planet?

He swore loudly as the razor cut into his chin. Fuck! Fuck! He yelled at the mirror.

Something would turn up. It had to. With mechanical optimism he reassured himself.

Shaving completed he placed the new razor at the corner of the shelf beside the toothpaste. He stepped gingerly into the bathtub. He stood farthest from the shower. With his outstretched foot he grappled the handle and turned. A jet of freezing cold water shot out of the faucet. He waited the prerequisite fifteen seconds using his toe as a thermometer. Satisfied he stepped forward. The now steaming hot water enveloped him. He let himself relax. A warm sensation gradually rose up inside him. Suddenly the water ran cold. That fat bitch!

His neighbour below, Miss Denker, had just turned on her shower. He could hear her ignorant feet stomping around in the tub. Only last week she had cause to complain about something.

He dreaded her large oval-shaped face full of suffering and patient martyrdom.

She caught him on the stairs one day after work.

"Mr. Martin, could I have a word?"

He knew what was coming. She always prefaced her gripes in this manner. She had many gripes.

This one concerned a drunken night that Nicholas could remember only in flashes.

Weekday drinking was rare for him. Work was unbearable hung over. He was too restless one Tuesday night. He had to get out if only for one drink. He walked the few blocks to the Sheffield.

There were few patrons. People were dotted about in small groups of two or three. It was quiet. He sat at the bar paying little attention to his surroundings. After three or four drinks he felt the warm glow of inebriation numb his senses. His anxiety lifted. He felt relaxed and affable. It was after his fourth or fifth, he had long since ceased to count that he became engaged in conversation with Cheryl. After that everything was blurred. He had woken the following morning with a massive hangover, Cheryl by his side.

Old pie-face no doubt was up half the night listening to God knows what. In a way he felt sorry for her. Her interest in men was overwhelming, and her criteria were not exacting. Even Nicholas initially was included in her list. Even though he had quickly disabused her of that notion. Still she was capable of anything. One word to Sonia could be disastrous. He knew the power of an embittered woman.

That morning she had adopted a frosty tone, known only to the sexually chaste.

"I would appreciate it "she snarled, curling a hairy upper lip, "if you could confine your carousing to the weekend nights, specifically Friday and Saturday."

With that she was gone, into her lair the door slammed behind her. Mindful of the consequences he had dashed off a groveling note which her shoved under her door later that evening.

"Dear Miss Denker,

I want to apologise for any disturbance I may have caused you last night. It is not my usual custom to make noise during the week. I can assure you that it will not happen again.

Sincerely,

Nicholas Martin."

Fat bitch. Cursing Nicholas turned off the shower and stepped out. It was probably eight already. Wrapped in a towel he stood otherwise naked in front of the wardrobe. Clean shirts were out. There were none. Doing laundry was more boring than work. Almost. The favourite one he looked at wistfully. No. Two days last week he had worn it. He finally compromised and chose the striped one. All that was left was his second favourite suit. The first was being cleaned. He checked the clock. 8:15.

A sudden shiver of urgency ran down his spine. Seizing his coat and hat he made for the door. The fat girl was ahead of him on the stairs. He was forced to make his dash a walk, as he followed in her wake. He danced this way and that finally managing to slip by her at the front door. She gave his friendly nod a parting glare as he turned to the right her to the left. Once out the door the cold hit him a blow. Clarke Street was bleary and windswept. His face bent low against the sweeping wind. He shuffled down the snowbound street, a tall, frail and slightly forlorn figure.

From all about people converged on the station. Nicholas merged with the crowd. He thrust his dollar fifty at the attendant and passed through the turnstile. He stood on the platform, the Chicago wind cutting through the station.

Around him the early morning commuters jostled. The smart ones moved towards the end of the platform where the cars were less likely to be jammed with people. Nicholas stood where he emerged, determined not to follow the trend.

So this was it. The be all and end all. Nicholas Martin. Six years in America. Lured by the American dream, of unlimited prosperity and material well being, and a general dissatisfaction with his homeland, gets to freeze his tits off on an icy platform. The Ravenswood train swept into the station, momentarily obscuring the blast of cold air. He dived into the nearest car, managing to gain a position pressed up against the door. Compressed against the window he began the long logical process of justifying his position. It was an elaborate sequence with many steps and subroutines,

with the efficacy of a computer program. It went something like this. Yes it's true I've been in the United States for six years, and I don't particularly like my job, or my lifestyle, and I don't love my girlfriend, but at least it is a life. And anyway where would I go and what would I do? I don't want to be unemployed in Ireland, living at home with my mother. The program crashed temporarily as the train swept into Fullerton. A loud, aggressive and diminutive Asian lady shouted "Owt, pliss. Owt!!" Nicholas stepped out of the train to let her out.

The program resumed as the train started to move. But I can live anywhere I want and to do anything I please. Yes you can retorted the program, but will it make you any happier that you are right now? The best thing you can do the program continued, is sit tight. This dissatisfaction is only a passing mood, anyway. In an hour, a day, a week, you'll have forgotten it. Be realistic. You're not one of the great ones. Not every one can be a superstar.

The train came to a stop at Jackson station. Nicholas was swept along in a general exodus. He emerged onto State Street walking quickly. His destination was a large, squat building. The sign above the entrance displayed in unambiguous terms "The Northern Trust ". Herein lay the location of Nicholas's career ambitions for five years where the great dream of fulfillment and social usefulness had been exploded in favour of the boredom and general futility of office life. Certainly Nicholas had not always felt this way. He had once (somewhat naively) believed that his contribution was significant in its own right. That he Nicholas Martin could make a difference. Be a force for change in his job and find a role worthy of his unique talents. That dream like so many others had died a death at the bitter hand of reality. For the umpteenth time as he crossed the foyer headed for his bank of elevators (floors 19 - 36) the thought crossed his mind. It doesn't matter a damn if I'm here or not. If a bus hit me tomorrow some other stiff would fill my shoes. He jostled into the elevator managing to select his floor before being pushed to the back of the car. He adopted a suitably inscrutable expression as the doors closed and in found him in close proximity to complete strangers. He remembered reading somewhere a study of human behavior. A researcher was interested in how people behaved in elevators. He contrived to be the first in the door and always adopted a stance facing the back of the car. Invariably everyone who followed would face the same way.

Nicholas liked studies like that. There was a part of him that always pushed for differentness. A sense of distinction beyond what his social standing deserved. The door opened on the thirtieth floor and Nicholas was ejected into the hallway. A sign on the wall with a pointing arrow read, "Northern Trust, Operations Department". He followed the arrow and entered the office. He kept his eyes low avoiding eye contact. He was ten minutes late he knew and he didn't want any acknowledgment of this fact to come from him. Foregoing his usual coffee from the machine he made straight for his desk.

"You're late, Nicholas."

It was Tony Ryan, his immediate superior. He was always an enigma to Nicholas. He viewed him as a man utterly content with his life and his job. Even deriving a certain satisfaction from his work. Ryan was the prototypical working man. Full of pride and critical of all other men who didn't share his background. He maintained a curious affection for Nicholas, despite the fact that Nicholas was a 'college boy', and therefore born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Maybe it was an ethnic bond. Ryan was an Irish-American. His family constituted an earlier wave of immigration into America. He, like others of his background, had been brought up on a garbled version of their Irishness, full of unrealistic notions and vague romanticizations. Whatever the reason he seemed to have developed a liking for Nicholas, unusual for a man so definite in his opinions. That notwithstanding Ryan was a man with a strong sense of duty. Tardiness was something he could never tolerate. There was a way in which he construed such violations as a personal insult to him. With a sinking heart Nicholas knew that a lecture was imminent.

"Nicholas, how many times have you been late in the last month?" said Ryan warming to his theme.

"Oh, I'm sorry I'm late. I..."

"Nicholas I'm asking you a question. How many times have you been late?" Ryan was nothing if not pedantic.

"Twice" he suggested.

"At least four times that I know of. And I'm sure Ken would know of others."

(Ken was Ryan's boss. The head cashier. Ryan regarded him as the highest authority, the Supreme Court to which all unresolved disputes between employees were referred for arbitration.)

"Nicholas, you have to start being on time. The market opens at nine. I need you at your desk." The market was a deified term for Ryan. It was the great shining star of his life. The sun around which he and Nicholas, and anyone else who "had their head screwed on the right way", orbited.

"I know Tony" said Nicholas, (it always struck him as odd that despite their meanness to each other, they would still address each other by their first name), "I'm sorry. It won't happen again. I promise."

"It better not" said Tony.

Nicholas busied himself with his work. Already there was a pile of paper on his desk. In a strange way he enjoyed the wholly mechanical aspects of his job. It was so unambiguous. There was no necessity for thought, and it was rarely that Nicholas managed to avoid his own thought processes. He inclined his large head to one side and let his brain relax.

Through the glass wall of his office, Ken Schaumburg watched Nicholas. Ken was an 'achiever' by his own admission. He was the titular head of operations. (In reality his responsibilities were slight, but he took them very seriously). In another life Ken would have been the power-hungry security guard, jealously guarding a doorway, and exerting the utmost power that his office permitted. Ken had by dint of ass-kissing, sneakiness and crass manipulation achieved a

position of authority and he intended to enjoy it. He regarded Nicholas with the customary disdain he showed to all his employees. He was possessed of the proverbial zeal of the poacher turned gamekeeper. He kept a securely locked drawer at his desk. In it he had compiled meticulous dossiers of every one under his tutelage to be used only in time of emergency. When it came to apportioning blame Ken knew well that the cutting axe could fall in any direction and no one, he included was immune. In his files, neatly ordered alphabetically, you would find if you looked under "Martin, N." a Photostat of every progress report Nicholas had received. Some years earlier he had noted that "Nicholas, while seeming to possess a good aptitude, lacked application and had a tendency to day-dream." In consequence he could not in all honesty, "recommend him for promotion to a position of greater responsibility."

The morning whiled away uneventfully. Ken came out of his office a few times, to monitor his underlings at closer quarters. He had a tendency to stand behind Nicholas and look over his shoulder, a habit Nicholas found intensely irritating.

He was a small, diminutive man, but he made up for his small stature by a large expansiveness, studiously cultivated over the years. A wispy moustache struggled for life on his upper lip. Today to Nicholas's relief he turned his attention to Tony.

There was a breach of procedure. Ken would say no more. Negligence was suspected. Obviously Ken would have to file a report to a higher authority. The bigwigs upstairs would have to be informed. Ken had no idea would happen, or how 'upstairs' would react. Tony was implicated. The two retired into Ken's office. A heated conversation ensued which Nicholas watched through the window. It consisted of Tony expostulating, arms held aloft in a gesture of injured pride and Ken remonstrating by turn. A conference call was made to another brokerage house, to settle the dispute between the two captains of operations. The doctrinal issues, it transpired were erudite and complex and not readily amenable to a simple yes or no, a black or white answer. The two combatants retired to regroup for lunch, and nurse their wounds. Tony had held his corner for the most part though Ken, to his credit, had administered a few stinging blows of rebuke. Nicholas suspected that Ken completely staged these periodic inquiries to assert his ever-tenuous authority. He used the temporary lull in hostilities to make a break for lunch. He had been in the habit of meeting Sonia for lunch but lately he had abandoned this in favour of his own company. She was full of talk about marriages and engagements, of this friend having purchased a dress of less than a thousand dollars, a real bargain, or that friend having honeymooned in Paris. It was all so romantic and so utterly mundane. Nicholas for his part viewed marriage with unvoiced fear. It wasn't so much the business of marriage itself. Rather it constituted a reminder to him that time was passing. His twenties had gone and very soon he would be forced onto the horns of another dilemma. Sonia had christened him lately as Nicholas 'Delay' Martin, referring to his evasiveness on the whole issue. Very soon now, he well knew things would come to head. The biological clock was

ticking and he would have to produce the goods. In the face of uncertainty he did what he always did and opted for the status quo. He was, in reality, a conservative. In fairness he was fond of Sonia, and despite the occasional infidelity, such as his night with Letica, had quite a fondness for her. He concluded that it was all too much to consider, especially on a Monday morning. His head hurt. Maybe he was coming down with something. Last thing he needed right now was to come down with something.

The elevator took him down to the foyer. Rather than face the cold outside. Nicholas betook himself to the restaurant on the ground floor. He joined the line, which snaked out into the lobby. When his turn came he opted for the soup sandwich combo. He made his way to a vacant table at the rear of the restaurant. He needed some time to think, to re-marshal some facts in his head. There was too much outside stimuli. He was just beginning time-consuming process when he heard a voice, which made his heart drop.

"I assume this is free, Nick". He turned around just in time to see Peter bumble into the free seat, his large ass oozing out of the gaps in the metal frame. Peter worked in the accounting department.

"Oh man, we had a major fuck-up this morning. Warren was raging. It turns out someone screwed up when entering the price per share, on three hundred trades that's a ten thousand-dollar error. No one said anything. Walter said he keep us in all fucking night till someone owned up."

A small piece of ham sandwich flew out of his mouth and hit Nicholas on the cheek. Nicholas was too polite to say anything. Peter continued unaware.

"What's going on in your department? I heard Ken and Tony were at it, again." "Oh, you know, the usual"

"Warren was bitching about Tony this morning" said Peter.

"Oh."

"Between you and me there's going to be a shakedown, very soon. Number One himself is taking an interest." Number One was a name that Nicholas rarely heard without some tremor of anticipation. He was the progenitor, the founder of the company. He was the first. Before him there was nothing. He molded and shaped the world in which Peter lived. He had set the parameters on all of their lives. They owed their very livelihoods, even their lives to this man. In Peter's parlance he took on an almost Biblical aura, significance on a par with Moses or David guiding the people of Israel to the Promised Land. Nicholas didn't comment.

Peter carried on munching cheerfully.

"How's that girl you're dating? What's her name?" he asked.

"Sonia" he said helpfully.

"Sonia. That's it. Good-looking girl. Good-looking girl."

In truth Nicholas suspected the real reason for this inquiry into his welfare was to introduce Peter's other favourite topic of conversation, his girlfriend, Barbara.

"You've met Barbara, haven't you?"

Nicholas nodded in the affirmative. He remembered vaguely being introduced to a small, plain-looking girl at the Christmas party. Her name was Barbara and worked in the personnel department. In fact she was one of the first people Nicholas met when he interviewed with the company.

"She just got a promotion" Peter beamed with pride. "Five years with the company. Her official title now is Vice-Co-Ordinator of Human Resources. "He paused on this last part to allow the full significance of it to sink in.

"Oh, tell her congratulations. I've got to get back "said Nicholas, glancing at his watch to justify his departure.

"We must go out for a drink sometime." Peter called after him as he left.

"Sure, anytime " said Nicholas. The last thing in the world he felt like doing was spending his spare time with that guy.

Nicholas jealously guarded his free time, greatly resenting any inroads made by the outside world. He made his way across the lobby and back into the elevator.

His mind was in turmoil again. He had desperately wanted his lunchtime on his own to think. There was never enough time to think anymore. There were so many demands on his time these days. Work, Sonia, Peter, Tony. A man had to fight for his own breathing space. Nicholas was never very good at doing that. He was too polite for a place like Chicago. Born in Dublin he had been educated at a Jesuit college. The main legacy of those days seemed to have been his manners. He still recalled Father Morrissey's description of him as "unfailing polite". Nicholas was a nice guy. He talked to people who bored him stupid. Conversed to the point where they had no idea what he really thought, and would come away convinced they had made a life long friend. That was another legacy of those formative days in Dublin. Nicholas hid his true feelings. Somewhere along the way he had picked up the idea that any strong emotion was naturally suspect. Fools and imbeciles felt strongly about things. Nice, well-adjusted people were not prey to emotion. The pure light of reason illuminated their lives.

The office seemed unusually quiet after lunch. Tony and Ken were no-where to be seen. Tony's usual procedure at this time was to adjourn to the bathroom, where he would spend ten to fifteen minutes administering to the call of nature. Nicholas would hear the rustling of the sports section of the newspaper coming from the cubicle at the back, accompanied by a pretty foul smell.

There was very little work to be done at this point.

At times such as these his thoughts generally returned to himself. He felt he was a curious breed. Not American but hardly Irish either in his habits or opinions. He had made an unsuccessful attempt at integration and the resulting cross breed was the outcome. His cultural antecedents existed somewhere in the mid-Atlantic. He really didn't want to be anything, have to accomplish

anything or prove anything. He was always called upon, forced to prove himself. Prove things to him, to Sonia, to the world. He just wanted to exist, and to be left alone. He never imagined when he was younger that it could have become such an issue for him. He fondly recalled his student days. Students had it easy. They existed in an egalitarian world where words such as status and prestige held no currency. He cast his mind back fondly to his student days in Dublin. Then he was full of unfulfilled promise, untempered by the vagaries of the world, confident in his opinions and unquestioning of his ability to fulfill them.

Somewhere since then doubt had crept into his mind and made a home for itself there. The passage of time had something to do with it. Nicholas's youth had been full of grandiose notions of changing the world. Only time had revealed to Nicholas that the world didn't want to be changed, and had no desire to conform to his expectations.

Tony came back from the bathroom.

"The Nicks are going to win the Stanley Cup.," he said, for want of anyone better, to Nicholas. Sports. Now there was another thing Nicholas hated. Playing sports he could understand. But following a team, reading the sports section of a newspaper, day in and day out, knowing who won the Super Bowl in 1974. Who cared? It was so mindless and boring. It reminded him of wet Sunday afternoons, when he was eleven years old. His older brother Michael would insist on watching soccer on the TV. This would invariably lead to a big fight. Then he would have to sit, beaten into submission, while the Pool Results were read out.

"That's good," said Nicholas. "That's your team, right?"

Tony didn't answer. He had adopted the idea, somewhere that ignoring people was a good way to impress them. Frequently he would do that when Nicholas addressed a question to him. Even though there was no doubt in Nicholas's mind that Tony had heard him. Nicholas didn't pursue the matter. Social conversations with Tony always made him nervous. After a few sentences the idea of conversing with his underlings on an equal level would seem incongruous to Tony, and he would come over to Nicholas's desk and find fault with something he was doing. The best situation Nicholas, always felt, was when Tony was preoccupied with something else. Then they were both spared the embarrassment of trying to find common ground, when in reality none existed.

The rest of the day seemed to pass without incident. Ken did not reappear in the afternoon, and Tony got into a protracted argument on the phone with an airline representative. Apparently he had left a pair of shoes on a Delta flight from New York. The agent in true American tradition was adopting the expedient that the customer was always right - a terrible mistake when dealing with Tony.

"I told you, already, it was Flight 478 out of Newark. Jesus Christ. Who's your superior? Put your superior on the line. What's your name? Look Michelle, I'm trying to make a point. No don't interrupt. Michelle, don't interrupt. I haven't finished... "

The barrage faded a little into the background. Nicholas was eyeing the clock on the wall. He never wore a watch. A watch made time slow down and Nicholas did not want to know the time at work. He started shuffling papers on his desk. This ritual usually began about 15 minutes before his departure. In so doing he ensured that come the appointed time he would have no more work in process, and would be out the door like a shot.

He busied himself with final preparations. At five he rose from his desk. The elevator was crowded. He left early enough to avoid walking out with Tony. He might have suggested a drink thereby putting Nicholas in the embarrassing situation of saying no. For Nicholas it was much easier to avoid him altogether. He heaved a sign of relief as he made it out into the street unnoticed.

He joined the rush hour melee. He wondered vaguely what a visiting space ship from another planet would make of human culture. From above the trends might be more obvious. At a certain time in the morning the aliens would observe a period of frenetic activity. Minute life forms (so many ants) would emerge from hiding. Around certain locations concentrations of these lifeforms would be clearly discernible. What attracted so many of these beings to certain distinct geographic points would be a matter of speculation and uncertainty for the alien visitors. Perhaps some very attractive food source was located there. And then another curiosity. After this period of intense traffic, quiet. To reemerge later and return to their original locations. Evidence of intelligent life? Nicholas felt sure the findings would be inconclusive.

The train was particularly crowded this evening. He was forced to stand in the aisle. A woman in front of him was reading from a book. He had to admire her persistence. Despite the constant swaying of the car she remained rigidly focused on the page, one hand held aloft clutching the rail. From his vantage of 6 feet and 1 inch, he could easily look over her shoulder.

He read, 'David held Joanne passionately in his arms. She could feel the pounding of his heart as she pressed close to him. She seemed to dissolve into powerful embrace. She felt...'

The woman half-turned and Nicholas quickly looked away. He felt an involuntary color rise to his cheeks. Another legacy from his student days. At the slightest impropriety he tended to blush. In a way he sympathized with the woman. There was as much insight into love in a Mills & Boon novel as he had ever learned. Buying into the notion of romantic love was as good a bet as any. Still Nicholas preferred to hedge his bets. Love or libido. He wasn't quite sure which.

He got out at his stop and walked the couple of blocks to his apartment. When he got in the light was blinking on his answering machine. Sonia. It had to be. He could hear Miss Denker stomp around upstairs. He narrowly missed her at the doorway. The floor reverberated above his head. Sonia could wait. They were supposed to go out to dinner tonight. He just needed a few minutes of downtime first. He slumped into the couch and switched on the TV. It was one of those interminable chat shows where the audience got involved. The main attraction or centerpiece was a virgin mother who had had two children by invitro-fertilization. She had certainly circumvented the

dilemmas posed by romantic love. The main entertainment seemed to consist of various members of the audience haranguing the unfortunate woman, to general applause. She sat impassively clutching her two children. Nicholas was alternately appalled and fascinated. His Catholic upbringing did not prepare him for such eventualities. A virgin mother, the last one he knew of was Mary. With his outstretched foot he reached for the answering machine.

On the television an overweight, black lady, stood up.

"What you did was unnatural. You should know better than to do that invitro thing. What you need is a man, young lady." She sat down in response to cheers and sporadic clapping. She certainly had some conviction in her voice.

The machine beeped and clicked.

"Hi, Nicholas. It's me. I'm at my mother's house right now, but I'll be at your place at eight. Let's go somewhere different. Maybe downtown. We haven't been there in a while."

That was Sonia. Always trying to suggest things. She prided herself on the improvements she had made on Nicholas since she first met him. She was the one who encouraged him to move out of that crummy apartment on Halsted, selected all his furniture, and introduced him to the concept of a colour scheme. He needed to be brought out of himself more often.

He switched off the television. He was restless. It was still another hour before Sonia would arrive. He passed around the apartment. The living room led directly into the bedroom and bathroom. He paused in front of the mirror. His face seemed somehow alien. He never associated his personality with a certain appearance, a given physical form. The slightly oversized head, dominant nose and wide cheeks seemed familiar. It was the frame containing the universe within. But only the surface.

He walked out into the bedroom. The bed was half made evidence of his hasty departure that morning. He glanced sidelong at the desk. It was in times such as these that he had sat at the desk. He turned toward the drawer. On impulse he opened it and took out the manuscript. The first page had originally been a typed sheet. It was a mass of handwritten corrections, in various coloured pens. Like layers of cracked paint it overlaid the original, each layer telling a history of its own. In the left-hand margin he had written in red ink; 'For some time now he had been on a downward spiral. Nothing sudden or definite. Just a gradual unraveling of the threads of his life'. A long arrow led from the note to a point in the middle of the page.

The doorbell buzzed. Sonia. He put the manuscript back in the drawer. The doorbell buzzed a second time. Jesus Christ, relax. He pressed the buzzer on the inside of the front door. Below he could hear her stomping up the stairs.

She bustled into the apartment.

"It took me ages to park. I ended up on Belmont Avenue. It's thirty minute parking only."

Sonia. Sonia. She could hardly be described as beautiful though judging by the reactions of others she was regarded as pretty enough. Nicholas had long since ceased to have an opinion. She was tall, blonde and blue-eyed and was inclined to be plumpness. She exuded certain sensuality. All things sexual fascinated and entertained her. She was constantly regaling Nicholas with details of the sexual exploits of her friends and family. Nicholas had always maintained a certain prudish exterior regarding these matters, particularly in the company of women. Engaging in sexually explicit conversation was something gentlemen (at least the kind of gentlemen the Jesuits tried to create) didn't do. If the lady wished to do so then that was her prerogative, in keeping with the other great maxim of non-judgementality. Sonia was the proto-typical 'good girl'; any guy should be thrilled to have.

Nicholas wouldn't have described the emotion he felt for her as love. But then on the other hand he wasn't exactly sure what that was. In the back of his mind he imagined it to be an overpowering sensation, full of passion and verve. That was certainly not the way he felt about Sonia. He knew with a certain resignation that she was the kind of girl who suited him best. Loyal, kind, honest and not given to wide mood swings or tempers. She was predictably nice. She would cause him minimum stress in life. Stress minimization was an issue of some importance to Nicholas these days. If the damaging components of his life could not be removed they could at least be contained. Hedged around with some protective sheen or exterior.

"How was work?" she inquired.

"Oh same as ever. You remember Peter, don't you?"

"I think so."

"Well, he cornered me at lunch. Started babbling about work as usual. He's such a bore."

"Nicholas, you're so critical of people. He's not that bad."

That was typical Sonia. Always thinking the best of people. Nicholas included. He wondered how she would react to news of his infidelities. There hadn't been many. Just a handful over the years. Drunken nights of passion. He adopted the happy principle of feeling guilt in proportion to her knowledge of these events. Since she knew nothing about it, he saw no reason to feel any guilt. It made him feel better that there was part of his life she didn't know about.

"We should go, Nicholas. The reservation is for nine."

She grasped for his hand as they walked down the stairs. Maybe real love was just liking someone. A companion. A friend of sorts. The inspirational lovers were generally the ones who had their bags packed, waiting at the door. It was another irony of life. Always wanting what couldn't be had. Then achieving something only to discover that it has lost its appeal. Still Nicholas, despite his misgivings had a niggling belief in romantic love. It was the passion of the Mills & Boon novel that he had been sold on. It was notable always in its absence.

Sonia drove. They were going to her favourite restaurant. Nicholas generally didn't have strong opinions about such things. Food was a generic item in his book.

"Stephanie just got engaged to Bob last week" she volunteered.

"Really." Nicholas refused to be drawn.

The conversation was taking a predictable turn. There it was again. Being forced to make a decision. In a way he yearned for his twenties. Then everything had a veneer of newness. New relationship, new friends, new job. Everything seemed jaded beyond belief, now. There was nowhere new to go.

An immigrant always harbours the notion, in the back of his mind, that if things get bad enough he can just pull up roots and relocate. He's already done it once. Why not another time? Secretly however the thought appalled him. He wasn't ready for the task of redefining himself.

"Nicholas, when are we going to get engaged? Everyone I know is either engaged or getting married. What are we waiting for?"

"I just don't want to rush in to it. That's all." That was the best way to handle it. Stall for time.

"If we're going to do it. Let's do it right. I need to save some more money, you know."

"But Nicholas, that's what you said six months ago. I'm not getting any younger. Neither are you. I'm twenty seven years old. You're thirty."

"Don't say that?"

An ambulance passed them on Lakeshore, sirens blaring, flashing red.

"It's true Nicholas. You're going to have to grow up. Face the facts. You're not twenty-five anymore. You have to stop acting that way."

He had the sneaking suspicion she knew more about his infidelities that she had previously admitted.

"Stop procrastinating and make up your mind. I can't wait for you, forever."

They said no more about it, that evening. She had thrown down the gauntlet finally, as he knew she would. Events were closing in. When he analyzed his feelings (something he did quite often) it wasn't necessarily regard for her that was foremost in his mind. He had often imagined, perhaps naïvely that a decision like this, a pivotal point in his life would be one he would leap at gladly, swept away on the strength of his own feelings. When it came to the crunch, as it surely must soon, there was no heartfelt emotion. Maybe words like love should be stricken from the dictionary and replaced by a word like compromise.

At heart, Nicholas was an idealist. Life shouldn't be a vague, blind adherence to social trends. On average, the statistics show that men in their early thirties get married to women in the twenty-five to thirty age bracket. That was just the point. He didn't want to be a statistic. A life is too precious, his life was too precious, to be thrown away on averages and medians.

His Place in the Sun
by Hugh McGovern

Sonia, like most women was a survivor. If Nicholas couldn't offer her what she wanted no doubt someone else would. There was the romanticism again. Wanting to be accepted without question. Not because you fulfilled certain criteria. Maybe it was too much to expect. He often wondered how readily he could offer it to someone else. He was, of course, an expert on his own needs and wants. None better.

So there it was a stark choice. He could sell out. Fit the bill. It just didn't seem right that the rat-race should enter the bedroom. Surely, some places were sacred, or ought to be. Maybe it was too much to believe that all these overwhelming wants, these raucous egos (his included) could find their match. Some other gross individualist to spend their lives with.

His head started to hurt again.

They parked the car and walked the few blocks to the restaurant. Once you got away from the lake the real Chicago quickly made its self known. One of Nicholas's first reactions to the city was the sheer ugliness of it. Chicago was a function city first and foremost.

Chapter 2 – Next day Sonia is gone

Daylight feebly illuminated the room when Nicholas awoke. Sonia was already gone. She got up at six. Something about her mother and the car. She was always pandering to her mother's needs. Driving her here and there. Enduring long conversations about the most mundane aspects of her life.

At first Nicholas had assumed this was testament to Sonia's inherently good nature. Later it occurred to him that it fulfilled a need in her. She needed this dependency. She fostered and cherished it.

Nicholas maintained an uneasy friendship with Sonia's mother. All males were potentially suspect in her book. Her husband had run off with a girl twenty years his junior. The experience had not necessarily made her write off the male sex. Just encouraged her too maintain a rigid vigilance over the males who came into her orbit.

The black mood of last night was gone and Nicholas felt a new found enthusiasm and energy. Today, he was ready for anything.

Last night just before he fallen asleep a germ of an idea had crept into his head. Of course he should have known it long ago, an idea, and a way to break out of the chains that held him in bondage. It was brilliant in its simplicity. It was inspired.

He, Nicholas Martin, would go into business for himself. Of course it was the answer. No more mealy-mouthed compromising. No more pandering to the egos of the ineffectual. This was the product of true vision. A concept such as this would not even have entered the brains of lesser mortals. Men like Tony and Ken could only stand in awe at such creativity.

What form this new found business venture would take was of lesser importance. Trivialities too be resolved at a later date. What was significant was the desire. That had set him apart.

He stepped delicately out of the shower. Truly it was only a certain caliber of person who would choose this destiny for themselves. They would have to be individualistic. Gifted with intelligence, of that there was no doubt. Everything fitted. He had all the prerequisites.

He tripped lightly down the stairs, even holding the door open for Miss Denker, and wishing her a cheery good morning. All he had to do now was seize that idea. Pull prosperity out of a hat.

In this new mindset everything was reevaluated for its money-earning potential. Franchises, margins, niche markets, specialty goods, import-export, developing countries, the Far East, his mind was spinning with the possibilities.

Suddenly there was money to be made. Business men, he reflected were respected. They were pillars of the establishment. Self-made men beholden to no-one. The train was crowded not with people, but consumers. Everyone of them had needs. There must be a way to pander to those needs, exploit them.

Nicholas would be generous in his success. He would be popular. He could have affairs with beautiful women, without commitment. There was no limit. A house in the Riviera. That would be important. Not too much work either. Once his business was up and running, he would be a hands-off manager. He wouldn't want the trouble. He didn't feel a compulsion to work. Once it ceased to be a necessity he would devote himself to other things. Channel his creative talents elsewhere. He clung to the overhead rail, as the train rounded a corner.

Respect would be forthcoming. People he had never met would know him. His workers would be well-treated. After all hadn't he worked in a subordinate capacity? He knew what it was like to be a peon. When he would come into the office people, would jump up to greet him. They would owe their livelihoods to him.

He would be a compassionate boss. Of that there was no doubt. Three weeks vacation a year for everyone. Well maybe not.

Of course certain laws would have to be observed. Sometimes the great money god would make demands and have to be appeased. Nothing personal you understand. Purely business decisions. He would make those tough decisions when necessary.

Beyond it all he would stand omnipotent. Nicholas Martin, slave to no man, self-made and proud of it. You can read about him in Forbes or Business Weekly, if you're interested. You may not like him, but you can't ignore him.

Tony and Ken were nowhere to be seen when he arrived. A temporary respite only, he knew. The question now, he thought as he switched on his computer is what to get into. He would have to start small. Great companies, invariably, had humble beginnings. Dunlop made his first tire in a shed at the end of his garden. The key was the idea. He needed to fill a need.

Somebody had left a newspaper on his desk. Probably Tony. He had a tendency to leave things on Nicholas's desk. He regarded the whole area as his personal space.

Nicholas didn't like newspapers. Generally they irritated him in terms of what they regarded as important. American newspapers generally took the US to be the focal point of the world. Understandable in a way, but frustrating to an outsider. Still it was hardly any better in Ireland. The media there reflected the curious priorities of the Irish national character.

Nicholas was annoyed by the presumption that they would tell him something important. Just because five million copies of someones opinions are printed and circulated does not make them anymore compelling.

An article on the inside page caught his eye. "Home Based Industry Becomes Multi-Million Dollar Concern". It told the story of an enterprising young man who began his career selling widgets door-to-door and gradually built up a huge distribution and import/export operation. It was the classic American rags to-riches story. It was all the there. The disadvantaged, the homeless the

economically disempowered becoming successful and prosperous. Wasn't that what America was all about, in theory anyway?

It was some vague reworking of the American dream that had lured Nicholas, in the first place, to the United States. Not some half-arsed bourgeoisie watered down version, (the reality that he lived).

In a strange way it was also the dream that entrapped him. Having adopted it and made it his own, he could hardly leave and admit that he had been a failure. Admit that most Americans did not lead hugely glamorous lives, filled with wealth and luxury. Some did, no doubt, but the majority did not.

For Nicholas leaving, rejecting that dream could only be an admission of failure.

He tore a fresh sheet of paper out of his notebook. On the top he wrote the date and beside it the title - "Business Ideas". Nothing inspired was coming to mind. What was the basic principle of all commerce, he reasoned, except supply and demand? All that guy, in the newspaper, had done was identify a demand and then supplied that demand. "All I have to do", he wrote, "is identify a need, and then supply that need."

But what could he Nicholas, do? He didn't have any skills. Five years as a clerk in a brokerage firm, didn't really qualify him for anything except just that. It was a dead-end job. He always knew that.

He shuffled some papers, busily. Tony had just emerged out of nowhere, and was standing behind Nicholas. He covered the page he had been just writing on with the newspaper.

He knew that to Tony such ideas would be evidence of a diseased mind. Tony was a man, completely content with his lot in life. He regarded Nicholas as a malcontent. Slightly damaged goods. Not really prime material for the job at hand.

Seeing a piece of paper with business ideas written on it would only serve to confirm that notion.

Today Tony was distracted. They had just hired a new guy in the department. Tony was showing him around. That would explain his absence, earlier.

Nicholas always felt sorry for new recruits. Tony would take them personally under his wing. That meant a complete indoctrination, with Tony hovering like some vulture in the background. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to talk about his job, at length. What he did. How he did it. There was a beauty, a harmony to it all. Novices couldn't be expected to know anything. The deeper workings and intrigues were mysteries only to be revealed gradually. Only a devotee with long years of service could grasp these profundities.

Tony had first gone to work when he was fifteen. He clawed his way up through the ranks with the same tenacity Nicholas had come to know so well. Dividends, new accounts, the cage. All

badges of rank, qualifiers for the next level. By the age of thirty he was ready to move from his native New York. This move Nicholas knew was only partly motivated by choice.

Tony was unpopular with people. His brusque, abrasive manner, his aggressive pursuit of his own interest alienated him from his colleagues.

So he had come to Chicago and found a job with the company. He spoke with reverence about his Manhattan days. New York was a place for real men. They didn't come much tougher. Everything else was sedate by comparison.

The new guy was installed at the desk next to Nicholas. Poor bastard, thought Nicholas. He doesn't realize what a terrible mistake he's made. Run for your life, he felt like saying.

He turned back to the page he was writing on. He racked his brains. He could sell something. What, though?

He remembered his first job. It was shortly after he had arrived in Chicago. He was just off the boat, naive and full of enthusiasm. He had responded to an ad in the Employment Section of the newspaper. "Business Development Officer Needed." It sounded pretty good, on the face of it. Everyone was very nice to him. He got his own office in a high-rise on Michigan. He even got to choose his own furniture. Then his first day of work began. He was expected to call people up all over the country and sell them timeshare in holiday resorts in Florida. Most of the people he called told him to fuck-off. It was too much for a sensitive Irish boy. He had been educated to respect people's space and privacy. Not to call them at home, harass them repeatedly, and sell them on something they didn't need or want. He was too polite, his boss told him, not aggressive enough. People don't respect that. People are basically stupid, he said. Sell them a line. Manipulate them. Control them.

So he went back to the phone. But it was still no good. He just wasn't a pushy emigrant. He didn't possess that hard nosed, street-wise mentality. He had been pampered all his life. Morrisey's description of "unfailingly polite" had been pretty accurate, filled full of unrealistic notions and then turned loose on the world.

Needless to say Nicholas didn't long endure at that job. By the end of the week, he was ready to run out of the place screaming. Strangely though his boss encouraged him to stay. It flattered his ego to have this well-spoken European, on board. He possessed a yearning like many Americans for some amorphous notion of culture and refinement. Europe, to him, was a seat of learning and culture.

He was the typical, self-made millionaire. Just as soon as the financial basis of his new prosperity was secured, a compulsion for the arts, the finer things of life assumed overwhelming importance. It was akin to movie-stars buying Renoir paintings, the eternal quest for class.

He saw Nicholas as a gentleman, was sympathetic of his difficulties. Nicholas was some kind of expensive, but somewhat defective toy. Rather than throw it away and buy a new one, he

tried to fix it, make it work. He just didn't realize how defective. The Jesuits had got inside Nicholas's head and done serious damage.

Another week went by, and Nicholas had sold nothing. He dreaded picking up the phone, he dreaded going in there every day. He dreaded meetings with his boss, where he would suggest new strategies. In the end even his boss admitted defeat and Nicholas left.

In retrospect those kinds of sales were not for Nicholas. He ruffled the page uneasily. He wanted some idea something creative to jump out at him. He glanced up, the new recruit was looking around him nervously, an expression of mournful anxiety on his face. Most people looked liked that after a few hours in Tony's company. Probably his first job and first exposure to such an environment.

He refocused on the page. It would have to be something that people would come to him for. Something so popular, that he would only have to show up somewhere, and he would be besieged by buyers.

He couldn't think straight. He threw down his pen in disgust. He got up and walked around the office. It was open plan with concentrations of desks around various locations. Along the outside with windows overlooking the lake, was Ken's office and his boss, the partner.

He walked into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee. It was generally pretty disgusting. It did at least having the added advantage of being free. What a farce. What a bogus social convention. Dragging all these people in here every day for most of their lives. It was called work. Institutionalized boredom would be a better description. They were all bored, unless they were freaks. Not one of them really enjoyed what they did. Five o'clock was generally the time they all made an unseemly rush to get out the door.

He took a sip of his coffee and made a wry face. He retook his seat. The new guy was gone. He was probably getting the grand tour. There hadn't been many calls today. In fact if anything it was a quiet day.

Those days tended were deceptive though. He was too superstitious to assume anything. Just as soon as Nicholas got comfortable thinking there was nothing to do, he would be inundated with calls. That was the worst. Being lulled into a false sense of relaxation and then being brutally pulled out of it.

The page peeked out from under the newspaper, where he had hidden it. What about something Irish? Sell something, market something with an Irish motif. He was Irish. God knows there were enough Irish-Americans in this city, crying about the 'Ould Sod, scurrying off to Ireland, on the slightest pretext, buying overpriced junk on Nassau Street. That was the ticket. Irish Americans were suckers for their heritage. But normally they had to go to Ireland to buy it. Aran sweaters, bogus genealogies, the works, they bought it all. Trying to purchase an identity most likely, God help them.

That's where he came in. Let them spend their dollars. He would bring it to them. All he had to do was set-up a stand somewhere and they would flock to it.

What would it be, though? What item could he bring to them? Something with a family crest on it would certainly solve the identity issue.

What did everyone use on a daily basis? It had to be something relatively commonplace. An item of clothing that would work. Sweaters with an Irish motif. Why not? Why the hell not? It could work. After all first comes the idea, then next the realization. There could be an untapped market out there.

He would start small. After all, he didn't have much money saved. He had no idea what it would cost to have sweaters custom made. He could probably afford just a small number to begin with. There would be no premature, profit-taking. All monies initially would have to be reinvested.

Research would have to be done. First of all what was the design he would use on the shirts. That was something he would have to find that out.

Nicholas left the office, early, with a spring in his step. He had spent the rest of the day locating a maker of customized clothing. He had, after some telephone research, found a place on the southside, where a heavily accented gentleman, had assured him that he could manufacture the sweaters at a reasonable price without delay. It was all coming together.

In this new spirit of dynamism, Nicholas had scheduled a meeting for that very same day. There was as he reasoned to himself, no time like the present.

In his bag he carried his check book so he possessed the necessary funds to pay the required deposit. It felt strange to take the train in the opposite direction. Having been a creature of habit for so long there was a schoolboy sense of excitement and wrong-doing. Thirty year old men did not do things out of the ordinary. It was as though he had taken the first concrete step on the road to a new destiny. A new world of opportunity was opening up in front of him.

He had checked his bank balance before boarding the train. Four thousand, five hundred and thirty seven dollars and sixty three cents. Javier, the man he had spoken to had assured him that he could produce four hundred sweaters for as little as three thousand dollars.

He got off the train at where he had been told. Almost immediately on leaving the station he felt nervous. It was not an area of Chicago, frequented by white people. Javier had not given him directions. By the general condition and upkeep of the buildings he could tell he was in a poor neighborhood. A main commercial drag featuring a series of dollar shops and fast food restaurants fronted directly onto the station. He knew by the reactions and looks he was getting from people that it was rarely if ever that someone of Nicholas's background ventured into their area. He felt the insecurity of being a clearly identifiable. He had lost his anonymous status.

He followed the main street for a few blocks. He turned right onto a side-street. A series of drab and non-descript warehouses overshadowed the alley-way. He was looking for number one hundred and four. A dirty canvas sign, fluttered over the entrance of the building. On it was the name 'Print Express'. A concrete staircase led up two flights. On the second level a long corridor opened up. On either side down the length of this corridor different businesses appeared to be located. Most of the rooms appeared to be entirely vacant, or recently vacated. Defunct machinery and trashed office furniture the only reminder of its former tenants.

At the far end of the corridor a small sign on the wall bore the name "Print Express". The door was open and a square of brightness was cast on the wall and floor outside. Nicholas knocked and then tentatively poked his head in the door.

It was a long, featureless room, enclosed by unplastered walls of concrete blocks. At the rear a dusty window, gave feeble illumination, the main light coming from fluorescent tubes which hung, suspended from the ceiling by long metal chains.

A man was busily writing at a desk, looked up when he heard the knock. "Come in, come in" he beamed a smile at Nicholas. He gestured to a dilapidated chair, facing the desk, the only other seat in the room.

"Please sit down" he said enthusiastically. He possessed all the eagerness of a man who had not seen another person all day long. Behind the office area the factory floor began. The demarcation was a dusty bookshelf, on which several stained trade magazines languished. Beyond it a large spindly machine, which Nicholas assumed was the printing press.

"My name is Javier, Javier Gonzalez" he extended his right hand across the desk, while hastily stowing a half-eaten sandwich, in a drawer, with his left.

"Nicholas Martin" he said, shaking his hand "We spoke on the phone earlier."

"Nicholas Martin" Javier mused, momentarily puzzled. Nicholas felt confident he one of the few if not only callers that day.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Martin you called about the sweatshirts. Forgive me, so many demands on my time. Only this afternoon I had to pick up my wife from the hospital. Another baby, last week. A boy this time."

"Congratulations" said Nicholas.

"Oh, you're too kind. I just started this business". He gestured around the room in a self-deprecating manner.

"I will be honest with you, Mr. Martinne", he left a prolonged emphasis on the last syllable, and "it's very slow. I need work, you understand. I must make money for my family. So I do very good job for you, and not charge very much money. Why you want the sweatshirts, is it for to sell?"

"It's for the Irish club" said Nicholas promptly, surprised by the lie. It was as though he didn't want Javier to realize that they were basically on the same level. Both amateurs in the business world.

"It's no matter. I can do this for you. I have lots of experience. I work fifteen years for Mister Print-It. You have heard of them, yes?"

Nicholas had to admit he had not.

"Very big, very big" said Javier, emphatically.

"So, what can I do for you? You say you have a design for the shirts."

"Yes, that's right. Its kind of a rough sketch" he said apologetically. On the back of an envelope, Nicholas had drawn the Martin family crest, just as he remembered it from the family home, in Donnybrook.

"This is just an example" he added, hastily. He had already decided he would use the three most popular Irish last names for the designs of the three different shirts.

Javier studied the envelope intently.

"Yes, I can do this. How many colors you want?"

"Mmmm, I don't know."

"Well, you want black and white? Or you want more?"

Nicholas paused, unsure.

"I can see you are unfamiliar with the process. Let me explain." He face lit up. There was positive joy in his voice.

"This machine", he gestured at the apparatus behind him "imprints the design on the shirts. First we must create screens with your designs." He scrutinized the envelope once again.

"Two colors requires one screen, three colors requires two and so on. Let me show you an example. He rummaged around in a drawer, producing at length a purplish piece of plastic with the words "Chicago, Illinois" cut into it.

"You see the ink comes through the screen, here." He jabbed at the hole in the middle of the plastic, with his finger, "and is imprinted onto the shirt."

"See here; let me show you a finished one." He disappeared below the desk again; the only thing left visible was his balding head, which glistened, slightly, in the artificial light.

"Here," he re-emerged from behind the desk thrusting the finished article into Nicholas's hands.

"You can make four hundred shirts, quickly?" said Nicholas.

"Of course. How soon do you want them?" said Javier.

"A week" said Nicholas, hardly able to contain his excitement.

"I think I can do it, in one week" said Javier, "but if it's a little late its okay, yes?"

"How about half. Can you do two hundred in one week? The rest in two weeks."

"That is fine." He looked very uncomfortable for the first time since they met.

"I will need to ask for a deposit, you understand" he said apologetically, "for to buy the ink and the shirts, of course."

"Of course" said Nicholas. "I understand" he said, "taking out his checkbook "How much do you need?"

"One thousand dollars. Two thousand to finish."

Nicholas wrote out the check for a thousand dollars. In the memo field at the bottom of the check, he wrote "business venture" in his neat, precise hand-writing.

"Thank you, very much. Let me give you a receipt" said Javier, taking the check. He disappeared below the desk again. After a longish period he re-emerged.

"This is all I could find" he said, sadly. On the back of a paper napkin he wrote, 'Received from Mr. Nicholas Martin, one thousand dollars'.

"The stamp, I have a stamp", he said brightening up, suddenly. He produced a small, plastic object from under a sheaf of papers and stamped the napkin with the words 'Print Express'.

Suddenly, there was a commotion and hullabaloo out in the corridor.

"That is my wife, and the baby. It is seven already" said Javier, with obvious embarrassment.

Nicholas turned in his chair to see a petite woman with a very self-effacing manner, hanging by the door, a moving bundle clutched to her, behind her, an elderly woman, Nicholas assumed to be the grandmother.

Javier got up from behind the desk to welcome in his wife. Nicholas was surprised to see how shorter he was. Seated he had imagined him to be much taller. Despite his stature he was a very animated man, with a large jovial face, which seemed to be permanently split by a sheepish grin.

"Mr. Martin, this is my wife and look the new child, and my mother also." He was positively radiant at this point.

Nicholas decided to take the opportunity to make good his escape, before he was invited to dinner, or worse still, the christening.

"I really have to be getting back" he said to Javier, standing up. "I hope everything is in order, and we'll talk early next week, about the shirts. Very nice to meet you" he added nodding at the women and the baby.

He hurried down the corridor without further ado. Almost as soon as he left Javier doubts began to set in. He brushed them aside as best he could. One thing seemed certain; Javier had not had too many clients before him.

Once out in the street the feeling of vague unease returned. It was late now and the main drag was almost deserted. Small groups of black youths in twos and threes hovered on the corners. Nicholas kept walking his eyes focused on the street ahead of him. A largish group of teenagers trailed aimlessly down the street in his direction, some of them barely thirteen years old. They parted in the middle allowing Nicholas to pass through. One of them deliberately brushed into him as he passed. Nicholas kept walking not looking behind him.

Once in the station he began to relax. The train was quiet at this time of the evening and Nicholas pretty much had the car to himself. Of course he would have to tell Sonia about his new venture. He felt confident that she would understand. Sonia was not a risk-taker by nature.

It was natural, as he well knew, at the outset of any enterprise to have doubts. To doubt is to be human. All entrepreneurs must have had humble beginnings.

He gazed out the window at the skyline passing by. Those vaunted symbols of commerce, that flashed by, were not built in a day, nor by the feint-hearted.

A city like Chicago had a superlative feel about it. It had to place itself unashamedly first. Even that preeminence was now threatened. Chicago was original in its day. There were too many imitators, now.

He left the Diversey station in a thoughtful frame of mind. It was a time like this that he would have enjoyed Norman's company, though it was too late to call him. Norman went to bed early and didn't like to be disturbed.

The light was flashing on the answer machine when Nicholas got into the apartment. Two flashes in quick succession meant two messages. The first was from Sonia, sounding quite miffed. It was eight and there was no sign of Nicholas. Where could he possibly be? And why hadn't he called, sooner?

The second was from Norman, in his dry laconic tone.

He first met Norman some years previously. It was at a book launch, Sonia had insisted on dragging Nicholas to. It was part of her series of improvements, for Nicholas. She reasoned that at a book launch he might meet someone who could help him. (At that point Nicholas had still harbored notions of being a writer).

Sonia had unshakeable conviction in what she called 'networking'. She had constructed a whole series of social engagements for Nicholas based on this founding principle.

The event had been surprisingly, crammed full of elderly woman, (exploding Nicholas's cherished stereotype of a writer being some aesthetic and unshaven man in his mid-twenties). Maybe on average these people constituted a greater percentage of the writing population. There were conversations about how to deal with the kids when one wanted to write. One woman in an unfeasibly large and outmoded hat was urging another woman by the name of Susan to lock herself up, be brutal about it, and don't take any backtalk from the little 'mites'.

The background hum had been silenced by a youthful and rather officious looking man banging a fork against his wineglass, and shouting, "attention, your attention please!!" His job, he informed the assembled gathering of middle-aged literati was to introduce the writer. The writer in question was a wispy and weather-beaten woman who hung back behind the officious young man. He spoke at length about how he had come to know and admire this lady, her tenacity and

perseverance, becoming acquainted with her through the medium of her first novel. It was long-winded but sincere, punctuated by his obvious nervousness.

At the end of it all the lady-writer took to the stand. She wanted to thank everyone who had made it possible for her including her friends and family. Nicholas didn't doubt that they comprised a large part of the audience. She was going to read her chosen excerpts, what for her was most meaningful in that she had written. She began to read in a high-pitched quavering voice. To Nicholas it seemed very descriptive and objectifying, but he kept his opinion to himself.

It was at the end of it all after rapturous applause from the assembly that a youngish, slightly overweight man sporting a goatee leaned over and whispered in Nicholas's ear "what a load of crap".

That was the first time he met Norman. He never did to this day figure out what inspired Norman to venture those five words. Maybe he discerned Nicholas's opinion from his face. He could generally tell Nicholas what he was thinking before he even said it. More likely though it was just one of those impulsive and unpredictable acts which characterized Norman's life.

It was partly that aspect that was so appealing to Nicholas. Norman was the genuine article. He didn't give a toss what Nicholas or anyone else thought. If he felt like saying or doing something that was good enough for him. He was persuasive when he wanted to be and would wave his podgy hands in the air, his face would redden, and he would talk volubly, about the world, America's degeneration, Jewish foibles, (including his own), how the Jews, like the Irish, had their own diaspora. He was for ever planning, scheming new initiatives with boundless energy and enthusiasm.

Norman came from a wealthy background and was extremely intelligent. He had dabbled in every conceivable profession - one year of medical school, finishing his law degree after two attempts and a hiatus of thirteen months spent in brothels in Miami and smoking reefers in Jamaica.

He had gone into business for himself briefly and unsuccessfully. Several months later and twenty thousands dollars poorer he had admitted defeat. As he later explained to Nicholas he was not cut out for the working world. He was intended solely to be a gentleman of leisure. He would go to his office, specially rented on Michigan Avenue, and spend the whole day doing crosswords and flirting with the secretary.

When the family finally pulled the plug Norman was not too upset. Work was overrated. The recourse of the small-minded. He was not, and never would be, one of the 'little people'. He sympathized with Nicholas. For him working was a necessary evil. He would frequently embarrass Nicholas by offering to bring him on jet-setting jaunts. Nicholas would always refuse.

Norman would disappear for months at a time returning without warning or fanfare

Nicholas slumped into his couch. He was weary, after his day's activities. He didn't feel up to calling Sonia. As usual she would demand an explanation. He didn't feel like explaining how he

had spent a thousand dollars in one day. Right now Sonia's skepticism and disbelief would be too much. He would call her from work tomorrow.

He stretched out full-length on the couch. There was another one of those interminable chat-shows on the box. He drifted off to sleep as two sisters explained why they had both fallen in love with the same man.

Chapter 3 – Norman staking out Tyler’s Place

Norman shifted his weight again. He longed to get out and walk around. He was cramped. After two hours he was sick of it. He always hated confinement. Nausea was the first thing to hit him - that feeling he knew so well as a child.

Dad would drive them to Michigan for summer vacation. Rachel and he were always fighting in the back. The old man would take for a while. Eventually he would get mad. "Unless you two stop we're going back to Chicago." Never meant it though. Rachel was such a sweet kid, then. Started going off the rails in her teens. Last time he saw her she looked terrible. On some vegetarian diet. Became a Moslem, too. That really killed the old man. He had to make up stories about her. Told Stephen she was out west learning horticulture. The latest was she was living on some farm for freaks in Ohio.

Summer seemed a long way off. He had the heat cranked right up. The radio said it was ten degrees outside. Inside he could feel a damp patch forming in the seat of his trousers.

From the car he had a clear view of the entire street. It was very like the neighborhood he grew up in. In summer a street like this would be alive. Kids playing, gardeners cutting grass, the sound of dogs barking. Now, winter held it in a frigid grip.

It was nearly afternoon. He was getting hungry. The old bastard was late. Not like him. He was usually very punctual. For six weeks he had parked here, on the corner of his street, waiting for him to come home. This would be the last time. He scanned the street for a sign.

Tyler drove an old Cadillac. Too tight and proud to replace it. You knew his generation from their choice of car. A status symbol from the sixties. A relic from an age of largesse. They were the doers. The merchants of self-reliance. They worked hard and now were enjoying the rewards. Bastards. People like Norman were a mystery to them. Selfish, lazy and resentful to boot. They had no idea what it was like growing up with a sense of grievance. They had started with no expectations and had succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. Of course they had faith in the system that had suckered them. They could hardly be expected to do otherwise. If you didn't make it you were a dropout, a parasite on the hard work of other people, an exploiter of bleeding hearts.

Norman smiled. It would be revenge on his father too. Tyler and he were so alike.

Matt Tyler made his money prospecting new oil reserves. He travelled extensively. Singapore, China, Baja, he'd even lived in Europe for a while. He loved Europe, he once told Norman's father. Europe was culture, sophistication, the finer things of life. It was the only purchase he had left to make. He did try. His house was full of expensive art works bought on his regular visits to Sotheby's in London.

He had been based in London for a while in the sixties where the cultural love affair began. He once cornered Norman and gave him a bellyful of guff about the place. Buckingham Palace, Hyde Park and shopping on Oxford Street. It must have been thrilling to a nouveau riche American. Of course he wasn't as wealthy then.

There he was finally. His Cadillac had just appeared on the street. Drove it himself. He regarded a chauffeur as an unnecessary expense. Old skinflint. Probably coming from his office downtown.

He didn't really work anymore. Just put in a daily appearance. He showed up for a couple of hours in the morning before his round of golf. Everyone at the office would tell him what a great guy he was and kiss his ass. Then he was off for eighteen holes at Waveland Golf Course.

Afterwards a few drinks in the clubhouse, where he would bitch about the way the country was being run. How the Japs were taking over.

The country needed strong leadership. Kennedy, now there was a president. He didn't take any shit. He kicked ass. A couple of drinks later he was warming to his theme. Now it was all washy-wishy compromise and bleeding hearts. This dependency mentality was ruining a great country. America was built on hard work, sweat and dogged persistence. The younger generation didn't want to work. Expected everything handed on a plate. They were spoiled. They're would a general nodding of heads around the table.

Tyler lived on his own. His wife died years ago. Must have patronized her to death. Norman vaguely remembered her from garden parties his father used to give. He would invite three hundred people including the Tyler's. She came clutching Tyler's arm - an appendage to the great man.

Her health was never good. She was a wispy, weepy sort of woman, constantly sick with one type of ailment or another. Eventually, after much procrastination, she did what every one expected and died of cancer.

Tyler never remarried. He did have two kids, about Norman's age. As far as Norman knew one was in California, the other joined the Hara Krishna's and lived on a farm in Ohio. Tyler made some abortive efforts to liberate her from what he believed was some brainwashed captivity. He soon found out that she was quite happy where she was and did not want to come back.

The car paused for the electronic gates to open and then disappeared into the driveway.

In a notebook Norman noted down the time and the date.

He vaguely contemplated another cup of coffee. He had three already this morning. Another would probably make him sick. Norman had a delicate constitution. He had many allergies as a child. His psychiatrist had later interpreted them as a bid for his father's attention, but by then he was too fond of them to give them up. His thoughts turned to the business at hand.

Timing was crucial. Without it there whole operation would collapse. The other weak link was his partners. Norman was not accustoming to working with other people. He was usually a solo

operator. This time he needed help. There was no way he could do this on his own. Despite that he had to be in control. There was no compromising on that.

Jefferson was late already. Probably still asleep. What the hell was he thinking? Why was Norman the only one who took it seriously?

As far as Norman could tell Jefferson had spent most of his life in bed.

He was not a dynamic person. He never had a job, nor made any serious attempt to find one. He rarely got up before one. Even then he spent the afternoon loafing around his apartment. Norman knew his routine. By five he was in the gym. He spent two hours pumping weights and trying to pick up women. By seven thirty he was on the phone organizing the evening's entertainment. This involved figuring out what club he was going to and who was going to be there. He liked to drink - an interest he shared in common with Norman. In fact it was on a drinking bout that he met Norman for the first time.

He was a big guy, three inches taller than Norman and always demonstrative, physically. On meeting he would vigorously shake Norman's hand in an iron grip. He sought to convey sincerity with his body language.

He lived on Division in a run-down block of apartments, his mother close-by. Norman never plumbed the depths of that relationship but it seemed to be Jefferson's closest. He never talked about her.

Norman was only ever there once. He remembered, smiling, that visit, seeing Jefferson flustered, for the first time. This was a side of Jefferson no-one was meant to see. Norman arrived uninvited. He was curious.

Jefferson answered the door, in shorts, a look of shock registering on his face. He stood squarely in the doorway, obscuring the view, making no attempt to invite him in. Norman caught a glimpse of the squalor within.

The hallway was littered with empty beer bottles and junk. What looked like a half-eaten meal lay untouched on the floor. On a balcony shared by all the apartments a family had set-up a barbecue. The smell of fried chicken wafted down the corridor.

What truly amazed Norman is that he could emerge turned out as he was. Jefferson was always immaculately dressed. Seeing where he lived Norman understood. Clothes were the difference between Jefferson and where he lived.

Of course this current project had a lot to do with the old man, Norman knew. Such a pompous bastard.

It was that fateful day eight weeks ago that had galvanized Norman. He knew something was up when he was summoned at short notice to his father's offices. Normally his father had very little to do with Norman. They were not alike.

This was not one of Norman's better days. The night before he had been drinking and doing lines with some buddies until all hours. Then at eleven he was disturbed from his slumbers by that bitch, Mrs. Rosenthal (his father's secretary) who took personal pleasure in harassing Norman, no doubt on his father's strict instructions.

"Your father wants to see you at midday" she informed him in her frosty tones. Before Norman could make a suitably sarcastic rejoinder she had hung-up.

Eleven-thirty saw Norman already showered and shaved and in a taxi earlier than he had been since his days in practice on Michigan. It was important he reflected to humor his sole benefactor and source of funds. Norman had expensive tastes and it had become something of a ritual to pay lip-service to his father's expectations while in private doing exactly the opposite.

He arrived at twelve fifteen. Only fifteen minutes late. Not at all bad. The offices were on the fifteenth floor. From the lobby he could see Mrs. Rosenthal glowering through the plate glass doors.

"You can go right in" she growled. There was just a hint of triumph in her voice.

Norman knew she was well acquainted with his father's opinions. "Mr. Rosen is a great man" she once told Norman. She loved the old man. He wouldn't be surprised if something had passed between them. Of course his father would never admit to that. He was beyond repute. An upstanding citizen, personal friend of the Mayor, chairman of Republican chapter.

Norman knew something was up when he opened the solid mahogany doors and went in. The first thing he always noticed about the room was the view. Full-length windows ran from floor to ceiling, revealing a frosty panorama of Lake Michigan. He refocused on the room. There was trouble coming, no doubt. His father seated, looked up as Norman entered. He was a tall well-built man, with a high complexion. (In his youth he had even been quite athletic, but had started running to fat in his middle years. Too many business lunches and booze. To his right was a taller, skinner man wearing a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, his father's accountant, and administrator of the trust fund, Hanes.

That miserable sycophant, thought Norman.

"Norman, sit down please" his father said, briskly.

"Hanes, how much money did you give Norman last month". That ass-kisser.

"Last month, Mr. Rosen Jr, spent over fifteen thousand dollars and withdrew ten thousand in cash from the fund."

"Twenty-five thousand dollars. Jesus Christ, Norman. Twenty five thousand dollars."

He said it again, as if he didn't spend ten times that on himself. He had a habit of repeating himself. He believed it made what he was saying somehow more important. He stood up and paced back and forth.

"What were you thinking, Norman?"

"Look, Dad" he said, trying the filial approach, "I had some extraordinary expenses last month. I don't spend that much every month. Tell him, Hanes."

Hanes did not respond. He only seemed to react to statements from Norman's father. His eyes followed Mr. Rosen, nervously as he moved around the room. As though he was afraid he would miss something important if his gaze strayed for a moment.

"Norman, quite frankly it's not just the money. It's everything. You're thirty-one years old. You've never had a job. The only time I ever hear from you is when you want something, or when you're in trouble. Last month I got a call from a Detective Maloney down on Halsted, he wanted to know if I would post bail for a certain Loretta Mendez who drove your car into the back of a stationary bus whilst under the influence...."

"I can explain about that" Norman protested. "I told her not to take the car."

"Norman I don't even want to hear it. You're an embarrassment, Norman and it's never going to change. I didn't tear you away from your all-night parties and your girlfriends to give you a lecture. God knows, I know how futile that is. I brought you here to tell you something, or rather have Hanes tell you. You're off the payroll Norman, officially, as of today. Hanes."

Hanes looked up suddenly like a frightened animal; the one time his attention had wandered he had been caught on the hop.

"Aaaah yes. Mr. Rosen requested I draw up the necessary legal documentation to spell out the situation."

"Spell out what, what situation?". Norman was getting really nervous now.

"This amount will constitute a final settlement, after which there will be no further payments".

Hanes pointed with a long, bony finger to a point on the document, which he had put in front of Norman.

Norman read and then reread the figure.

"Fifty thousand, that's it. No more after that. You can't do this."

"Oh, but I can Norman" said his father.

"How am I supposed to live off that?" he inquired, glumly.

"You'll manage. Lots of people do. It will be good for you Norman. Character building."

Norman tried one last-ditch effort.

"I could change. This is just the kind of kick I need."

His father resumed his seat.

"I hope you do, Norman. I hope you do. No-one would be happier than I, but I won't hold my breath until that happens. Now Hanes and I have some business to conduct. I think you'll find Mrs. Rosenthal, has something for you, on your way, out."

So that was it. Cut adrift, practically penniless, without the slightest consideration.

That very same day as he took the elevator to the parking lot, he had the germ of a plan in his head. Revenge of a kind, indirectly.

Norman was no fool. He knew that this day was coming. It was not the first time such a possibility had occurred to him. He gave thought to his options. Penury was not appealing. He did not grow up in the lap of luxury to gracefully surrender it on a whim. Certainly not to a phony moralizer, like his father. Hypocrite. One business lunch with his self-styled friends could cost a thousand bucks.

There was a way to secure his financial independence. It was the subject of late night conversations with Roberto and Jefferson. Only before it had been on a more theoretical level. Now for the first time it took on a serious earnestness.

He refused to be bound by the narrow confines of finance, the petty constraints by which others lived. He would take what was rightfully his, by whatever means at his disposal.

That was about two months ago.

Norman looked up from his notebook. To his left through the window he could see Jefferson walking up the street, his long black raincoat trailing in the wind, revealing an equally black and immaculate suit. Black sunglasses completed the image. He dominated the middle of the side-walk. The whole image was designed to impress. Stupid bastard, thought Norman. That's just the kind of impression people will remember.

Jefferson sauntered up to the car and got in the passenger seat beside Norman.

"You're late" said Norman, with asperity.

Jefferson ignored Norman's opening remark. He phoned out statements that he didn't want to hear. Norman could be a pain in the ass. So uptight, sometimes. For once he had a good idea, assuming everything worked.

"Did Tyler arrive yet?" he inquired.

"Ten minutes ago." said Norman. "Jefferson, I don't think you should dress like that when you come down here."

"Why not? What's wrong with it?" said Jefferson, defensively. "I always dress like this." His face showed that there.

"People will see you and remember. Think about it. After this happens, the place will be crawling with cops. Cops asking questions. Try to be inconspicuous, Jefferson. Dress down for once in your life."

Jefferson leaned back in disgust. He wished the whole thing was over. He was a man of action, impulsive action. Long drawn out planning held no appeal for him. Already the whole thing bored him. Twice now, Norman had demanded he come down to sit outside this guy's house. Casing the joint, he called it. Norman said they had to know everything about Tyler. Who worked in

his house, who his friends, where he spent his day. Down to an unbelievable level of minutia. It was too much.

Jefferson was just as much a stranger to the working world as Norman. He sustained himself by a complex mixture of welfare, debt, drug-dealing and freeloaderly. It was a precarious existence. One that entailed long and involved manipulation of people he didn't really like.

"Did you talk to Roberto?" Norman inquired.

"Yeah, he said he would meet us later at the Rendezvous."

The Rendezvous was an all-night bar and dance-club where Norman had first outlined his scheme to both Jefferson and Roberto.

It was a featureless Wednesday night. They had gravitated together more out of habit than any real desire for each other's company. The place was practically empty. Disco music blared out into an empty dance-floor.

It was a time for new resolutions. The consensus round the table was they had all been disadvantaged in some way, Norman, by disinheritance after a life of luxury, Jefferson by the father he had never known, and Roberto, by his best friend who stole his fiancé, Marie.

"Well, we might as well get going" said Norman. He turned the key in the ignition.

Chapter 4 – The club where the robbers meet

The club was quiet. At the back a waiter was busy setting up tables. Behind the bar a tall, skinny, girl with tattooed arms was wiping the counter. It was seedy, smoky place. Unwashed paneled walls and shady booths with stained, satined upholstery lent to an almost sinister atmosphere.

The bar top was old, worn and pitted with many carvings. Even Norman had signed his name there one drunken night. It smelled of cigarette smoke and beer. Decrepit drapes and awnings hung limply down above.

Roberto was late. They sat at the bar and ordered a drink while they waited.

"How much longer before we're ready?" said Jefferson?

Norman stared at his reflection in the mirror, his head comically distorted.

"A few more weeks at least. Why? Are you getting impatient?"

"No, just wondering."

"What about Roberto?"

"He'll be alright. Don't worry about him."

"And the other guy?"

"I haven't decided yet."

The tall, skinny girl came and put two glasses of beer down in front of them.

"Is that all you wanted?" she said.

"That's it. How are you, today?" said Jefferson.

"Why?" she said.

"I don't know. Just curious that's all."

"I felt better before you asked me."

"Oh."

"Why do you bother?" said Norman after she left. "She's really ugly and she's not interested."

"You never know. All women are attractive anyway plus they don't know what they want. A girl like that finds confidence attractive."

"Obviously not in your case" said Norman, standing up.

"Let's sit in one of the booths. I don't want anyone listening to our conversation."

They took their drinks with them.

"Let me ask you this" said Jefferson when they were seated. "How many men would show consistent interest in that girl like I would?"

"You mean how many don't get the message?"

"I'm telling you sooner or later she'll start thinking about me. I guarantee it."

He nodded his head emphatically.

"Do you ever think about anything else?" said Norman.

"What do you mean?"

"Anything other than women?"

"Why? What else is there to think about?"

He smiled.

"I think about this deal sometimes" said Jefferson, after a moment. "Don't you ever have doubts?"

"Of course I do. Planning will see us through. Like I told you I've got it all figured out. As soon as Roberto comes we'll go to my apartment. I'll explain everything."

"I'll tell you one thing, prison's not pretty."

"Don't start that shit again."

"I'm not starting anything. I wouldn't be human if I didn't have doubts."

"Well, don't be human around me."

"Alright. Alright."

A man came in from the street. He was tall and dark with long hair, tied back in a ponytail. He stood at the door for a second surveying the scene. Then he walked towards them.

"Roberto. There you are" said Jefferson.

"What's up?" said Roberto. "Norman looks unhappy."

"He's a little upset right now."

"I sick of hearing doubts. If you have any I don't want to hear them."

"That's not very nice" said Jefferson. "Roberto just arrived."

"This is not some frigging joke Jefferson."

"Oh relax."

Roberto sat beside Norman. He took a cigarette from a pocket in his jacket and lit it. He exhaled a large cloud of smoke. "Guess what? Marie had a fight with Carlos. I heard it from Loren, her cousin. Loren can't stand Carlos any more than I can."

"Are you still talking about your ex-girlfriend?" said Jefferson.

"I wasn't talking to you" said Roberto. "I was talking to Norman. He understands how I feel."

"When you get your share you'll have all the women you want" said Norman.

"First I'm going to buy a villa in Columbia. You can buy a huge house there for the price of an apartment here."

"What about you Jefferson?" said Norman.

"I'm going to get a black Mercedes convertible."

"Another of Jefferson's phallic symbols I suppose" said Roberto.

"Very funny" said Jefferson. "And you Norman, what do you want?"

"I got that figured" said Norman.

"First I invest about sixty percent in high-tech stock, a diversified portfolio mind you, and then I'll live of the rest. That way I'll have a guaranteed income for the rest of my life."

He finished his drink.

"Anyway we should go now Roberto's here."

He stood up. The others got up followed him out into the street.

It was already late afternoon. Workmen had cordoned off part of the street. A large excavator was busy piling soil from a hole that had been dug in the ground. Elsewhere men were stacking concrete pipes on the sidewalk.

Across the street a building was being demolished. It had been abandoned with one side still standing. On the second floor a former bedroom was opened to the sky. Strips of wallpaper fluttered in the wind.

They walked a block to where Norman had parked.

"You managed to hang on to the car at any rate" said Jefferson getting in.

"Just about" said Norman. "I hate having no money."

"Welcome to reality" said Jefferson.

Norman started up the engine.

"Your reality not mine."

"What about your apartment?" said Roberto.

"I own that" said Norman. "Let's just say there's a big difference between having money and losing it, and never having it at all."

It was a short ride to his home. The apartment was in a tower block overlooking the lake, a gift from his father on his twenty-first birthday.

They parked in the underground parking lot taking the elevator to the twenty-seventh floor.

He opened the door and ushered them in. The floor was covered with stacks of books, magazines and newspapers. Heaps of papers were piled on every surface. Book shelves covered the walls bending under the weight of huge reference books.

It was the pictures that caught Jefferson's attention. One showed Norman on a pier, a huge marlin hanging beside him.

"When was this taken?"

"A few years ago. I caught it off the Keys. That's my father's boat in the background".

Roberto cleared a space for himself on the couch and lit a cigarette.

"Can I have a glass of water? The air's very dry."

Norman went into the kitchen returning with a jam-jar filled with water.

"That's all there was. All the cups are dirty. I can't afford the maid any more."

"You need a woman to do your cleaning" said Jefferson, sitting on the arm of the couch.

"Oh no. Not this again." said Roberto.

"At least I'm not crying about some woman who left me six months ago" said Jefferson. "I don't know how you listen to that shit Norman. Roberto needs a mother not a lover."

"It's only because you've never been in love that I refuse to be insulted by that remark."

"Love, what's that?" said Norman. "It's the creation of some romantic poet. Personally I think it's outdated."

"It's a feeling. It's an emotion" said Jefferson. "You can't expect it to last forever. That's your problem, Roberto. Marie was in love with you but it changed. She changed. Don't you get it?"

"I don't want your advice. Anyway don't bring Marie into this. She is a woman not some bar room bimbo."

"I like bimbos" said Jefferson.

"Well, I'm happy for you."

"Enough" said Norman. "I didn't bring you here to discuss your love-lives. Let's talk business, shall we?"

Okay, I know we've been over this a few times already. However we can't be too prepared. So I'm going to repeat myself again and again until we all know the plan backwards."

He disappeared into another room emerging with a roll of papers.

"I was able to get the original floor plan of the house" he said spreading the drawing out over the coffee table.

"Isn't that risky?" said Roberto. "Can't they trace that?"

"Don't worry. I was very discreet" said Norman.

"Here's the perimeter wall. I've marked the entrance point here. Once we scale the wall we have to cross the garden and get into the house. That shouldn't be too difficult. Our best bet is the patio doors here. Believe it or not Tyler has practically no security and he lives on his own. On a typical Monday night he's in bed by eleven."

"How do you know?" said Roberto.

"Because I've watched the house. In the last six weeks he's gone to bed pretty much at the same time every night."

He sat down on the edge of the coffee table.

"I don't anticipate any problems. We should be in and out of there in fifteen minutes."

"What about the safe?" said Jefferson. "You don't know much about that. Or if it even exists for sure."

"I have considered that. I believe it exists. Why would Tyler lie? He trusts my father. He had nothing to gain from lying. The other thing I find appealing is that it's money that supposedly does not exist. He can hardly report it stolen."

"Suppose we find the safe" said Jefferson. "What if we can't open it? There are a lot of ifs."

"This safe is built to be concealed not to be tough. In any event I have a diamond drill which will cut through anything. Don't forget too Tyler has some pretty valuable art-work. If we don't find the safe there will be a consolation prize."

The table started shaking ever so slightly. Roberto was wagging his foot underneath it, legs crossed.

"I know you've explained it all" he said. "I just can't help feeling nervous. I'll be happier when it's over."

"We're all nervous. Just follow the plan and you'll be fine. No solo acts. We're one team, and I'm the leader. Agreed."

They nodded their heads in agreement.

"There is one other thing, I haven't thought about yet."

He stroked his goatee.

"While all this is going on we will need someone outside in the car. I don't want an unpleasant surprise when we come out."

"What do you suggest?" said Jefferson.

"I think we're going to need another person."

Chapter 5 – In the office

It rained all day. Tony came in after lunch soaking wet.

"Can you believe this weather?" he said taking off his coat.

"At least it's not snowing."

"Not yet."

He came over and sat on the chair beside him.

"Man, I'm pissed off."

"Why?"

"Don't ever get married. That's why."

"What happened?"

"My wife, that's what. Listen to this. I go to meet her for lunch. I figure we'd go to this new place over on Jackson. The one beside the coffee shop. I should have had my head examined. First of all, she hates anything new. It takes months for her to like a new place. She'd go to the same restaurant her whole life if she could.

Anyway we get there. I'm wet. She's wet. It's a fifteen minute wait. No big deal for most people. But she has to get into an argument with the hostess. It's not as if everyone else doesn't have to wait. Finally we get to our table. As soon as she gets the menu she says she doesn't like the place anymore. There are no salads. It's all steak and rib. Man food, she calls it. And why did I bring her there anyway, when we could have gone to Luigi's? So in the end she has coffee and blames the whole thing on me. And it cost fifty bucks. I really don't understand her at all."

"It's biology. That's the difference."

"What do you mean?"

"Between men and women. They each have a different biology. They want different things from each other. That's why they never get along."

"She's just being a bitch. I married a bitch. That's all."

"But why is she a bitch? Did you ever think of that?"

"Maybe she was born that way. I don't know. I take it back. I mean she's not that bad. She has to put up with me, too."

"That's what I think, anyway."

"Jesus, you're some optimist. Where did you go for lunch, anyway?"

"Nowhere. I was here all the time."

"You need to get out more. It's not good to sit at your desk all day. No wonder you're coming up with morbid theories."

Ken came back from lunch. He called Tony into his office. They had some bullshit discussion. Ken loved meetings. He was always creating reasons to have them. They were long, wordy affairs that led nowhere. It was a ready-made forum for his ego.

After a while Tony came out again. This time he was being the boss.

"Did you get those checks from the cage?"

"What checks?"

"What do mean what checks? The checks Steve was supposed to give you yesterday."

"I forgot."

"Go get them right now."

He ran off to get the checks. He could see the rain through the kitchen window as he passed. The tops of the other buildings were wrapped in mist.

"Steve hasn't done them yet" he reported back to Tony.

"That's your fault. If you had asked him when I told you to we wouldn't have this problem."

After that he left him alone. He took the paper's sports section and went into the bathroom for a half hour.

The rest of the day went by quickly enough. At five he left and made a dash for the train. He was headed for Javier's print shop. State Street was wet and windy. The rain had slackened off to a drizzle.

He boarded breathless. It was crowded and smelly, every seat taken. He found himself pressed up against the door. The world outside blurred through fogged-up windows. He felt claustrophobic and sick.

He got out at the same station as before. The same unease hit him as he left the building. It menaced from tatty store fronts, overflowing trash cans, garbage strewn everywhere, groups of youths idling on the street corner. He walked quickly to the warehouse.

Javier was not there when he arrived. Instead a boy was sitting at the desk. He jumped up when Nicholas came in. He looked guilty.

"My father's not here."

"Where is he?"

"He's gone to pick up my mother. He told me to give you this."

He pointed to a large cardboard box by the door.

"Is that everything?"

"Just the first batch?"

"How many sweaters are in there?"

"One hundred and fifty, I think."

He went over, opened it and took one out. He held it up to the light. It looked terrible. The ink was stained in places and the colors were badly mixed. The print had blurred slightly like a picture taken out of focus.

"Are they all like this?"

"No. Just that one."

He must have been ready for this.

"Here let me show you."

He pulled out another.

"This one's perfect. See, the back's not blurred. My father said that other one's free."

He looked at the rest.

"They're better but they're not perfect."

"I made this myself. You won't get better elsewhere. It's the ink. More expensive ink costs more money."

"I need to talk to your father."

Just then Javier arrived with his wife and baby.

"Mr. Martin, good to see you. How is everything?"

"Javier, these shirts are terrible."

He looked pained. He handed the baby over to his wife and picked one out.

"I don't know what you mean. No process is perfect. This equipment is old. I did the best I could. Normally it would cost twice or three times as much. The shirts alone are a thousand dollars."

"I know but the printings blurred."

They were interrupted by the baby crying. Javier's wife tried to console it. She whispered softly to it rocking it back and forth. She walked out into the corridor. Instead of getting quieter the noise grew louder and louder. She came back a few moments later. Her face was worried.

The baby did not look well. Its cheeks were very red. It stopped crying suddenly. Its breathing was shallow and raspy.

"Javier, I don't know what's wrong. I think she's choking on something" she said.

Business was forgotten. Javier took the infant from his wife and put it over his knee. He slapped it hard on the back. It coughed, spluttered and started to cry again.

"Something was blocked" he said.

Nicholas stood around unsure what to do.

"Is it alright now?" he said.

"She, it's a girl."

"I'm sorry, she."

"She will be fine" said Javier. "Babies choke very easily at that age."

"I see."

He handed her back to his wife.

"Mr. Martin, please forgive the interruption."

"Oh, that's quite alright."

"Okay, where we're we? Perhaps if we use a different type of ink we can make the print clearer. I will try to do better for the rest. I am disappointed that you are not pleased. I tried to do a good job."

He looked unhappy.

"I'll take these ones for now" said Nicholas.

He took the box and left taking a cab back to his apartment. He was too tired for the train.

Now that he had his sweatshirts he had no idea how to sell them. Getting them made was the easy part. The hard part would be selling them.

He could see from the street that the living room light was on when he got back. Sonia must have let herself in. She was the only person with a key. Even so she never came around without calling first.

He carried the box upstairs, fumbling for his keys, balancing it on one knee while he got the door open.

She was sitting on the couch looking upset. Her face was red and her eyes swollen.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

"I wanted to talk to you."

He shut the door and put the box on the floor.

"What's in the box?"

"Oh, nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing?"

"Just a few things from work. That's all."

"Let me see."

She got up, stuck her hand into the box and pulled a shirt out.

"What's this? I'm proud to be Irish." She read the back of the shirt.

"Is just a little business idea."

"What business idea?"

"I got some sweatshirts made with that printed on them. I'm going to sell them to stores and whoever wants to buy them."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Perfectly."

"That's the kind of idea a teenager or a student has. You're thirty years old. How are you going to sell them? They must have cost thousands of dollars."

"Why do you have to be so critical? I think it could do very well."

"How much did all this cost?"

"Not that much."

"How much?"

"Four thousand."

"Four thousand dollars? You've got to be kidding."

"What's the big deal?"

"That's all your savings. You spent all your savings on sweatshirts."

"Well, I think it's a good idea. I don't expect you to understand."

He sat down.

"You're right. I don't understand. To me, it's a waste of money. Why did you do it, anyway?"

"You don't get it, do you? You're content to live out your life without ever trying for anything better. All you want is have babies and live in some stupid suburb. Haven't you ever dreamed about bettering yourself? Not just existing, for a change?"

"You call this bettering yourself. I'm more realistic than that."

"You're not a realist. You have no vision. That's your problem. You don't even believe there is another way to live your life, except work, and family and then your own family, like some kind of genetically programmed robot."

"And I suppose you're not programmed by your own desires. Well if you think selling sweatshirts on the street corner like some bum is going to help you, good luck."

"It's just an idea. An attempt to break out of this lifestyle. You know how much I hate it."

"Why do you hate it?"

"You never believed me when I told you that. I hate it because it's so predictable and mundane. Working all week. Going to the supermarket at the weekend. The two week vacation in Ireland. Going to your mother's house for Sunday dinner. It's so pointless and I just can't do it anymore."

There was silence.

"Nicholas, you're a very complicated person. I've always known that. I don't know what would make you happy, but it's beyond my power to give it to you. Anyway I don't want to argue about how you spend your money or live your life. That's your concern. I came here to tell you that I can't see you anymore. I know now that whatever's eating away at you inside is never going to change. You'll never be content with the kind of lifestyle I want to lead. I've thought about it a lot in the last few weeks."

He wanted to say something appropriate to the gravity of the moment. But the only thing he could think was that he needed to go to the bathroom.

"Okay."

"Okay, what?"

"Okay, you're right. I'm weird. You're normal. We're better off apart."

"I think it's for the best. If you want we can discuss it some more."

"That's alright."

"You're sure you don't want to talk about it?"

"No. It's fine. I mean its okay. I knew this was coming for a long time."

"You're sure it's okay?"

"Well, there's nothing to talk about. Your mind is made up already."

"Don't think this is easy for me."

"I'm not saying it's easy for you."

"It took me a long time to think this way."

"I know."

She got up.

"I think I'm going to leave now."

"Okay."

"Call me if you want to go out for a drink sometime."

"I will."

"Good luck with the sweatshirts."

"Thanks."

"Well, good-bye."

She was hanging by the door.

"It's okay to go. I'll be alright. You don't have to feel bad."

"Okay then. Bye."

"Bye."

She closed the door behind her.

He went to the bathroom. He couldn't wait any longer. It was strange how mundane the most crucial moments in his life could be.

He wasn't regretful. Maybe he would feel that way in a while. Loneliness took time to grow. While she was around she was so much a part of his life that he hardly gave her a second thought.

He lay down on the bed fully dressed. He probably would miss her in the end. By then she would have forgotten all about him. It was coming for a while anyway. She wasn't going to change. Neither was he. He couldn't live the way she wanted to live.

He could never settle for that.

Chapter 6 – Selling T-shirts in Chicago

"Do you have a permit?"

"What do you mean a permit?"

The cop looked at him in disbelief.

"I mean a permit for all this stuff."

He stared behind him. Two of Javier's sweatshirts hung from the railings. The wind had caught one and flipped it over the wrong way. The other fluttered this way and that. A cardboard sign on the ground read 'Irish Sweaters \$20'.

He was overweight, his breathing heavy and raspy. He talked slow, too, like you would to a child or someone who's dumb.

"You need a license for street trading. You can't just stand on a corner and sell whatever you want. There are laws, you know."

"But it's a free country. I can stand here if I want."

"Look buddy, where have you been? Nothing's free anymore. There's a law against that."

"That's what's wrong with this frigging country. There's a law against everything."

"Don't get smart with me."

"I'm not getting smart. I don't know about any law."

"Well, you should. What the hell is that anyway?"

"It's a sweatshirt. Wanna buy one?"

He ignored the question.

"Maybe I'm in a good mood or something. I'm going to let this go. Get a license. Until then don't let me see you around here."

He went off promising to return.

It was a damp, misty Sunday morning. His set-up where Chicago and Michigan Avenue meet. The air was dusty from a building site nearby. Somewhere a jackhammer was going incessantly. Cars, trucks, buses roared by. People milled and jostled at the crosswalk. Stop and go like a flood through a sluice. Fresh waves coming off buses.

After a while a woman came up and looked at one of the sweatshirts. She was scruffily dressed, hair disarrayed, a grimy raincoat wrapped tightly round her.

"Do you have it in small?"

"Sorry"

"Oh, what a pity. I'm Irish, you see. I like everything Irish. My mother was from there. She had lovely, long red hair. A beautiful woman.." Her voice trailed off.

"Are you Irish?" she said.

"Yes, I am."

"Oh, how wonderful. I knew it. Wait. Wait a second. My mother, her name was O'Brien from Cork. Do you know any O'Briens?"

"No."

"What's it like? They say it's beautiful over there."

"It's okay."

"Can you spare some change? I hate to ask. It's just to get breakfast. I haven't eaten all day."

He gave her a dollar.

"God bless your heart. Can I have a sweatshirt too?"

"No you can't."

The morning was terrible. Nobody paid the slightest attention. Sometimes a passerby would stop to look at the sign. He had a spiel for these occasions.

It went like this.

"Hi, I'm selling these fine, quality Irish sweaters. Yours for just twenty dollars?"

"You want twenty? It's worth ten" said an Asian youth after a long time inspecting one. He felt the material, critically, holding it up to the light, even smelling it.

"You make this?"

"No. Not exactly."

"I need some shirts. Next summer for the Chinatown festival. Big festival. Every year thousands of people come from all over. You can make these?"

"Look, I told you I didn't make them."

"We need to say Chinatown Festival on the back. Here." He pointed to the place.

"Maybe a dragon on the front."

"I didn't make them. You want to buy one or not?"

"Me? What I want this for? You keep it."

Later a man arrived in a rusty, red van and parked on the corner nearby. He kept looking over at Nicholas as if he was annoyed about something. Eventually he got out of the van, opened up the back and took out a table and chair. Next he put out some ties and trinkets on the table placing it and the chair against the wall.

After a while he came over.

"Hey there, what you selling?"

He was a short, stumpy and swarthy man in his early thirties. He kept glancing sidelong at Javier's sweatshirts. He moved from one foot to the other as if the ground was too hot to stand on.

"Sweatshirts."

"I see. How's it going?"

"Not good."

"Not good. Hmmm. I'm Ali." He stuck out his hand.

"You see this corner here. This is my spot. I've been here two years now. I've never seen you before. Now you're in my spot."

He said it without anger as if he were stating some painful but necessary fact.

"But it's a public street. Nobody owns it."

"This is my spot. I've been here nearly two years. I have customers. They expect me to be here. You can't just come here and take over. Why don't you go on Michigan Avenue? Lots more people down there. This is my livelihood. I have the wife and kids, you know."

Over Ali's shoulder the cop was coming back up the street.

"You know what? You can have my spot. I'm leaving."

The morning was not a success. He sat in McDonalds the box under his seat. Nothing. Not one sale. This was harder than he thought. Not one lousy sale. Frigging vagrants and bureaucrats. How was anyone supposed to make money? Where was that frontier spirit? That openness to new things. Everything was sown up already.

He looked at the box. That was his money in there. All his savings. Four thousands dollars sunk into that. How hard could it be? He had to sell some. If he sold half he would break-even. Everything after that was profit. Discounting his labor of course.

He refused to be discouraged. Great entrepreneurs always faced setbacks. Obstacles to be overcome. They didn't just give in. No, they got out there. Back in the fray. No one said it was easy.

It was too hot already. They jacked up the heat to stop the bums from hanging around. What a dump. He finished his coffee tearing strips off the Styrofoam cup. What to do next? Not the street. He couldn't handle that. Something more direct. Somewhere he could make an impression. Go to the source. Hit the consumer in his home. A chance to make a personal impression. Once they saw the product up close, then they would realize.

Why not now? Everyone's home on Saturday. As good a time as any. He grabbed the box and bolted out of McDonalds.

He walked along Lakeshore Drive wondering where to begin. The box was heavy, so he carried it on his shoulder. His burden made him sweat despite the cold.

Most places looked intimidating. Red carpets, plush-rich awnings out front, guarded by liveried doormen with stern, no-nonsense faces. Some had gothic facades, apartments towering above, and bizarre distortions of medieval form. Others were featureless boxes their sixties symmetry and decor already dated.

In the end he picked a less affluent place to start. Mainly because there was no doorman to be seen.

He entered through a revolving door to the lobby. The guard desk was vacant. It was hot inside. The place smelled of dried flowers and hot, sultry afternoons. To left was a waiting area with

couches and chairs. A scuffed coffee table with a few dog-eared magazines. On a wall near the elevators he found a directory of the all residents.

"Can I help you, sir?" He turned around. A doorman approached him. He must have come through a door beyond the elevators.

"No, I'm fine."

"Are you a resident, sir?"

"No. I'm not."

"Are you visiting someone in the building?"

He was officious-looking, in his late forties. It was worse seeing older men in those uniforms. Age was supposed to lend dignity. He couldn't have much with a life-time of servility.

"Yes, I suppose I am."

The doorman looked at his box suspiciously.

"What's the purpose of your visit?"

"It's business."

Now he knew. This was no resident or friend. This was a hustler, selling something.

"I'm sorry, sir. We don't allow soliciting."

"I'm not soliciting anyone."

This was too much after a whole day of disappointment. He put the box on the ground.

"I'm just going ask them if they're interested in one of my sweatshirts. That's all. Look, here."

He pulled one out of the box and waved it in front of him.

"That's all it is. It's just a sweater. I'm not going to kill anybody."

"I'm sorry, sir. I'll have to ask you to leave the building."

"Why? They might want to buy one for all you know."

He picked up the box. The doorman escorted him out onto the steps.

"Just let speak to them. I know they'll understand."

"If you don't leave I'm calling the police."

He gave him a push to move him along.

"Don't you touch me. I've had enough of this. Get out of my way."

Then everything blurred. He made to push past. The older man grabbed him. They wrestled this way and that. He struggled and teetered on the edge. Dimly through glass an old woman watched. The doorman was older, heavier but slower.

Suddenly he was falling backwards. He flailed, grasping at the air. Too late. His head hit the ground with a smack. Bright lights exploded. Trumpets blared. Pain ricocheted around his head. Then darkness fell.

When he came round a policeman was leaning over him. In the background, he heard voices. He touched his head. Something hot and sticky flowed. It was blood.

The box had tumbled down the steps, sweatshirts spilling out onto the ground. The wind had caught one and carried it high in the air. Another was tangled in the bushes in the driveway.

"He tried to force his way into the building, officer. When I tried to stop him this happened."

"I saw the whole thing." This was a woman's voice.

"It's just like Frank said. The man wouldn't leave. Then he tried to fight his way in. He must be mad."

"How are you feeling?" A gentler voice spoke. He opened his eyes. The cop was leaning over him. He had a kindly, honest face.

"My head hurts."

"Can you stand up?"

"I think so. I'm bleeding."

"See if you can stand."

The cop helped him up. He stood shakily on his feet.

"What's going on here?" said the other cop.

"Like I told you this man tried to force his way into the building. He was trying to sell those things."

He pointed at the sweatshirts strewn on the ground. An old woman stood beside him holding a dog.

"I was standing inside, officer. I saw everything. That's the man you should arrest."

"Shut up whore."

"Officer, did you here what he said? Arrest him right now."

"Calm down lady" said the second cop.

He turned to Nicholas.

"You shut your mouth."

The dog started coughing and snorting. It was sickly, rat-like thing. It gave out a few yelps and was quiet. She stroked it lovingly.

He started gathering up the shirts and putting them back in the box. It was badly squashed. One side had ripped in the tussle.

"Okay let's take this guy to the station and book him."

"I think he's injured" said the first cop. Dave was his name.

"Hey you. Can't you speak?" said the second.

"Of course I can speak."

"What have you got to say?"

"Nothing. I don't know what the big deal is. I was minding my own business. All I was trying to do was sell some of these sweaters. What's wrong with you people?"

He felt dizzy. He swayed on his feet. White spots appeared before his eyes.

"This guy needs to see a doctor" said Dave.

That was the end of it. They put his box in the trunk and drove him to the hospital.

They sat for a long time in a waiting room. It was crowded full of people and smelled of disinfectant. A baby beside them cried incessantly. The teenage mother tried to console it.

"He's got diarrhea" she explained.

"I can't much more of this" said the second cop whose name was Matt. "I'll be outside."

Dave stayed.

"What are you doing fighting with a doorman? You seem like a smart guy. You should know better."

"I guess I'm not that smart."

"What I mean is a guy like you can make good money. You should work for a company or something. Shit. With a bit of get-up-and-go you could make more money than I do. You don't need to hustle like some bum in the street."

"It's not that I want to. I just want something of my own. Something that's one hundred percent me. I just don't want anyone telling me what to do or think. See, when you go to work every day you got your sergeant or your boss or even your partner telling you what to do, how to be, what to think. That's why I'm out on my own."

"But everyone has to answer to somebody."

Eventually his turn came. They ushered him out into another quieter room. It was much cooler and less crowded here. A nurse led him through a corridor. Windows looked out on a sunny forecourt. At the end was a longer room with beds, some partitioned off. The nurse pointed to one of these. He went in and sat on the bed. Dave waited outside.

A moment later the doctor came in.

"What happened?"

"I fell down some steps and cut my head."

"Let's take a look. Hmmmm. Three stitches should do it. That's a nasty cut. Do you want an anesthetic?"

"No."

"You normally fall down steps?"

"It was accident."

"What's that cop doing out there?"

"What are you? A detective too? Just do your job."

"Jesus, relax."

He shut up after that and quickly put the stitches in. He wasn't satisfied, though. His curiosity had been piqued.

"Do I have to come back to get them removed?" Nicholas asked.

"No. These ones dissolve after a while."

The nurse stuck her head to ask a question. They went outside to talk. He could hear their hushed voices through the partition. She didn't have any answers for him.

"Okay. You're all set" he said coming back.

Dave walked him out to the car. Matt was already inside waiting.

"Thank God, that's over" he said to Dave.

They took him to the station and booked him for disrupting the peace. They dropped the other charge of assault mainly because Dave wanted to. He sat with him in a small, stuffy office while he wrote out the charges. Matt had disappeared.

"My mother's Irish. She's from Kerry. Have you ever been there?"

"Once or twice."

"It must be amazing. Next year I'm going with some friends."

He finished what he was writing and handed him the sheet.

"Okay. Stay away from apartment buildings and don't get into any more fights. I don't want to see you down here again."

"Don't worry. I don't want to be here."

He even offered to drive him home. Nicholas refused. He wanted to be alone. It had been a wearying, disastrous day. Now he just wanted to forget.

The train was quiet when he boarded. There was no one in his carriage. At Fullerton an old woman got on. She was well-dressed and carried a huge shopping bag. It was overflowing with toilet rolls, vegetables, old newspapers and something that smelled like fish. She sat down opposite him.

"Took my husband away. Gave me drugs and called me mad" she muttered to herself staring blankly.

"Bastards gave me drugs. Took my husband away....."

She was still muttering when the train pulled in to his station.

He felt the back of his head as he walked down the stairs to the street. Already a scab was forming. It felt weird to the touch.

His apartment was cold when he opened the door. He sat down keeping his coat on for warmth.

The land of opportunity. What a farce. A myth, that's all it was. Just a myth. He looked at the box lying on the floor. He hated it. Once liberation, now it symbolized failure. Enough was enough. It was Sunday evening. Tomorrow meant work and Tony and Ken.

He couldn't go to bed yet. Too early to sleep. He was restless. Dreading the solitude he got up again and went out.

He walked down Clarke Street aimlessly. A train clattered noisily overhead. It was close to midnight. He hated the oppressive feel of Sunday. The corporate drones were already in their beds. No-one was on the street.

There had to be more. More purpose to life than mere survival. Was that it? Eking out an existence. Fighting for a share of economic resources, and then keeling over at the end of it. It seemed so futile. It would be comical if it wasn't tragic.

Wasn't he the same, though? Didn't he want all the good things in life? More of an amateur about getting it perhaps, but just as greedy for money and fame.

He passed a basement bar, all lit-up. Suddenly he felt like being around people. On impulse he walked down the flight of steps and went in.

It was quiet inside. There were few customers. A couple of regulars turned to look as he walked in. They resumed their conversation after a minute of silence.

"What are you having?" said the barman. He left the two and came over.

"Just a beer" he said avoiding eye-contact, not wanting to talk. "Did you see the game?"

"No. I missed it."

"You missed it? It was great. This place was swinging earlier. Lots of people came to watch it. Great atmosphere."

"Oh."

He went back to his friends. Judging by the side-long looks Nicholas had become the subject of the conversation.

He drank his beer staring in to space. The voices around him rose in volume. They were arguing about sports. The barman's voice was loudest.

It was simple, he thought. Without money you were nothing. No-one was interested. That's what it was all about. Money - the great leveler. How much you had determined so much.

He had tried to postpone it. Ignore it. Even deny it. But it always came back to haunt him.

He wished he didn't care. Stupid people were the happiest. Not a care in the world. Happy to be. He was just smart enough to torture himself.

There had to be a better way.

Chapter 7 – The Dream Sequence

Dark brooding hills overshadowed the clearing where he stood. The light was grey. Dusk. The twilight of day before night. A vast, sinister forest encircled him, its dim interior shrouded in mystery.

"Nicholas." The voice stirred emotion within him.

He looked up. It was Sonia. Face appealing, wide-eyed. When they were close. Before marriage and babies. When they were happy to be. No issues. No agenda. The moment every couple remembers. A day, a place, a time both cherish.

"Don't be fool. Don't throw it all away. You have so much."

Throw what away? He wanted to speak. Scream. Yell. Take her in his arms. All he could do was face her, motionless and mute. She turned sadly away. Like the dying day the forest swallowed her and she was gone.

A station at rush hour. Streams of commuters dodging him left and right. Ahead, someone very familiar. He followed, pushing his way to the platform. There she was. The same hair-style, the tan jacket bought on Michigan Avenue one rainy, fall day, the fashionable gait.

"Sonia". He shouted her name. Too late. She boarded. Somewhere a whistle blew, but distant and faint. He was running, alongside her window, struggling to stay abreast. The train moving faster and faster. Yelling as he ran. She sat biting her lip, lost in thought. Glancing out the window with unseeing eyes.

The train faded into a blinding mist. It cleared to reveal a lonely figure, clad in black. All about a desolate land cut only by a winding, rocky track. Stone walls outlined grey fields and hugged the road. The sky threatened, dark and grim. Storm clouds menaced on the horizon.

The figure was always a step ahead. With tremendous effort he gained ground. Close-up the stranger looked frail and stooped. As though carrying a great burden. Shawl tightly drawn over the face. He reached out to touch.

Somewhere an alarm was ringing. Distant at first but growing louder and louder. It was morning again.

He got up. The view from the window made him feel worse. Shit weather. Again. Snow covered everything. The cars. The houses. Even his window ledge. He opened the window and stuck his hand in the snow. Playing with it through his fingers. It was powdery-fine. He watched it fall, like grains of sand onto the sidewalk below. Already the street was a grimy track where cars moved cautiously along.

When he was a kid he loved snow. Snow meant no school and snowmen and taking the bus to Stepside with a piece of plastic tied up with string. A homemade toboggan. Spending the whole

day flying down the hill above the pitch and putt. Going home tired but happy. Hoping against hope that it would last for at least a couple of days.

Now it just meant a pain in the ass. Wading through slush to the train. Worrying about the stain on his fifty dollar shoes or the ends of his trousers.

You'd think he'd have something better to think about. Children are so much smarter. They could give a shit.

Fatty Gruber was already out scraping the windshield of her car. Probably doesn't feel the cold with all that blubber.

He shut the window with a bang. Fuck work. Fuck everything. Fuck Fatty Gruber and her blubbery thighs. Sometimes enough is enough. You reach a point. Cross a line. Well he'd reached that point. He'd had enough. It's like that crucial day in psycho's life when he goes out to buy a gun and get even with all the bastards who have ruined his life. That's what today felt like.

What's the point? What's the fucking point? I'm just like a rat in a cage running on a wheel. Just a big rat. Only this rat should know better.

Sunday was such a waste of a day. Hanging around lethargic. Not going anywhere. Not even bothering to get properly dressed. Half reading books. Hours of TV. Making up errands and things to do. And that was the highpoint. Now a week of bullshit waited for him.

He bought the paper before he got on the train. War, murder, robbery, rape and an increase in the sales tax. Something about Ireland. Someone planted a bomb in Belfast. Blew up a few people.

Some guy wearing a walkman and shades tried to read over his shoulder. Buy your own frigging newspaper.

Apparently they'd grown a human ear in a laboratory. Identical in every respect. Eventually they will be able to grow everything. Wonder could they grow women? Maybe in the future you will be able to buy a starter kit. Like a chemistry set. He could grow his own.

He poured out a big coffee in the kitchen when he got to work. Tony wasn't in yet. Thank God. At least he could be at his desk looking busy. He sat listening to his messages.

Warren called. Everyone hated him. He was an overweight, bald bully. Head of Commercial Loans. Big deal. Been here forever. Felt that seniority gave him the right to abuse and intimidate anyone under him. What a fat pain in the ass he was. It would be such a pleasure to call him up and say 'Warren you're a big fat prick' and then sit back and listen to him rant and rave. Some day he would do that. Some day.

He put off calling him back. He was too fragile to deal with him right now. Maybe later. Moods were funny like that. Some days he would come in shit humor and leave in great form.

The phone rang.
"Operations, this is Nicholas."

"Operations, this is Nicholas." It was Warren.

"Why haven't you called me back, already?"

"I just got in Warren."

"You just got in Warren" he said mimicking him. "Where the fuck have you been? Its eight thirty already. Did you call Goldman about the Tectronics stock?"

There was silence.

"What do mean? Did you call them? That's a million dollar trade". He was yelling.

"Relax, Warren. I'll call them right now."

"Don't you tell me to relax. You think you can just forget to call Goldman on a million dollar trade. Who the fuck do think you are? Don't think I haven't noticed you before. You haven't heard the end of this. Call Goldman right now, and call me back."

He hung up. Through the glass door he could see Ken pick up his phone. It had to be Warren. Fuck. Now there would be an inquisition. Warren loved that. Nothing better. Fat bastard.

He called Goldman. Turned out it would be another day before they could send the stock to Chicago. Next he dialed Warren's extension. It was busy. After a few rings Dan picked up.

"Man, what did you do? Walter is going ballistic. I've never seen him like this. His talking about getting you fired and everything. One of our biggest clients is waiting for that stock."

This was too much. Just too much. Bad enough listening to Warren, but to his ass-kissing side-kick. That was worse.

"Dan, just fuck-off". He slammed down the phone.

Now he'd done it. That would get back to Warren. That was the kind Dan was. As if Warren didn't have enough ammunition already.

Fuck the whole lot of them. He was sick of it. Sick of kissing ass. Sick of humoring people he didn't like.

The phone rang. It was Ken.

"Nicholas, can you come into my office." That was redundant as he could see him clearly through the glass. Ken looked down refusing to make eye-contact. Pretending to read something important on his desk. Nothing important ever crossed Ken's desk. Not that Ken would give you that impression. He hated that Nicholas could see him. It compromised his dignity to have his underling looking at him in his fishbowl.

He walked across the floor to Ken's office standing in the open doorway. Ken was looking at his computer now like the whole company was depending on his next move.

"Come in and shut the door" he said, not looking around.

That was it. A big power trip. He loved any opportunity to assert himself. He was short and skinny, a scraggly moustache clinging to his upper lip. That came after his first kid in the hope that finally someone would take him seriously.

Psychology, he believed, was the key to maintaining control. Knowing how to intimidate subordinates.

Hitler kept his generals waiting before seeing them - grown men reduced to hysterical wrecks after a few hours of suspense. Of course nowadays you had to be more subtle. Still he did the best he could.

A picture of Ken's wife hung on the wall. What kind of stories must she hear when Ken got home every day? Faded and meek she stared nervously out of the picture with a compliant smile.

A few minutes later he looked up.

"I just spoke to Walter on the phone" he said, gravely.

"Do you know what you've done? That's one of our biggest clients, you kept waiting. Warren had to call and personally apologize for the delay."

The door opened. Tony and Warren came in looking like they were going to an execution. Tony sat on the edge of the desk, Warren on the only other chair. Even the seating arrangements were in order of seniority, the chair going to Warren.

He sat red-faced and glassy-eyed, pot-belly bulging inside his shirt. The pressure on those buttons must be critical.

"I was emphasizing the seriousness of the situation that Nicholas has got himself into" said Ken.

"I want to know what the fuck he was thinking" Warren spat out.

"You're too careless" said Tony.

"I've told him time and again" he said looking at Ken and Warren for approval. As the lowest in rank he was edgy in their company.

"He's always day-dreaming. He'll never get on with that attitude."

He had nothing to say. They were so boring and predictable. It was a drama played out before for his benefit - his education, as Ken put it.

"I've had enough" said Warren.

"I had to take the heat for his fuck-up. I can tell you the client wasn't happy. He even threatened to move his account to another firm."

They all gasped in amazement at the thought of losing an account. Warren must have wet his pants thinking about that. Big deal.

"Nicholas you fucked up, bad" said Ken.

"I don't know what Tod is going to say". Tod was Ken's boss. His sycophancy to him knew no bounds.

"I know that you'll be held personally responsible. You're going to take the blame for this one."

"That's right you fucked up" said Tony.

"You stupid fuck" said Warren savagely, "look at all the trouble you caused. If I had my way I'd kick your ass right out of here. That's the suggestion I'll be making to Tod, when I see him."

A rush of anger swept over Nicholas. Without thinking he opened his mouth.

"You know what? I don't give a flying fuck about the client, or about you or what you think, or what you tell Tod, or don't tell him. As far as I'm concerned you can take this job and shove it up your ass."

He looked directly at Warren. Splotches of red were appearing on his fat face. He was gearing up of an outburst of monumental proportions.

"Before you say anything Warren, let me spare you the trouble. I quit."

Nobody said anything. They were not expecting this. They sat stunned into silence.

He got up, opened the door and walked out onto the floor. Stopping at his desk he took his bag, his pen and the calculator, he had used every day for five years.

His anger had drained away. Feeling weary, he stood in the lobby waiting for the elevator.

"You don't have to leave if you don't want to."

He turned around. Tony had followed him out into the lobby.

"Just go in. Tell Ken you're sorry, that you lost your head. He'll take you back. In a week or two this whole thing will be forgotten. You know how it is."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Well, how can I say it? You're a nice guy. I wouldn't like to see you leave."

"I think it's for the best. The way I feel right now, I don't think I want to come back. Thanks for asking though."

He stepped into the elevator.

"Call me if you change your mind."

The doors closed. So that was it. A few angry words and it was all over. Five years. Five years of what? Could it really be that long? If someone had told him back then it would be that long he would have laughed in their face. The terrible thing was he couldn't remember one significant thing about it. Not one thing in all that time. All his weekdays, all that precious time for five years seemed to collapse into one bland, dreary day. A day where he arrived at eight thirty had his coffee and was at his desk by nine. Made a few calls and was ready for lunch by twelve.

Life was more. It had to be. There was supposed to be purpose. Something to be excited about. Anything. Anything but an insipid entry in a ledger, a debit to one account, a credit to another.

Warren. That bloated pig and his sidekicks. Blind. Blinded by a narrow vision. Selling their souls to the company god. A vengeful god. One that could turn on them any moment despite their loyalty.

What a creed to live by. It didn't matter that the sun sparkled off the buildings on Michigan Avenue that his spirits rose to bask in a harmony long forgotten. No. Theirs was a murky world of

whispered conversations, vying for promotion, currying favor with the boss. Fuck them. Fuck them all.

He stopped on the bridge resting his elbows on the parapet. Water glimmered in the winter sun. A plaque on the wall caught his eye. It told of some Frenchmen. The first white men to be here. Ages ago. Came up the river in a canoe. That was achievement. Something to be proud of. Being first. Nobody else could match that.

There were no pioneers left. No achievement. Just a nation of bookkeepers and statisticians. Rushing for the train every morning. Relentlessly middle-class. Their world dominated by mortgages, babies, car-payments, charge-cards and Monday night TV. A far cry from some doughty Frenchmen in a canoe.

Two women came and leaned on the parapet looking down into the river.

"Isn't it beautiful" said the first woman. She pointed to the skyline.

"We need to meet Tom at the Hard Rock soon" said the second looking at her watch. She had frizzy hair and glasses and clutched two shopping bags to her side.

"I tell you I'm sick and tired of the way he's behaving. Ever since we left Madison he's been unbearable."

"He just does it to bug you. All that stuff about Jimmy, he's knows it's not your fault."

"I never loved anyone more than that boy."

"I know that."

"He knows how to hurt me. That's certain."

She looked like she was going to cry.

"Come on" said the frizzy one. "Let's not think about it."

"Which way is Ohio Street?" she said turning to Nicholas.

He pointed in the direction. They ambled off.

The station was quiet when he got there. Rush hour long past. A black man with a brush was sweeping up trash on the platform. He was singing a tune with a walkman on his head. Only he couldn't sing. It must have sounded really good to him with the music in his ears. Instead it just sounded funny and tuneless.

He sat on the bench waiting. The euphoria of his new freedom had faded. Now he'd done it. What was he going to do? No job. No money. Just a box of sweatshirts sitting in his living room. How would he pay his rent? He was never much of a saver. Who would help him? Sonia might have in the past. Not anymore. She was putting a distance between him and her now. Scary that. He knew once she got over it she would really get over it. It was real this time. She wouldn't be coming back.

Now he knew why he'd never done this before. Too scared that was it. Anytime in those five years he could have walked out. It was the money. Always the money. Such a stupid thing. A few

thousand dollars a month in exchange for a lifetime of servility. It was cheap at the price. They didn't just want his time. They wanted his soul too. That they would never have.

Money was the only thing they held over him. All that bullshit for the check he collected every month.

The train trundled into the station brakes screeching. Sell. That could work. Only who the hell would buy his sweatshirts? He could do it. The thought died as soon as it was born. It was false optimism. He knew it.

There was a message on the machine when he got home. It was Javier. The second batch of sweatshirts were ready. Their quality was much superior to the first, he said. Of course he'd say that. That's what happens when go for a bargain. Crap merchandise. That's all you get.

He kicked off his shoes, and lay on the couch. It was morning still. Hard to believe. Not even lunchtime yet at work. Warren would be just about making his way down in the elevator for Ken. They went to a steakhouse over on Franklin. Warren was their best customer. Been going there for fifteen years. They even had a special table reserved for him. He could just picture it. Warren, his large paunch tucked under the table, a big bib on him, like some grotesque man-sized infant, gorging on Louisiana steak.

He closed his eyes. Just to relax for a second. Something would turn up. It always did. Just when you thought everything was black. That's when something good happened.

He woke up suddenly. It was much later. He felt cold. The room was dark. Late afternoon-dark. Car headlights made crazy passing shadows on the ceiling. Outside the streetlights had come on. He must have fallen asleep for hours. The clock on the shelf said four. He hated that thing. Sonia brought it back from Orlando one time. It was in the shape of Mickey Mouse's head. He never had the heart to get rid of it. Now she was gone he probably could.

He was restless again and it was too early for dinner. There was entertainment value even in eating sometimes. He'd save that for later. He was bored. He could have tried calling some stores to sell his sweatshirts. It was too late for that now. Just as well. He wasn't in the mood.

It was weird though. Less than one day out of work and he didn't know what to do with his time. The weekends he could get through okay. They were short enough for that.

He turned on the TV. It was crap. The usual drivel of weather reports and local news. A car accident on Lakeshore Drive was the top story. Such parochial bullshit. What about foreign news? Life on the rest of the planet.

He stood at the window looking out. There they were all coming back from work. He watched as the commuters passed by. So many cogs in a corporate machine. Secretaries, salesmen, clerks, accountants. On foot or in the cars that lined the street they made their way home.

The light from the bar across the street caught his eye. It looked very appealing right now. The phone rang.

It was Norman.

"I got your message."

"I tried calling you last week."

"I've been busy. How are things?"

"Terrible. I just quit my job."

"Just as well. I don't know how you worked in that place. I wouldn't last a day."

"That's easy for you to say. What am I going to do for money now? I'm broke."

"Something will turn up. Listen, are you free tonight? I want to talk to you about something."

"What?"

"I can't tell you over the phone. I'll tell you when I see you."

"Okay. You know what? I was just going to have a drink. You know the place opposite my apartment. Why don't you meet me there?"

"Give me an hour. There are a few things I need to do."

He hung up. An hour. What was he going to do for an hour? That's a long time without diversion. He put on his jacket and went outside. He stood indecisive at the gate. The sun was setting in a smoky-grey, watery sky. The cold made him shiver.

The place was empty when he went in. He sat up at bar leaning his elbows on the counter. The TV was showing a basketball game. It looked like it just opened. He was the only customer. It was a low-ceilinged, dimly-lit place. At the back there was a dusty pool table. Beside it a jukebox with out of date records. The furniture was old too. It was seventies-style with veneered tables, and chairs with metal frames. On the walls old sports memorabilia caps and jerseys, a signed baseball bat, black and white photos of old games.

After a while the barman came out from a room behind the bar. He seemed upset that someone was in the bar.

"What do you want?" he said. He was short and balding but stockily built. He had a grumpy, discontented look.

"A beer."

"What kind? What kind?" he said, as though he was in a great hurry.

He poured out the beer and slapped it down on the counter disappearing back into the other room.

Sonia liked this place. They came here a few times near the start playing pool and listening to the old records. It was carefree then. No issues or agendas to deal with. Happy just to be with her.

He felt nostalgia creep over him.

Secure but predictable. He could have had all that but instead he had to throw it all away. Freedom came at a price. There was no balance to be struck. No happy medium. With security he yearned for what might have been like a man who sees a jet-plane on his way to work and longs to

be on it. With freedom comes the desire for security, a home and someone waiting for you. No. He had made his choice. There was no going back.

The bartender came out of the back room. He stood looking around him. After a moment he took a cloth from the sink behind him and started wiping the bar top. He seemed to do it more from boredom than a desire to clean. When he came to Nicholas he pushed the cloth aggressively around him forcing him to raise his arms in the air.

"You live around here?" he said.

"Across the street."

"I know your face. You've been in here before, haven't you?"

"A few times. Not recently though."

He moved off down to the other end of the bar. His curiosity satisfied he had no further interest in talking.

With time desire and ambition had grown in him. Back then he could always put it off into the future. Finally tomorrow came. At least now he was making a stand on his principles, on his beliefs. No more compromising.

Norman he used to know better. What did he do now? He used to want to be a writer. One of his many fads. He went through a literary phase penning numerous unpublished short stories. Then they were quite alike. They would talk late into the night about characters that existed only in their imaginations, about plots that never got written.

Norman knew some publishers. Might even have helped him. But suddenly he dropped the whole thing. It got boring. Everything bored him after a while. Life was about experiencing not observing, he said.

Norman was smart. He could have been a lawyer, writer, anything he wanted with his connections. Something always held him back though. He could never commit to anything for long.

The door swung open. It was Norman, finally, a little older and balder, perhaps, but still the same as ever.

"Norman."

"How are you?"

"Alright" said Nicholas. He wanted to say more but he couldn't seem to find the right words.

"Let's sit at one of the tables away from the bar" said Norman.

He sat at a corner table.

"So what's the latest?" said Norman, after the grumpy barman gave him his drink. "How's Sonia?"

"I'm not seeing her anymore."

"What happened?"

"She wanted to get married. You know - babies, mortgage and a house in the suburbs. How depressing is that?"

"Lot's of people are into it".

"I'm not." He drank from his glass.

"I started a little business venture, too." He quickly told the story of the print shop and Javier. When he got to the part about the doorman, Norman burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"You'll never make money that way" he said.

"What do you know about making money?"

"That's part of the reason I came. I have a business venture of my own" he said, lowering his voice.

"What kind of venture?"

"Well, it's kind of illegal."

"What do you mean? How illegal?"

"Well, my father has some very wealthy friends. One friend, Matt Tyler, you may have heard of him. He lives in Evanston. Has a palatial spread, on about six acres. Now I happen to know that he keeps about five million dollars - jewels and cash in a safe, in that house and what's more I know where it is."

Comprehension was beginning to dawn on Nicholas.

"You want me to help you rob this person?"

"Keep your voice down." The barman was hovering somewhere in the background.

"Yes."

"You've got to be out of your mind."

"You not being rational."

"Rational. What do you mean, rational? Do you know what you're saying? You can't just rob someone. What if you're caught? And anyway why would you want to? I thought your father gave you plenty of cash."

"He did until recently. The bastard cut me off."

"I'd say you were unhappy about that" said Nicholas, smiling.

"I still am and stop smiling. But think about it. Seriously. You're thirty years old. You've no money. No job. No marketable skills. That's over a million dollars. If it comes off you'll be set for life."

"And if it doesn't I'll be set for life alright. And why a million? I thought you said five."

"I have two partners. They have to get their share."

"Have I met them?"

"No."

"Anyway", said Nicholas, "why do you need me, if you already have two accomplices?"

"Don't call them accomplices."

"Why not? That's what they are."

Norman said nothing. After a moment he spoke.

"Look, the way I have this operation planned, I need someone to drive the car and keep watch outside. That's why I need you."

"I don't know, Norman. It's so risky. What if something goes wrong?"

"It won't. I've put a lot of planning into this. Tyler has practically no security. He lives alone. His wife died a few years back. The alarm system is pretty basic. I could hardly believe it myself, initially."

"How do you know the money is there?"

"Well, he told my father, a conversation I overheard. Look, don't decide now. The best thing you can do is think about it and let me know."

"You look tired" said Nicholas.

"I am tired. I'm tired of convincing everyone. Roberto and Jefferson are the same. They need constant encouragement. What so wrong about it? No one will get hurt. Tyler's in his sixties. He doesn't need all that money? He'll never spend it. You need money when you're young. That's when you have time to enjoy it. Look at you. You spent the last five years doing a job a computer could do better. And why? So you could pay your rent and exist. That's no kind of life."

"I know. I know."

His glass was empty again. He wanted to get drunk. To be free, at least for a while, from care.

"Let's get another. What are you having?"

"Already?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"You're drunk" said Norman.

"Not yet." He waved to the barman. "Two more beers."

"I don't know about this" said Norman.

"Just have a few more and see how you feel."

He took a big gulp from his glass. More beer was brought.

"In a way I wish I was content. Everything would be so much easier. There's this guy I work with. Not very bright, or interesting. Nothing going for him but he's happy. He comes into work with a big smile on his face. Never complains. He's full of inane enthusiasm for his job, for life, like some big, slurpy dog. Sometimes I wish I could be like that."

"Why?"

"Because it's so easy. No ambition. No desires. How simple his life must be."

"This is a way out" said Norman. "Over a million dollars could be yours. Think what you can do with a million bucks. Even if you put it in a bank you'd never have to work again. Seems to me

you've been torturing yourself for too long. You need a break. This is your opportunity. Don't let it slip away."

"You're right. I have to do something. I can't go on like this. Do you know what it is to want? It's a cancer eating away at you. Nothing is good enough. Nothing satisfies. You think sometimes, like a tumor that it's gone never to return. But it always comes back. Always. There's no escaping. Eventually you give in."

He finished his glass setting it down with a bang.

"Where's that grumpy bastard? More beer. Hey you. More beer, don't just stand there."

"Shut up, Nicholas."

The barman came over, sour faced, and ready to fight.

"Tell your friend to behave or I'll kick him out."

"Like to see you try."

"Shut up" said Norman. "He'll be alright I'll look after him. He's not normally like this."

He went off, muttering darkly to himself. Standing behind the bar, watchful, darting vicious looks in their direction.

"What you do that for?" said Norman. "You don't want to provoke someone like that."

"Fuck him. Let's get out of here, and go somewhere."

Everything was fuzzy after that. He remembered jumping in a cab with Norman. Speeding downtown past bleak warehouses, vacant lots and towering apartment blocks. Streetlight casting crazy shadows on the seats. On through subterranean streets, the river glimmering, framed in steel girders.

The cab left them outside a grey, featureless building. Rain drifted gently down. Queues of people waited. Patient. Norman knew someone. Words were exchanged. Burly men ushered them past through a side-door.

Inside was hot and dark. Beams of lights cut the gloom. A heavy, febrile beat pounded. A staircase led up to a balcony with a bar overlooking the dance floor. Below a seething mass of bodies writhed. Another round. Vodka this time.

Norman knew two girls sitting at the bar. Alison was a tall, stringy, dyed-blond with droopy, mascara eyes. Her friend, a small, dark-skinned shy girl who said nothing.

"What do you do?" said Alison to Nicholas.

"Nothing."

"What do you mean? Don't you work?"

"Not right now."

"You must be rich then. Are you?"

"Not exactly."

"Norman's rich. Father's a big-time lawyer. He told us that. He's always here, you know. Very generous, too."

"You okay."

Nicholas was swaying on his feet.

"I just need to sit down" he said slumping onto a vacant stool, beside her.

Norman was dancing with the quiet girl.

"Where's Gina?" said Alison.

"With Norman. Forget about her."

"What are you doing?"

Leaning closer an amorous glint in his eye.

"Nothing."

The music, the booze, the dark. Now. It had to be. Before the others came back. Everything was right. Shifting uneasily on her seat, she knew what was coming next.

He lunged suddenly to kiss her. Eyes closed, mouth open. She jumped up in alarm. Losing his balance, he tottered and fell. Glasses went flying. Stools crashed to the floor. He lay on his back. Much more comfortable now. All he wanted was sleep. To rest. He closed his eyes.

Strong hands lifted him, roughly, to his feet. Dazed, he was hustled out a side door. Norman was arguing furiously with the bouncer. Suddenly he was bundled into a cab. Dozing off, he came to outside his apartment, the cab-driver shaking him vigorously. He thrust a few notes in his hand.

Out of the cab, he stumbled to his door. The stairs was a mountain. Hand over hand; he pulled himself up clutching the bannister. Struggling to find the key. Hand shaking jabbing at the keyhole. One pass went wide scraping the wall. Finally unlocking the door it swung open with a crash. He collapsed on the couch.

"That friend of Norman's was weird" said Alison, after Nicholas was thrown out.

Gina sipped her Bacardi.

"I suppose rich people always have hangers-on. Side-kicks you know. I bet that's what he is. Some side-kick."

"Norman asked me for my number" cooed Gina.

"You're lucky. He'd be a great catch. He never looks at me, though. It's you he likes."

"He said he was going to take me on his father's boat. Out on the lake."

"It's not fair. You meet all the nice guys."

The phone rang and rang. She tried to ignore it. Some psycho. You got those freaks late at night. Nothing better to do than pick a number out of the book. This freak wasn't giving up, easily, though. You never know. It could be an emergency. Finally she got up, throwing on a dressing gown. She picked up the phone.

"Sonia it's me."

"Who is this?"

"It's me. Nicholas."

"Nicholas what the hell are you doing? It's three in the morning."

"Sonia, I've been thinking.."

"You're drunk, aren't you? That's what this is about."

"I need to talk to you."

"About what? There's nothing to talk about."

"Can I come over?"

"No you can not. You're disgusting. Go to sleep."

The phone went dead.

Chapter 8 – The night of infidelity

Slowly he opened his eyes. Daylight streamed through the open curtains. He was sprawled fully dressed on the couch, his right arm dangling limply over the edge. On the floor the phone lay off the hook, beeping urgently. The TV chattered loudly to an empty room.

He tried to sit up.

Then he panicked. He was late for work. In a flash it all came back - Walter, the bar, Norman, even Alison. He cringed involuntarily. Oh no, he called Sonia - the long silences, her angry words and final rejection. He should never have called. It was a stupid, drunken impulse. Bitch. Now she would think he was chasing her.

Everything hurt. His head throbbed. His arm ached. A wave of nausea rose up in his stomach and then receded. Groping his way to his feet, he stumbled into the bathroom. The smell of vomit was overwhelming. Yesterday's dinner decorated the inside of the toilet seat. Another memory stirred - heaving violently on all fours, forgetting to lift the seat in time. His nausea returned. He fled the bathroom, slumping back onto the couch. Cleaning would have to wait.

Much later the phone rang. He must have slept. Judging by the light it was already midday. With a lunge he grabbed the receiver. It was Norman.

"You alright?"

"No"

"I wasn't sure you got home. Remember what I said, yesterday?"

The conversation in the bar, what had Norman been saying?

"What? I don't remember."

"Yes you do. The proposition."

"Oh, that."

"Well, we're meeting in my apartment. They want to meet you - the other guys."

"Now hold on a second. I never said anything, one way or the other."

"Just come along. No commitment. You can meet everyone. And hear more."

"Well, I don't know."

He knew he should be more forceful. He was too easily manipulated, too polite. Norman was good at railroading people.

"I'll pick you up at six" he said.

He got up. Sleep was making no impact on his hangover. He loafed around the apartment watching the lunchtime soap operas. There was no where to go and no one to see. He had no friends. Sonia was about it. Norman was too unreliable. Work took up the rest of his time.

There was his cousin who lived on the southside, a distant relative his mother kept harassing him to visit. Finally he gave in, taking the train, one Sunday, to a drab and windswept suburb. His cousin lived alone in a small, beat-up, house on a bleak and smoggy Chicago street. It stretched in an unending vista of gas stations, houses and cars as far as he could see.

A rusting gate, creaking loudly, opened onto a scraggly, unkempt garden. Sickly bushes lined the pathway to the front door. Grass and weeds proliferated, invading untended flower beds and sprouting between the cracks in the concrete.

The interior was scarcely less grey. He was quickly ushered into a dowdy living room. Grimy lace curtains dampened the outside hum of traffic. Faded photographs depicted a forgotten wedding, a smiling boy long grown to maturity, a priest and a St. Patrick's Day parade from long ago.

"Will you have a cup of tea?" asked his cousin, standing nervously opposite him. He was a faded, morose-looking man, obviously unused to company.

Nicholas nodded.

His cousin disappeared into the kitchen. Rattling and banging sounds came through the open door. A few moments later he returned, thrusting a steaming cup into his hand.

"I don't have too many visitors" he said, self-consciously, slumping into an enormous, shabby armchair. So big was it that he almost seemed to vanish into its recesses, leaving only the long, skinny legs, bony head and shoulders visible. In the growing gloom of late afternoon it gave him an almost gremlin-like appearance.

"Sorry for not dropping around sooner" said Nicholas. "You know how it is with work and all that, I'm always so busy."

"How's your mother?"

"Oh, fine."

"Must have been thirty years since I last saw her. I only went back once to Ireland, you know. That was with my poor wife. She died some years ago. You're not married, are you?"

"No, I'm not."

"I suppose you get used to having someone around. She used to love that garden." He gestured behind him at the tiny green space outside.

"When she was around it was immaculate. She was always out there, pottering around. I'm afraid I'm not much of a gardener, though" he said, sadly.

Nicholas sat on the edge of the couch, tea-cup balanced on his knee. There was a silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock on the mantle-piece.

"You've never been back to Ireland, since?" asked Nicholas.

"No. I must have lost touch after my own mother died. There was really no-one to go back for."

He struggled out of the armchair and squatted in front of the fire, skinny arms out stretched to absorb the feeble glow. Seizing a poker he stirred up the embers vigorously. A shower of sparks went flying up the chimney. The sudden flash of flame lit up the angular face and hollow cheeks. He resumed his seat.

"You see we never had any family of our own, my wife and I. You're probably young enough not to care, but children are an investment in the future, someone who will take an interest in you when you're old and tired. Nobody wants to listen to the ramblings of an old man. No one has any time."

"Don't you have any other visitors?"

"There's a woman who comes around every week. The church sends her. She's very kind, of course, but she can only stay an hour. It wasn't so bad when I could get out a bit. But lately I haven't been feeling so well."

A large truck trundled by on the street outside causing the cups on the sideboard to rattle.

"I must say I'm glad you called. I was thrilled to learn I had a relation, even a distant one here in Chicago. You will stay for dinner won't you? It's nothing fancy but I'd be glad of the company."

"Actually I have to be getting back" said Nicholas, rising to his feet. "I have to work tomorrow and I'd rather not be too late."

"Oh, no. What a pity."

He struggled to his feet. Nicholas was already standing by the doorway.

"Please do drop in again any time you like. Next time I could prepare something if I know you're coming."

Nicholas waved as he shut the creaking gate behind him, resisting the urge to run. A dusky gloom settled on his spirits as he walked away, like the smog from the countless cars whizzing by. The gloom only lifted as his train screeched through downtown - its vaunting buildings all brightly lit, caring nothing for a lonely, old man left far behind.

After that his cousin phoned a few times leaving croaky messages on the answering machine, all of which he ignored. Anything was better than another encounter with the death's-head, as he called him.

More thoughts crowded in, as he lay staring up at the ceiling. He must be mad getting involved with Norman. Disaster followed him closely behind. What if it worked? One small risk and all his problems would be over. Who could say it was wrong? He had tried all the other routes. Nothing worked.

Restlessly, he paced around the apartment. Boredom welled up in his queasy stomach. It was too early still. Too early for Norman. He needed to kill time. Get out for a while. Seizing his jacket he made for the door.

Sonia loved shopping. Every Saturday without fail she would harass him to come with her. Together they would spend hours trailing through one store after another. She never tired of trying

on this and that outfit, demanding Nicholas's opinion on each. It was a dangerous game of diplomacy. Too much enthusiasm and he was being insincere, too little and he was disinterested. The balance had to be just right.

Then groceries - buying all the ingredients for a meal - wine, steak, cheese. Sonia cooked, banishing Nicholas from the kitchen to the couch in the living room. Supine, he would make encouraging comments every so often. Fact was she couldn't cook. The meal was either underdone or burnt - never right. She took pride in her ignorance. Career women didn't cook. Her maternal urges satisfied they would set to their rubbery steak.

He shuddered as he left the building. The street was bare and windswept. A newspaper caught up in a swirl and fluttered by. There were few people about. Those that were walked, huddled, bent over to avoid the wind. He cursed as it cut through his overcoat. Sonia had hassled him for ages to get a new one. That would have to wait, now, too.

It was early still and the supermarket was quiet. Old women plied their trollies down the aisles, pausing to gossip, their talk full of ailments and injuries.

"Marilyn's not doing well" said one, as he stood nearby.

Her listener nodded a grave and expressionless face.

"She told me the doctor said six months."

"It happened so fast" said the first woman. "Last fall she was full of life. Remember taking her to Giordano's? She always loved that place."

He stood at the vegetable stand watching, side-long, a woman on the other side of the aisle. Shoulder-length blonde hair flowed as she moved her head - hair that could only belong to a beautiful girl.

She turned suddenly to pick out tomatoes. Too late he looked away. A smile crossed her lips, arrogance flashing in cold, blue eyes.

He hurried away down the aisle ashamed, his desperation exposed. Loneliness made him too eager. Before, Sonia would have given him the confidence to return that haughty look. Now he ran.

He checked out his few purchases and fled out onto the street. It was snowing again. Small, feather-like flakes swirled and drifted downward. He stood, bag of groceries in hand, snow gathering on his head and shoulders. What to do now? Home was too depressing. He dreaded those long shadows that were already spreading across the living room floor.

A coffee shop, across the street beckoned, casting a warm glow on the greying late afternoon. Glass windows revealed a cozy, wooded interior. Finding a seat by the window he produced pen and paper and wrote at the top of the page, 'Dear Mother', in his scrawly script. What could he say? His mind was blank. Her world was an alien place of gossip, neighbors and relatives. He wrote, 'Sorry for not writing sooner but I get so busy. I hope everyone's fine. Sonia says hello. I'll be back for Christmas of course.'

What an ordeal. He wanted to tell her how fucked up everything was but there was no point. She wouldn't understand. Guilt twinged like a needle-point when he thought of her. Guilt that he forgot her birthday, that he didn't come home for summer, at what the world had done to her, that he failed to be the dutiful son. 'I hear Michael got a promotion recently. Tell him congratulations. You said in your last letter that Uncle John is sick. How's he doing?'

It was too much. Throwing down the pen he put on his coat and gathered everything up. The letter, he stuffed into his pocket. At home he had several unfinished, like it.

A picture flashed across his mind. Old and grey, he saw her pottering around the house, dusting pictures on the mantelpiece - Nicholas's graduation, Michael in rugby gear. Sitting patiently, in the shabby drawing room, shadows growing outside. Later, moving to the kitchen, the house dark to save electricity. A pot of tea kept sitting on the stove, in the hope of visitors, perhaps Michael, or John, or even the new people next door. Hope would fade as the clock passed nine.

Then the phone ringing with Kitty on the other end. Saying her son got a job with Aer Lingus, and Peter Durkan was a queer all along, that Father Hanlon was in court and no-one knew why.

Tension surged as he left the coffee shop, hurrying back, breathless, by the time he climbed the stairs.

The room was cold and cheerless, the early morning sunlight a distant memory. Streetlight cast crazy shadows on the wall. Turning on the light he unpacked and put away his groceries. Sonia would have cooked. But Sonia was not coming back. Right now he couldn't face it. He slumped in the couch, hunger forgotten.

The doorbell cut through his thoughts. Norman, already? The clock said six.

He threw on his coat running down the stairs. Norman was parked in the driveway. "Jump in" he said, rolling down the window.

"I left the front door open. Hang on."

He ran up the stairs, locking the door of the apartment, and back down again, this time out of breath.

He jumped in beside Norman.

"Where are we going?"

"To my apartment. I want you to meet Roberto and Jefferson."

"You're really going through with this, aren't you?" he said.

"I wasn't kidding."

They took the freeway, merging with the southbound traffic. From the car the lake was visible, frozen solid. Great rafts of ice thrust skyward like a gigantic glacial edifice. Lights sparkled on the pier beyond, the huge Ferris wheel in motion.

Norman was silent, hunched over the wheel, his chubby face almost resting on it. He looked older, hair sparser. Last night he'd missed the lined face.

Then he was not in any state to notice. There was a desperate look, somewhere in there, behind those eyes. Mad eyes, he once thought, with frenetic mental activity behind them. Scenarios were being computed at a furious rate.

He was like a chess player, trying to see every move, every combination far into the future. "When do you plan on doing this?" He didn't know what to call it - robbery, burglary, crime. It was better not to name it.

"We're set for next week".

"That soon" he said, trying hard to seem calm.

"I had no idea."

"Everything's ready. You're nervous, aren't you?"

"Well. Yes. I am."

"Look at it this way; it's a once off deal. One night of risk. Less. One hour. One hour, and you're set for life. You can go back to Europe, do whatever you want. When you think of it that way it doesn't seem so bad."

"I suppose."

"You wouldn't be here, if you didn't agree. Don't fight it. Commit. You know you want to."

He parked the car in the underground lot. The doorman buzzed them through into the lobby.

Norman was right. He wanted it both ways - to benefit but take none of the risks.

"I've brought the fourth man" Norman said, ushering him into the apartment.

It was as he remembered it - disorganized heaps of books, magazines and papers, oak-paneled bookcases overflowing with heterogeneous items - the physical signs of a frenetic mind.

There was silence. After an awkward moment Norman did the introductions.

Roberto and Jefferson looked uneasy, avoiding eye-contact. Roberto spoke.

"Norman, you know how we feel, no offense to Nicholas, but we don't need anyone else."

"Roberto, I already explained why we need him." Norman pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Do we have to go over it again?"

"Disagreeing already?" said Nicholas.

"Shut up" said Norman.

"Norman, Roberto has a point....." said Jefferson.

"Look" said Norman, "let's get this straight. I'm glad you're hearing this, Nicholas. Either I'm in charge or we forget the whole thing. You can't do this without me. So let me do the planning. I say we need someone to stay in the car and keep lookout. We all know how many private security companies are patrolling that area. It's an extra insurance policy. Without it the risk increases.

You're just being greedy, Roberto. Think about it. What if some cop sees a light in the house and calls in. We'd never know. This way we have someone out there, telling us what's going on."

Nicholas sat, unsure, on the edge of the couch, beside Jefferson. Should he go or stay? It would be so easy to walk out the door, but to what he didn't know.

There was a subdued silence.

"So, if there are no further objections, let's proceed" said Norman.

Mostly he did the talking. It was all logistics and timing. Nicholas didn't have to do anything. His job was to sit in the car and wait. Wait and be alert until the others came back. There was more grumbling from Roberto and Jefferson. But Norman was right.

Without him there would be no robbery. Nicholas knew he could never plan something like this and the others knew it too.

Norman knew every detail of the house - the layout and type of alarm system, the location of pressure mats and light sensors, where Tyler's bedroom was, how he spent the last six Monday nights. The more Nicholas heard the more confident he became.

Norman had anticipated everything.

Knowing about the safe was the key. Tyler would never have planned for that. How could he know that his own neighbor was going to rob him?

He remembered his father's garden party, five years ago. How he hated those events, the phonies, the trite conversations, the terrible relations. Still, he couldn't escape it. There were financial rewards for being present. So he went fully expecting to be bored.

It was a sweltering hot summer's day. Even the trees seemed to wilt beneath the cloudless sun. Not a breeze ruffled the ornamental trees. Heat radiated from every surface, the pond, the patio tiles, and each movement causing a cascade of sweat. He stood, rigid, under the canopy, his jacket concealing great rings of damp, wondering when he could decently leave.

On the verandah Tyler was bragging to his father. Even he would admit Tyler was a bore. Norman could just hear snatches of words. He moved closer to hear more. Tyler was speaking. "The way I see it, I have every right to keep some of my assets in cash. After all it's my money. I pay enough in taxes every year as it is."

"What about the IRS?" said Norman's father.

"Oh, they don't know. As far as they're concerned, the money doesn't exist. It's just my little insurance policy. You never know when business can go bad."

"So where do you keep this money, anyway, if you don't mind me asking?"

"It's in a safe in my house. By the way don't repeat this to anyone. Aside from my wife nobody else knows."

Norman pretended to tie his shoelace.

"Why there's Norman" said Tyler, suddenly noticing him.

So that was how he knew. Nicholas leaned back into the couch. The urge to go had passed. Why not? Why the hell not? Norman had a plan. More than he had. In less than one week he would know the outcome. He was tired, tired waiting for success. Tired of hoping, planning, and scheming. This was a relief. One way or another it would be over soon. At least this way the decision was taken out of his hands. He was no longer responsible.

Jefferson was eyeing him guiltily. There was a lull in the conversation. Norman and Roberto were going over a floor plan of Tyler's house in the bedroom.

"Sorry about earlier. Norman's right, we just don't think of all the angles" he said.

"I didn't want to muscle in. Norman just invited me along. I wasn't even sure if I was going to stay."

Nicholas paused for a second. "The truth is it really scares me - the whole thing, the risks are so great."

"Me too. Even Norman's scared, but he'd never admit it. I try to think of the benefits when I feel like that. Sometimes though, I get this nervous feeling in my stomach."

He touched his abdomen.

"Around here. It's an intense pain. I know people in prison. Prisons are not nice places. But you've got to trust Norman. He's smart. He wouldn't lead us in there if he didn't think it would work.

I've got to try something like this. You only get one shot in life to be something. I have to seize it. God knows, I don't have too many chances left. I've never been to college. Never had a decent job. All my life it's been handouts and scrounging. I even borrow off the old lady. It kills me to do it. You have a mother right?"

Nicholas nodded.

"When I get my share, I'm going to help her. Get her out of that shit-hole she lives in. Can you imagine, my mother, living in a building, where kids get shot in the stairwell? Sometimes she doesn't go out for days, she's so scared. You guys don't even know. It's a war zone down there. Thirteen year-old kids shooting each other. It's crazy.

That's what's so fucked up about this country. Three miles away you got that old guy living in luxury with five million bucks to spare. When is he ever going to need all that money?"

"It's true, it doesn't make any sense." said Nicholas. "My reasons are the same. I always wanted success. Somehow I fucked it up. Kept waiting and hoping. But it never really happened. I was just fooling myself. I'm tired of waiting. At least this way I'm doing something about it."

"What are you going to do, after? Will you go back to Ireland?"

"I don't know, yet."

Roberto came out of the bedroom.

"Norman has everything covered" he said. "He explained my part. We just went over it. We need you too."

He nodded at Nicholas. "Norman was right of course."

He shook Nicholas's hand vigorously.

"No hard feelings, I hope. It was nothing personal."

He sat down on the chair opposite. Norman emerged from the bedroom. He looked tired, but confident. All his planning was coming to its final test.

"Well, Nicholas what do you think of our little scheme, now you've seen more?"

"I've seen enough to make up my mind. Count me in."

"Good for you" said Norman. "And now I think a drink is in order." He went rummaging in the dresser underneath one of the bookcases, reappearing, after a while, red-faced, with a bottle of wine and four dusty glasses.

"To our success" he said, raising his glass. The others followed suit.

They stood around looking awkward. "You broke up with your fiancée" said Roberto.

"How'd you know that?" said Nicholas.

"Norman told me."

"Girlfriend, not fiancée. We were never engaged."

"I split up with my fiancé, too. She left me for my friend."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It was money. I know it. He had a job, money, security, all the things women want. She had expensive tastes, Marie. It was always the best restaurants with her, the most expensive champagne. She nearly gave me a heart-attack, always pushing me to get a job, nagging, calling me lazy and useless. I can't work, I've tried."

"I know how you feel."

"I have this problem with authority" said Roberto. "I hate being told what to do. Every time I get a job I end up fighting with the boss. The first few days are fine. Then the orders start. Do this. Do that. I always end up walking out. What about you? You have a job, right?"

"Past tense. I quit."

"You feel the same way, then. Respect costs money. Marie would never have left, if I had more money. No one could tell me what to do. It's such a little thing - money, but it will change my life." There was silence for a moment.

"Do you know what scares me more than what we are about to do? Doing nothing. That's much worse. That is so much worse."

Nicholas felt dizzy, the wine, the night before, Jefferson, Roberto. It all had an air of unreality. He was an observer, a spectator, detached from all around him.

Some time later. Roberto and Jefferson said their good-byes and left. The date was set, the toast drunk, and all roads were converging to one. Nicholas lingered unwilling yet to leave.

"You seem troubled" said Norman, looking at him curiously, after the door closed behind them.

"You have to give up your reservations. Don't you see? That's how the rich stay rich and you stay poor. The status quo is preserved. They don't want you to change anything."

"But it's wrong - what we're doing."

"There is no wrong or right. The rich are right, the poor are wrong. It's that simple."

"It shouldn't be like that, though."

"Shouldn't doesn't come into it. Money is power. It buys more than goods. It creates its own laws. Money shapes the world we live in. You can ignore it if you want, but that's the reality. Everyone craves it, and envy those who have it. You know it's true. The heroes of our time are the sportsmen, movie stars and business tycoons."

"It's such a fucked-up value system."

"What would you replace it with?"

"I don't know. Something that doesn't make me feel so inadequate. I mean if I don't measure up it's my own fault. I'm to blame. I reject that. Why should I be judged a failure by how much money I have?"

Norman refilled his glass.

"There's no why. But I'll be damned if I let anyone else stop me from having some. People like Tyler are too fat and complacent. They're not hungry enough anymore. You have to hunger for it, Nicholas." His eyes glittered with a strange intensity. "How much do you want it? Ask yourself that question. Because your desire must be strong. I look in my father's face and I see fear. He is afraid of me. But the old must always give way to the young."

Nicholas stared into the bottom of his glass, swirling the last dregs round and round.

"I feel like every avenue has been closed off. Every way I turn I come up against a brick wall. You see, Norman, I'm never going to accept that I'm a failure. No one wants to believe that about himself, that he's no good. I can't take that on board. What I desire I want to be true. I want all the things money can buy - notice, acknowledgment, respect. I want people to sit up and take notice. I want my place in the sun. No price is too high to pay for that."

Chapter 9 – The robbery & break in

Nicholas sat, in the driver's seat, hands firmly clenched to the steering wheel. The shaking had passed, but he remained rigid, too afraid to risk movement. The engine, he kept running, lights off, per Norman's instructions, nervously scanning the street this way and that. Each car that went by, he dreaded, until it disappeared from view in the rear view mirror. Evanston police would not be patrolling this area for another hour.

One minute had passed since the others scaled Tyler's wall. The house loomed just visible beyond, swathed in darkness, a gray line of slate cutting the night sky. One minute in which all the moments of his life were contained.

A summer's day, when he was still a boy, flitted through his mind. One of those long, listless vacations spent clambering behind serried rows of Victorian houses. He remembered scaling Mrs. Brady's garden wall to pick plums from her orchard. The strange brightness of a summer's evening, with distant cries of children playing, carried on the air, evoking longing and loss, as he hung precariously from the wall, reaching further and further, each plum a more distant prize, until finally losing his balance, he plunged headlong, crashing through branches and leaves to land at her feet as she came running out of her kitchen, crying, "they're not ripe. They're not ripe."

The radio on the seat beside him crackled and spluttered into life. It was Norman. "Okay, Nicholas, we're inside. Stay alert. Radio in one minute."

Fear lay like a tightened coil around his stomach. Each second another turn of the screw. He remembered a half-forgotten saying to ward off the demons, 'there is no worse fear than fear itself'. He repeated it over and over in his mind, 'there is no worse fear than fear itself'. Five minutes exactly. That's how long they should be gone. Thank God. It was the waiting that was killing him. The whole thing was suppose to be over in an instant. 'A cake-walk', according to Norman.

Tyler was a heavy sleeper. Anyway the house was so big that the likelihood of him hearing anything was very slight.

Shit, it was past two minutes already. He should have radioed.

"Nicholas, you okay", Norman's voice, followed by a burst of static.

"I'm fine. Everything's fine out here". He hoped Norman didn't hear his voice quavering. Why was he so bloody calm? You'd think he burglarized houses every day.

"Good. Don't forget about us. Remember every minute."

"How's it going..." he blurted out. Norman was gone already.

More thoughts came crowding in thick and fast. What if it all went wrong? What if right now the police were on their way? Even now they could have the car staked out? What would he do? Would he run? Would he give himself up? Would they just shoot him anyway? What if he

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by Hugh McGovern

died? Sonia and his mother might shed a tear. Not too many others would. He could picture the funeral oration, the tragic tale of a promising young man, gone wrong, would be told. Promising my ass. If promising meant, 'had a great future as a pen-pusher', then yes it was promising. No. Whatever happened there were no regrets. He knew what he was doing and whatever the outcome he was resolved.

For the first time that evening he felt strangely relaxed. The knot in his stomach unraveled. It was going to work. It had to work.

Chapter 10 – The break In

They left Nicholas silently, quickly scaling the wall that surrounded the estate. Barbed wire and glass had been set atop to deter intruders. Jefferson cursed, noiselessly, as his hand snagged on the wire. Norman was next squeezing his portly frame between two strands. Roberto came last, drawing up the ladder behind them. They landed, on the other side, one by one, panting, crouched in the cover of trees. The earth felt soft and cold to their touch. The rope ladder they stowed, quickly, in the bushes for their return.

The house now loomed shrouded in darkness. Its stucco walls gleamed faintly in the moonlit sky. A tree lined lawn spread out before them. Beyond it, wide, broad steps led up to an expanse of patio centered on a now quiet ornate fountain. Its waters lay frigidly silent, winter frozen.

Even Tyler, had he stood on the patio watching, could hardly have made out the three darkened figures that flitted one by one across the lawn. They regrouped, huddled, under the balustrade, all fearful that any moment a light would come on or a shout ring out. "Cutters" whispered Norman.

Jefferson produced a metallic object from the bag slung over his back.

Norman went first. Up the stairs disappearing into the shadows cast by the house. Darkened French windows overlooked the patio. He pressed his face into the glass. All was quiet within. Tyler lived alone, he knew, apart from domestics who wouldn't be here this late. Jefferson pressed his hands against the glass to stop it from cracking, as Norman made his first incision. The screech of the blade shocked them all into alertness. One cut went straight down the blade straining against the glass. The next went wide. He took care to avoid sensors attached to the door. A minute later it was all done. Jefferson and Roberto eased the pane out delicately. A man-sized aperture was left in the door.

Norman went first, stepping gingerly through the opening, the curtains fluttering in a sudden gust of wind. He had entered a little used reception room. Tyler's house had many such rooms. The air was musty, the furniture covered in drapes. Aside from the maid who dusted every week no one had used the room in years.

Tyler had few visitors since his wife died. Beyond the club and his work he had few social involvements.

Roberto and Jefferson followed silently behind. Norman checked his watch. One minute. Everything was going according to plan. He quickly radioed Nicholas in the car, taking the radio Jefferson handed him from his bag.

He gestured to the others to follow him. The only sound audible was their strained breathing, all trying to be quiet. With the greatest of care he opened the door that led into the corridor. The darkened hallway was quiet the silence broken only by the distant ticking of a grandfather clock.

From his knowledge of the plans Norman knew he was somewhere in the west wing. The house was an elaborate affair. Laid out with two wings, east and west, meeting at the main entrance where an enormous staircase led to the bedrooms above.

His objective, now, was the basement where he knew Tyler had a safe installed in a disused cylinder of the boiler. That was the crucial piece of information he overheard that summer's day five years before.

They walked in single file, their shoes clicking softly on the marble floor. Closed doors led off to the left and right. Each one could contain a menace just waiting to step out. Norman was wracking his brain trying to recall every detail he learned from the plans. Tyler had made some changes since then he knew.

He guessed a stairwell to the basement would be located under the main staircase. He led the others with more confidence than he himself felt. He knew the information he had was of the vaguest nature. The thought that it might be some bizarre lie, Tyler told to impress his father had also crossed his mind.

The corridor came to an end suddenly and the trio found themselves in the main hallway. A magnificent chandelier glimmered faintly far above, purchased on one of Tyler's many jaunts to Europe. It dangled from the glass dome through which moonlight shone.

"Where to?" whispered Jefferson to Norman, as they stood nervously, feeling exposed in the light. "This way" he said with false conviction.

They followed, unquestioningly. Behind the staircase a series of doors seemed to open directly under the staircase. The first one led unpromisingly into a closet. Golf clubs, coats and old pair of shoes lay strewn about.

"It has to be the next one" whispered Norman. He opened the second door. A stairway led down into the darkness.

He had found the basement.

"Quick, Jefferson, you're with me. We're already behind schedule. Roberto stay up here and keep alert. If you hear anything, you let us know right away."

Jefferson went ahead, shining a flashlight. The wooden staircase creaked loudly under their feet. They stopped at the foot of the stairs, racks of wine bottles were stacked floor to ceiling, Chardonnay's, Burgundies and Chablis, evidence of Tyler's, belatedly acquired, gourmet tastes.

"The boiler has to be down here somewhere," said Norman. There was no need to whisper any longer. With Jefferson directing the light he walked down aisle between the wine racks. A small door led off to left.

"Jefferson, I think this is it" Norman called out. The door opened on a small, low-ceilinged room. The soft hum of machinery operating was clearly audible. Now that he found the room, he had no idea where to look. Two large cylinders flanked the furnace, but which one contained the safe? How would he even know? It was a little late for doubts.

"Jefferson shine the light over here".

He started by knocking on each cylinder. They both had a hollow sound.

"Try underneath" Jefferson suggested. Norman bent down on all fours, his large ass sticking up. The floor seemed solid - paving slabs as old as the house, with every indication that they were untouched since the house was built.

"I don't see anything". He couldn't hide his anxiety, any longer.

"Maybe it's in one of the walls" he said. He started tapping the walls at a frenetic pace.

"Jefferson start tapping the other side".

"Norman, I don't think...."

"Just do it will you? We're already two minutes behind schedule".

"Norman, we should keep the noise down. That could reverberate through the whole house".

"We have to find it. We have to find it."

He stood, breathless in the middle of the room.

"The bastard couldn't have made it up. It has to be here, somewhere."

"What do we do now, Norman?"

"Let me think. Let me think. I have to think. It's got to be in here, somewhere. If I have to tear this room apart, I'll find it."

"Norman" said Jefferson, "we should tell Roberto." He's been standing up there a while."

"Okay. Okay. Look, give him the radio. I can't radio from down here. Tell Nicholas we're delayed or something. I don't want him freaking out on us."

Jefferson opened the door into the passageway. The staircase creaked. Someone was coming down.

"Jefferson. Norman, where are you?". It was Roberto.

"Back here" said Jefferson, "behind the wine racks".

"Quick. Someone's coming down from upstairs. I heard footsteps. That's why I came down."

"Everyone into the room" said Norman. "Hide. Turn out that light."

Jefferson and Roberto ducked behind some wooden boxes that had been stacked in the corner. Norman hid behind one of the metal cylinders. They killed the light. The darkness was complete. The only sound, Norman could hear was his own breathing, the blood pounding in his ears.

In the stillness they could hear distant footsteps getting closer. The staircase creaked loudly at every step. The footsteps paused at the foot of the stairs. Radiance suddenly flooded under the door, Norman shrunk further back into the shadows.

A voice could be heard, muttering.

"I'm sure I heard something. Sounded like someone banging."

It had to be Tyler. Footsteps were approaching the door. With a sinking heart Norman heard the handle turning, then the door opening. Light flooded through. Tyler stood, illuminated, in the doorway, gun in hand. From behind the cylinder Norman could see him, an elderly, graying but still robust old man.

He walked purposefully, toward the cylinder, becoming obscured from Norman's view. There was a sudden resounding click, as though a lever had been pressed or a button pushed. A hatch swung open on the front of the cylinder.

Norman strained to see, leaning more and more out from his hiding place. With a sudden sickening sensation he slipped and lost his balance. He tumbled out to land at Tyler's feet.

With alacrity surprising in someone so old he swung round, pointing the gun.

"What the hell?". He stared in disbelief, recognition growing in his eyes.

"Norman Rosen?"

There was an almighty crack. Tyler crumpled in a heap, nearly falling on Norman. Jefferson had brought the steel flashlight with full force down on the back of his head.

"Did you have to hit him so hard" said Norman, jumping to his feet.

"Jesus Christ. He had a gun," said Jefferson.

Norman was barely listening.

"Look. Look behind you."

The others turned around. The subject of Tyler's interest became clear. The cylinder had swung open into two halves. Built into the back was what looked like a safe? Tyler had even obligingly opened the door, before Norman had surprised him.

Norman pushed roughly passed Jefferson.

"It's all here. Millions of dollars in cash. Jewelry, too. His wife wasn't completely useless, after all. Open up the bag Jefferson, let's fill it up and get the hell out of here."

"Oh my God, I think his head is bleeding," said Roberto, bending over Tyler. "Norman, his breathing is very faint."

"What are we going to do with him?" said Jefferson. "We can't just leave him here."

"Will you both shut-up. I can't think. Roberto take the radio. Go up stairs tell Nicholas we're on our way. Jefferson and I will handle Tyler."

"What are you going to do?" said Roberto, wide-eyed.

"Nothing. Just do as I tell you. Go on now."

Roberto left, almost reluctantly, half-turning his head as he went.

Jefferson turned to Norman, after he left.

"He recognized you, just before I hit him. You know what that means."

"I know. I know. It means as soon as he comes round, he'll open his mouth. He'll put the finger on us all."

He looked down at the old man, sprawled on the ground. Already a pool of blood was beginning to form around his head, streaks of red running through the grey.

"There's no alternative. We'll have to bring him with us. I'll figure out what to do with him later."

Norman emptied the safe while Jefferson hoisted Tyler on his back.

Chapter 11 – Waiting for the gang to return

Something must have happened, thought Nicholas. Ten minutes had gone by and still nothing. The radio was silent. Time dragged by with agonizing slowness. Every moment's delay increased the chances of someone raising the alarm. What could have gone wrong? The whole thing was only supposed to take five minutes.

What should he do? He fought the impulse to leave. He could leave. Just get out of the car. Out of this fucked-up situation and go. He hadn't done anything wrong. Nothing could link him to the crime, not if he got out, now, and left.

The radio crackled into life.

"Nicholas, its Roberto."

"Roberto, where are you? Where's everyone? What's going on?"

"We ran into a problem".

He knew it. He should have had his head examined getting involved. Should have seen this coming.

"What kind of problem?"

"Tyler surprised us. Jefferson hit him with the flashlight. Nicholas, I think he's badly hurt."

"Jesus, what are we going to do?"

"Hold on a second. Norman wants to talk to you."

There was a pause as Norman came on.

"Nicholas, sit tight we'll be out in a few minutes."

"Norman, what are we going to do?"

"Just relax. Wait for us."

He had a long wait. It must have been ten minutes later, at least, before Roberto slipped over the wall and knocked on the window, causing Nicholas to nearly jump out of his seat, in alarm. He climbed into the car beside Nicholas.

"There's a side-gate, on the other side of the building" he said breathlessly. "We have to drive right around the estate. Norman said to hurry."

"He said hurry. What the hell is he talking about? I've been waiting for nearly thirty minutes."

He started the engine slowly putting the car into gear. They circled the block each looking for the other entrance.

"Roberto, what's going on? Have they got Tyler with them?"

"I don't know, Nicholas. I don't like it. He saw Norman before he was knocked unconscious."

"Fuck. What about the money?"

"That part, at least, worked out. We got it all, Nicholas. Every single buck. Must be millions of dollars. We're going to be rich, all of us. Stop here this is where the gate is."

He brought the car to a standstill. Almost immediately two figures issued from a high metal gate recessed in the wall. "Keep your eyes open. We're bringing Tyler out" said Norman, through the window. They disappeared in through the gate again, re-emerging with what appeared to be a large, object wrapped in a sheet. They tossed the bundle roughly into the back seat. Norman and Jefferson tumbled in after it.

"Is that Tyler?" said Nicholas, in disbelief.

"Drive the car, Nicholas" said Norman. "Let's get the hell out of here."

They both visibly slumped in the back seat. Nicholas put the car in gear.

"Where's the money?" said Roberto.

"It's right here. Don't worry" said Norman.

"What about Tyler, Norman? Is he alright and where the fuck are we going, anyway?" said Nicholas.

"He's fine" said Jefferson. "He's just unconscious".

"He's more than unconscious. What about all that blood? He didn't look very fine to me" said Roberto.

"Where are we going, Norman?" said Nicholas. "Do you want me to drive aimlessly around until we get picked up by the cops"?

"Will you all shut-up" yelled Norman. "Drive to my apartment, for now, until I figure out what to do".

"Your apartment, Norman, that's not very smart" said Roberto.

"Jesus. Just do it. There's nowhere else."

They fell silent, as Nicholas drove. He managed to avoid the main streets taking side roads through residential areas. The journey was uneventful. They scarcely saw another car on the road. It was still the early hours of the morning and a heavy fog had descended on the city reducing visibility to a minimum. It seemed to Nicholas as he drove that what started out as a ten minute interlude had mushroomed into a monstrous involvement. He felt calm, now. The emotional reaction had passed. There was nothing to do but sit it out and wait. It wasn't any easier for the others.

They were getting closer to Norman's apartment. The taller buildings were so shrouded in mist that they seemed like spectral ships in the night, looming suddenly, as they passed.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do" said Norman, leaning forward between the two front seats.

"Drop me off and wait about two minutes. I'll go in front and distract the doorman. He knows me, anyway. In the meantime, you drive into the parking lot and get Tyler upstairs. Don't delay you've got about three minutes."

Everything went as Norman had said it would. He chatted amiably with the doorman, making sure his eyes weren't on the TV screens behind him. The doorman was not surprised to see

Norman. He was frequently wandering in at all hours, drunk. He regarded Norman as a playboy, unfettered by the demands of job and responsibility. In the corner of his eye Norman could see the other three on the screen carrying Tyler through the parking lot.

Nicholas went first making sure no one was in the elevator. Roberto and Jefferson came behind carrying Tyler between them. The sheet was stained a violent streak of red where it touched his head. They bundled him unceremoniously into the car. Nicholas hit seventeen the button for Norman's floor. Another pang of angst hit him when the door opened on the seventeenth floor.

The corridor was quiet, though. Most of Norman's neighbors were elderly and lived alone. As such they were not inclined to roam the halls in the small hours.

They quickly hauled Tyler into the apartment tripping over the usual mess of papers and junk.

They lay him on Norman's bed, removing the sheet. His face was pale and his breathing still very shallow.

"How do we know he's not dying, or something?" said Roberto.

"He's not dying" snorted Jefferson.

"How do you know?"

"Look Roberto, I know. That was not a fatal blow. The cut isn't even deep. In a few hours he'll come round. He'll have a crushing headache, but otherwise he'll be fine."

They left Tyler in the bedroom. Nicholas was slumped on the couch. The adrenaline that had kept him going until now was ebbing away.

"Jesus, Nicholas looks worse than Tyler" said Jefferson.

"Do you guys have any idea how much worse having him here makes everything. Every cop in the city of Chicago will be looking for us in a few hours. This is not some bum off the street. This is a prominent business man who we've abducted from his home. They'll call out the National Guard for this. And what are we going to do with him when he comes round? Do we keep him here forever? Are you going to kill him, Jefferson? Have you even thought about it?"

"What would you suggest, Nicholas?" Norman had just arrived.

"I don't know. The whole thing is fucked-up. I don't have any suggestions."

"Well you're right about one thing". Norman sat down on the chair. He, too, looked tired.

"We can't keep him here for long. We have to figure out what to do about him. The fact that he's seen me makes him a liability. I think we should all think about it. That includes you two as well", he gestured to Jefferson and Roberto. "Nobody is going anywhere until we figure it out."

Nobody said anything after that. The silence was a welcome relief at least. Jefferson seemed untroubled by the gravity of the situation. Within a few minutes his head was resting on his chest, his eyes closed.

"How great it must be to be able to do that" said Roberto to Nicholas. Norman was in the bathroom.

"I don't think I'm going to get much sleep" said Nicholas.

"This situation seems somehow familiar to me" said Roberto, after a pause.

"How's that?"

"Well, it has occurred to me that, things could get out of hand. I mean when I got involved in this it sounded so easy. We just take the money and go. Nobody gets hurt. Nobody gets involved. One little crime. Such a simple thing. But now it's as though the stakes have been increased. Suddenly a man's life is at issue. I don't want any part in murder."

"Neither do I" said Nicholas.

"You know what scares me though" said Roberto in hushed tones, "I don't sense that it would bother Jefferson or Norman much. I think it would be wrong to kill this old man. He's done us no harm. To rob a selfish old man when he has more money than he knows what to do with, that doesn't strike me as wrong. But to kill him, no, I know that's wrong. What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think. I feel like I'm caught up in a monstrous trap. Should we stand by and let them do that? Aren't we just as guilty as them, if we do?"

Jefferson murmured softly in his sleep. Norman seemed to be having a shower.

Roberto spoke again after a few moments.

"I mean, in ways, I'm a religious man. You're Catholic, right?"

"Yes, I am."

"When I was a child I was brought up to believe in God, to abide by a certain moral code. But when I went out into the world, I began to realize that a very different system of laws applied. There was a set of rules for the rich and one for the poor. All men may be equal in the eyes of God, but in the eyes of man there is no equality."

"You're right. I'd agree there is no objective morality or criteria by which to follow. I was subjected to the same indoctrination you were, mass on Sunday, and high-sounding platitudes by clerics who molested little boys, the whole gambit of institutionalized superstition. I suppose somewhere in there I developed a conscience, a rudimentary one, perhaps, but one that can't be ignored."

"What you said earlier about Tyler, is true of course" said Roberto, after a while, "every cop in Chicago will be looking for him, but only because he's rich and successful. Hell, he's probably a friend of the mayor, or knows a senator or something. If it was you or I, I don't think they would be all that concerned."

They fell silent. Outside the first glimmers of the new day were showing. Shadows gradually receded, in the room, as the sun rose in crimson hues over the lake.

"You know, I can't help but feel optimistic when I see a new day" said Nicholas, "despite everything".

Norman emerged from the bathroom, enveloped in a cloud of steam.

"I took a bath" he said, standing in a bathrobe, drying his hair.

"What time is it?" he said.

"About seven" said Roberto.

"Turn on the tv, there might be some news, about the robbery."

Roberto picked up the remote control that was lying on the table. He pressed a button. The television suddenly blared into life startling Jefferson into wakefulness. He changed the channel, hoping to find a news program, eventually finding a local channel, one that specialized in endless weather bulletins and inflated any titbit of local news to sensational heights.

The screen cleared and Nicholas recognized the street on which he so lately parked. The reporter, a fresh-faced enthusiastic young man, seemed almost overcome with excitement.

"I am standing outside the Evanston home of Matthew Tyler, a well-known and respected North Shore business man, who it appears, was brutally abducted from his home last night. Police are still trying to piece together what happened. It seems certain that at least two men scaled the wall of Mr. Tyler's estate at this point", he gestured to the wall, "gaining entrance to the house through one of the ground floor windows. Mr. Tyler may have confronted the burglars only to become the victim of a brutal assault. The contents of a small personal safe were rifled. Police are working on the theory that the criminals were personally known to Mr. Tyler, as they seemed to have intimate knowledge of the house.

A statewide search is being conducted for the kidnapers, but police are assuming for now that Mr. Tyler is being held somewhere in Chicago." A eulogy of Tyler's life followed. There were photographs of the youthful Tyler, the man with vision. The story was told of how he had built up a business that employed over a hundred people by him, what a generous donator to charity he was. "What a load of crap" said Norman. "Everything he did was for his own aggrandizement. Public benefactor my ass."

"Norman, Norman", a feeble, almost plaintive, voice was calling from the bedroom.

"Shit Tyler's awake" said Norman, jumping up, "he must have heard us talking". The other three sat electrified in their seats.

"What are we going to do?" said Roberto.

"I'll talk to him" said Norman.

He went into the bedroom. Tyler was sitting upright in bed. His face was very pale. His forehead was caked in blood.

"Norman Rosen" he said. "It is you. What the hell is going on? What am I doing here?"

"I'm afraid you're being held prisoner."

"Prisoner for what?" Comprehension suddenly dawned upon him.

"So it's my money you're after. Now I remember, I went downstairs after hearing banging noises." He looked at Norman in disbelief.

"I can't believe you're nothing but a common criminal, and to think I know your father too.

"That's right. I'm a criminal and you're my hostage."

"Norman Rosen, I always knew there was something dangerous about you." He looked searchingly at him.

"You never did like work, did you? Your father said you were good for nothing. I never realized you were capable of this, though". He tried to sit up in the bed, but was forced, instead, to lean on one elbow.

"So what are you going to do now? You don't honestly think you're going to get away with this, do you?"

"We'll see about that. In the meantime you're not going anywhere."

"What do you mean, 'not going anywhere'? You can't keep me here. Norman, come now." He adopted a conciliatory tone. "I don't know what you're trying to prove, or what kind of chip you have on your shoulder, but you've made your point. If you stop this nonsense now I might be persuaded to drop the charges."

"That's big of you."

"Norman". There was sharpness in his voice. This tone was usually reserved for chastising wayward employees. Normally it had a devastating effect. "I don't think you realize who you're dealing with."

"Perhaps not. But you might as well save your breath, Tyler. You're in no position to make threats."

"Now, just one minute, you impudent little punk, I've had just about enough of you. Release me this instant."

"Or you'll do what?" taunted Norman.

"Do you realize what kind of trouble you're in? This isn't some kind of joke."

"Who said anything about a joke? Anyway, I think this conversation has gone on long enough. Just do as you're told, shut up, and you'll be fine."

"And if I refuse..."

"I think you'd much rather be co-operative."

"Meaning what exactly?" Tyler called after him.

"You'll see" was the cryptic reply.

Norman closed the bedroom door, locking it behind him.

"He's pondering his fate" he said to others.

"What about him kicking up a commotion, or throwing something out the window. Shouldn't we at least tie him up?" said Roberto.

"Well the windows don't open and these apartments are soundproofed. He could rant and rave in there all he wants and no one would hear him."

"It still doesn't solve the question of what to do about him?" said Nicholas, glumly.

"No that's true" admitted Norman. "Does anyone have any suggestions?"

There was silence.

"There is one solution, no one has mentioned yet" said Norman.

"What's that?" said Jefferson.

"Well, the way I see it, we can't really let him go free. He's seen me and just as soon as he's free he'll tell the cops everything."

"What are you suggesting, killing him?" said Nicholas, aghast.

"Well, why not?" said Norman, defensively, "I don't think you realize the situation. We don't have any alternatives."

"I don't want any part of murder, and Roberto, feels the same way."

"Let Jefferson and me handle it", said Norman, "you don't have to deal with it."

"You've got to be kidding."

"You're not being smart, Nicholas. Think about it. Do you really want Tyler to go free? How long do you think it would be before the police came knocking on your door?"

"That's not even the point. This man, what harm has he done you?"

"It's not what he's done. It's what he might do."

"I don't want to think about it" said Nicholas. "I have thought about it, already. The whole idea makes me sick."

"Wake up, Nicholas. Wake up to reality. You can't run just run away from this situation. You're involved now. Nobody gets what they want by shirking the hard decisions."

"He's right, Nicholas. There is no other way" said Jefferson. "With Tyler alive and free we'll always be in danger."

"There must be something else we can do, Norman" said Roberto.

"Tell me, then, what it is. What is the better way? We don't have time for debate. Every moment he's here jeopardizes all of us."

As if to confirm there was a huge crash in the bedroom. Something heavy hit the wall and tumbled to the floor with a thump. The tinkling sound of glass breaking followed.

"The bastard" shouted Norman, "he's smashing my fish tank".

A huge crunch followed by the rushing sound of water confirmed his fear. He ran to the door, in the frenzy, his hand shaking with fury, as he turned the key. The door wouldn't budge.

"He must have barricaded the door. Jefferson. Roberto. Help me."

Jefferson ran to his aid. They heaved their combined weight against the door. It yielded reluctantly as though a heavy weight was set against it. They pushed into the room, Nicholas and Roberto following behind. The bed had been jammed tightly up against the door. Tyler slumped in the corner, seemingly exhausted with his efforts. The floor, about him, was saturated with water, brightly colored fish lay strewn about, wriggling and kicking, convulsively.

As soon as he saw Norman and Jefferson he made a bolt for the door.

"Get out of my way, all of you. You can't keep me here."

He made to push by them.

"Jefferson, stop him" yelled Norman. There was a brief scuffle. Tyler, despite his age, put up a good fight. Jefferson, eventually, wrestled him to the floor, while Norman produced a rope and bound his hands and feet. Trussed up he was tossed on the bed, Norman administering a few blows for good measure.

"That's for my fish tank" he said, vindictively.

"Alright, that's decided it" he said to the others, as he closed and relocked the bedroom door.

"We're going to settle this matter, once and for all tonight. We'll get him out of here when it's dark. I have just the place, in mind, where we can dispose of the body. After that we'll divide the money, and you can all go your separate ways and that will be the end of the matter. It's the only way" he said turning to Nicholas.

"I wish there were a better way."

"So do I" said Norman, "so do I."

Norman and Jefferson went out for food. Nobody felt very hungry but partly they went to get out. It was early morning, still. The fog had lifted and Nicholas could see far out on the lake. It seemed to beckon, invitingly, knowing nothing of his or any other trouble.

"I feel terrible about this business" he said turning away from the window, after Norman and Jefferson had left.

"So do I" said Roberto. "But I don't know what we can do, Nicholas. Our hands are tied."

They watched the news reports on the TV. Even the national networks had picked up the story. They must have been hard up for news. The same piece of footage was shown again and again. There was no new information. The kidnapers had not made known their demands.

"It's weird" said Nicholas, after a while.

"What is?"

"I should be happy. In less than day I will be a millionaire. I suppose I dreamed about this moment often enough. I never thought it would be like this. There really are no 'free lunches', in this world. The higher the stakes the greater the price to be paid. Is it just me? Am I alone in feeling troubled by this? Maybe I'm a greater hypocrite, wanting it both ways. Wanting to salve my conscience, while at the same time to get a share of the spoils."

"Don't dwell on it" said Roberto. "It only makes it worse. Just think, in a few short hours, you will be as far away from here as you want with no-one to remind you."

"I wish it were that easy" he said. "Doesn't this bother you, too?"

"Of course it does. I didn't want Tyler involved. It did occur to me that this might happen, though. I mean you don't just walk into somebody's home and take what you want without consequences."

"You're right, of course" said Nicholas. "It's just another great big fuck-up, I've walked right into. All my life I've been doing that. I had a good education, a better chance than most. I could have led

a normal life. But it wasn't enough for me. Never enough. I wasn't satisfied. Do you know what it is to fuck everything up? Well, that's what I've done."

There was rattling sounds coming from the bedroom. Tyler had obviously come round after the beating he'd received. Very faintly, through the locked door, they could hear him calling out.

"What's he saying?" whispered Roberto.

"I think he wants water" said Nicholas after listening for a few moments. "We'd better bring him some."

"Oh, don't do that. Norman will be annoyed."

"Fuck Norman."

Nicholas turned the key in the lock and opened the door. The room was in the same state of disarray as before. There was an overwhelming smell of fish. Tyler turned his head, feebly, to look up.

"You wanted water. I brought you some" said Nicholas.

The old man looked him in the eye. His face was very pale. Blood had trickled down from the gash on his head and flowed unchecked down his cheek.

"Untie me" said Tyler.

"I can't do that."

"You'll have to hold the cup for me, then."

He held the cup for him as he drank noisily.

"Don't go" he said, as Nicholas turned to leave.

"I heard what you were saying earlier. Tonight you're going to kill me. Isn't that the plan?"

"Something like that."

"Let me tell you something. I've done nothing to you people. I don't know who you are or what you stand for. Take the money. Isn't that enough? I have a life out there. I was quite content. I have no desire to die."

"I'm sorry" said Nicholas, quietly.

"Sorry, isn't enough. I have a daughter and a son; I want to see them again. Don't you have anyone you care about? Or are you just as morally bankrupt as the rest of them?"

"I don't know what to tell you."

"How can you stand there and say that? Don't you realize what you're doing? My life is at stake. It may not mean much to you, but it means a lot to me. You have to help me."

"I can't help you."

"You must. Listen to me. Haven't you a father, a mother, a girlfriend, someone you care for?"

There was silence.

"How did you get mixed up in all this, anyway? Norman I can understand, but you, you don't seem capable of this."

"I'm not."

"What are you doing here?"

"It wasn't supposed to be like this." He felt as though Tyler would have to understand. If he could just explain it to him.

"It just happened. Please understand. I don't bear you any ill will."

"Then you have to protect me."

"I can't do that."

"What can you do?"

"Nothing."

"Nicholas, what are you doing?" Roberto called from the other room.

"I'm coming. I have to go" he said to Tyler. He closed and relocked the door.

"What were you doing in there?" said Roberto.

"Nothing."

"The others should be back by now."

As if in response to that statement they heard the prearranged series of knocks on the door.

"It's them, alright" said Roberto looking through the spyhole.

"What took you so long?" he said opening the door.

"We had things to do" said Norman, brushing past him.

They sat around the coffee table eating their food.

"How's Tyler?" said Norman.

"Nicholas went in to give him water a while ago" said Roberto, "Otherwise he's been quiet."

"I said that door wasn't to be opened" said Norman.

"All he wanted was water."

"Nicholas I don't care what you do after tonight. But until then you do as I tell you. I said no one was to open that door and I meant it. Alright, now, Jesus, I'll have a coronary before this thing is over. Jefferson get the map. I want to explain how we're going to dispose of our problem."

Nicholas sat and listened as Norman outlined his plan. The key was disposing of the body. That, according to Norman, was the major shortcoming in any murder plot. The killers always left the evidence lying around. What better place to dispose of a body than somewhere you would expect to find a lot of dead people. Somewhere no-one would think of looking - a cemetery of course. They would take him out there tonight. Norman knew the exact place, too. His grandfather was buried, there, in a vault. Norman, in anticipation, had got a copy of the keys made. Tyler could keep his grandfather company, he laughed.

"You mean you expected this would happen all along?" said Nicholas.

"You have to consider every eventuality" said Norman, between mouthfuls of hamburger. "Yes. I always thought it was a possibility. I had hoped it wouldn't be necessary. But for all that I wouldn't

shirk it now. This is not the time to falter. Don't give up at the last minute. Not just you Nicholas. All of you. You're so close to what you want. Don't throw it away at the last minute."

There was silence after that. They sat around as afternoon gave way to early evening. Tyler called out several times but was ignored. It was a waiting time all of them wanted to end.

Some time later he started a regular rattling noise as though he was rocking the bed back and forth.

"What the hell does he want now?" said Norman, in frustration.

"Nicholas, go in and see what he wants, since you're so full of compassion I'm sure you would be happy to look after his needs."

Nicholas unlocked the door and went in.

Tyler turned in the bed, hearing the door open.

"Oh, it's you" he said looking up. "I suppose I should be happy to see you, even if you are one of my executioners."

The room was beginning to darken as dusk set in outside. Lights winked on in ones and twos in the high-rise across the street.

"I need to go to the bathroom. Or is that allowed?"

"I'll have to check."

"You run and ask Norman. See what he thinks."

Nicholas stuck his head into the living room.

"He wants to go to the bathroom."

The others looked up from the TV. They were watching a so called in depth analysis of the kidnapping. One of the local networks had found a panel of experts to comment on what was already being dubbed the 'Tyler Kidnapping'. "Maybe Tyler had mob connections" speculated one kidnapping expert. The three burst out laughing.

"Jefferson go with Nicholas. Make sure Tyler doesn't try anything" said Norman.

Tyler was more subdued than earlier. He made no attempt to escape when they untied him, and allowed himself to be escorted, unprotesting, to the bathroom.

They led him back to the bedroom. He didn't resist when Jefferson tied him to the bed again. Nicholas lingered by the door after Jefferson left.

"Is there anything else you want?" he asked.

Tyler didn't answer for a second. He lay on his back staring up at the ceiling.

"Have you ever faced death?" he said after a second.

Nicholas didn't say anything.

"The waiting is the worst. It must be like that on death row. In the end you get impatient, waiting. It's funny. I never thought I'd be scared either. It's the loneliness I'm really afraid of. I suppose any human experience is bearable if it's shared. Except you can't share death. That's something you

have to do on your own. Death is like being completely alone. Lying here contemplating my own death makes me feel the need for human company. Even the company of people who are going to kill me. Does that strike you as odd?"

"No" said Nicholas.

"I think I let myself forget what's most important. It's easy to lose sight of that. You people think all you want is money. That once you get it you will be satisfied. Money's not important. It's never enough. Only the rich can say that with confidence. Life is what matters. Look at me. I have everything money can buy. And bunch of punks like you can take it all away on a whim. Now I'd gladly trade all my money for life. You're probably thinking I'm just a selfish old man. It's not just for me I want to live. You probably don't even know what its like to live for someone else. You know the first thing I would do if I survive this?"

There was silence. A jet streaked across Nicholas's line of vision. A solitary light in the sky. "I would get on the next plane to California and go see that son of mine. I know we've had our differences, but I always thought there would be time to fix them."

He paused for a second.

"In a way I'm grateful to you" he said, after a moment.

"To me. Why?"

"Some things have changed since I've been lying here. I see more things clearly now. It's not often a man gets to contemplate his life in its entirety. I have you to thank for that. Now I feel like there are so many things I want to do, so many things I haven't accomplished yet. It must be one of life's ironies, having to lose something, in order to really value it."

"What are you doing, Nicholas?" Norman had been standing in the doorway.

"Nothing."

"Come out and lock the door" he said, ignoring Tyler.

"What the hell are you doing in there?" he said after Nicholas closed and locked the door, Norman took the key and pocketed it. They stood, facing each other, in the corridor.

"Norman" he said, ignoring his question, "I ask you one more time, is there no better way?"

"How many times do I have to say this? There is no better way. Nicholas, we've been over this. There are no alternatives. I don't like the idea of you developing a conscience. Consciences scare me. People who have them do unpredictable things. You are not going to do something I wouldn't like are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean."

"Norman there was a time when I thought we thought alike, I would even have considered you a friend, but now I know that we have nothing in common. After this is over I hope I never see you again."

He made to brush by him.

"You hypocrite. What makes you so high and mighty? There's no difference between you and me. You want it both ways. You want to steal Tyler's money and not have to trouble your conscience. You think you're different. We're the same Nicholas. Face up to it; you're just as much a criminal and a murderer, as I am."

Chapter 12 – Kidnapping on TV

"Still no word from the kidnapers, as the mystery surrounding the Tyler Kidnapping continues to grow. Less than eighteen hours have now passed since..." he gradually lowered the television sound to a background hum. Jefferson was fully asleep slumped in one corner of the couch and hadn't stirred in a while. Roberto was more restless, tossing and turning this way and that, trying to get comfortable in the armchair. It was Norman he was most concerned about. Thirty minutes had passed since he had gone into the spare bedroom, leaving strict instructions to be woken in an hour.

With the greatest of care Nicholas rose out of his seat and made for the door. He dreaded every creak in the floorboards. He stood, silent, in the hallway listening. No sound was audible, save the muted hum of the television. Even Tyler seemed quiet; his end of the corridor was dark and silent.

With infinite caution, he turned the handle of the front door and stepped out into the corridor. The hallway was quiet. It was already late in the evening, but not yet late enough for Norman to execute the final stage of his plan.

He wanted to wait until at least three or four before attempting to move Tyler.

"We want to make sure we don't run into any surprises, in the elevator or parking lot" he said before retiring. "That means not taking unnecessary risks by leaving early."

Nicholas moved quickly, after gently closing the door behind him. Everything depended on being back before he was missed. One thing he was sure he'd seen, when they brought Tyler in through the parking lot, was a public phone by the doorway. It had to be working.

The elevator was empty and he hit the button for the parking lot, watching nervously as the numbers counted down. Surely nobody could want an elevator this late. It was already passed midnight.

A shock of surprise tingled on the back of his neck as the elevator came to an unexpected stop. A young, giggling, couple got in, falling silent when they saw the harried, expression on his face, catching a glimpse of the pale, bloodless cheeks and red-ringed eyes. They left quickly stepping out at the lobby, relieved to be away from the grave figure behind them.

The elevator proceeded without interruption. The parking lot was deserted; the events of the night before seeming like a distant memory. He picked up the phone and dialed a number. A voice came on the line after a few moments.

"Let me talk to someone in charge. I have information on the Tyler Kidnapping."

Chapter 13 – Philosophical Moments

Even Dublin a starving and neglected colonial city for so long, was more picturesque than this.

Chicago was a functional city, a city of industry but beauty. Still it had a more genuine feel. It felt more representative to him of what America should be like. The coastal cities were too cosmopolitan, too full of transients to be anything other than freakish and extreme.

Chicago was at a remove from all that. It didn't attract backpackers and drifters, the detritus of the nation and the world.

Like most Europeans, Nicholas had been brought up with a certain opinion of Americans, uncultured, overbearing, loud and sexual promiscuous were just some of the things he had been programmed to expect, and to an extent had discovered.

Poorer cousins, he reflected, nearly always tended to be disparaging of their rich relations. Europe he expected was a little afraid of America. It had reworked the world in a successful way and didn't give a damn what anyone thought about. It was about the present and careless of the past.

The restaurant was crowded. Sonia however had made a reservation and they were quickly ushered to their table.

"What's wrong Nicholas, you seem very preoccupied about something," she said, as they sat down.

"Just thinking, that's all."

"What about?"

"Sometimes I wonder what exactly I doing here. I mean living here, this lifestyle."

"Well what do you want to do? Where would you rather be?" Sonia was nothing if practical.

"Well, it's not just as simple as that. Sometimes I think something, and then a few hours later it changes. Opinions or at least, my opinions are apt to change from one moment to the next."

The waiter brought them two menus.

"Well, how do you ever know what you think, if that's the case."

This was Sonia's idea of facititiousness.

"You know what I mean. It depends on what position you adopt, what your perspective is. Take me for example. Having lived in the United States for nearly five years, sometimes I think I'm more American than Irish, in fact from an Irishman's perspective, certain of my opinions would seem very American. And yet by the same token, I will always be an outsider. I would never consider myself American. But again having lived here that long, renders me in some ways a cultural anomaly in my own country. When I go home on Christmas vacations I'm the Yank. Here I'm the Irish guy, with the funny accent."

"Well, I think it's nearly better. This way you have the best of both worlds." Sonia, she was such an optimist. In some ways she was very open-minded. She tolerated Nicholas's pontificating without any ill effects.

When they had first met she told him she had a thing for European guys, guys with accents. She had never really quantified what that 'thing' was. Maybe Nicholas had grown to fit the definition at least in her mind.

"I suppose that's a consequence of not being committed to either way of life. There was obviously something in Ireland you wanted to escape from; otherwise you would not have left."

"Well, it's a cultural thing, too. Emigration, I mean. Since the potato famine and before we've been bailing out like rats from a sinking ship. So with this long tradition of leaving, it's a very acceptable choice to make. I'm not exactly the first Irish person to leave his country. Nor, indeed will I be the last. I guess at a certain point in history leaving Ireland made good sense. It was an issue of survival. I think, back then, I'd rather take my chances, and take a leap into the unknown, than wait around to die of starvation."

"Well, that's surely not the case now. It may not be an exceptional wealthy country, but there's no shortage of anything."

"No, that's true. But it's always been easier to run away than to stay and try and improve things."

Nicholas wondered what interest Sonia actually had in these conversations. True, from a purely theoretical standpoint they were interesting. But Sonia had other motives. What was Nicholas's likely commitment to living in Chicago could be one obvious question.

Woman needed stability, Nicholas reflected, as he spooned his ravioli. It was the men who were biologically and emotionally independent. Already by virtue of being here, he had done something that Sonia were never have contemplated doing.

Family, she once told him, was the most important thing in her life. She talked to her mother on the phone for about an hour every day. At first Nicholas was mystified as to what they could possibly be saying to each other for that length of time. Later it transpired that her mother knew every aspect of her daughter's life, down to intimate details of her amours. There was an indissoluble link, even if it was maintained electronically between Sonia and her mother. A bond far stronger than any other relationship in her life, including Nicholas.

In truth, Nicholas had no real idea, how long he wanted to stay. It never felt like a permanent thing. There was one major demarcation in his head was the day he arrived in Chicago. Beyond that one-year led to the next, sooner than he could have imagined possible. At first he resisted the status of resident. When he lived on Halsted it took him a year to buy a couch and a decent bed. Every expenditure of this nature was agonised over. Representing as it did another commitment to this location. Symbolism was very important to Nicholas. As long as he lived out of a cardboard box there was the implication at least that he could up and leave.

The conversation lapsed as the food arrived. Sonia was quite fond of 'people-watching', as she called it. This consisted of her focusing in on another table and trying to imagine what kind of conversation they were having or what kind of people they were.

One particular feature of the restaurant was that the tables were close together. It was relatively easy to tune in to other conversations. Sonia had been focused for a while on a couple at another table. The woman was talking in quite an affected manner about another woman, who it transpired was her roommate. The audience for this monologue was a rather unfortunate looking man. This was obviously not the first such harangue he had been subjected too, nor the last. She was the kind of woman, Nicholas supposed, who was preoccupied with prestige and status. Everything was done to impress. She even raised her voice, as though she wanted everyone to hear her.

The two possessed all the ambiance of a couple who had been together for a long time, and who irritated each other intensely, but were held together by some mutual compulsion. "Joanne is being such a bitch, lately. She's got this new boyfriend. You know how she goes through guys. Anyway this new guy is around practically every night. I can hear everything. You know what that apartment is like. Well, at first I didn't what to say anything. I tried being out and giving them their space, like that time last Sunday when I came over."

The man didn't really say anything. His participation didn't seem to be required. "She looks like a real bitch," said Nicholas, in an undertone. "Why aren't you listening too me." the woman addressed the man, aggressively. "I was" he protested weakly. "No, you were not." "I heard everything you said. You were talking about Joanne." "I hate it when you do this," said the woman. "Do what?" "Don't pretend you don't know."

It occurred to Nicholas as their conversation degenerated into an argument that it was just another version of the same old thing. Just as this woman had an expectation of her boyfriend so did Sonia have an expectation of him? He had to live up to the role of future husband and lifelong companion. She like everyone else had been sold on the romantic myth. It didn't stand up to the test of reality. But then maybe it was never suppose to.

They finished up their meal and walked out into the cold. It had just started snowing again and a white carpet covered the sidewalk as they walked. "Nicholas" said Sonia "do you love me?" There was an intense expression in her eyes. She hated to ask questions like this normally. But Nicholas judged by her expression that this was an important

moment for her, maybe even a turning point. Her eyes scanned his face nervously as if she was trying to read some glimmer of his thoughts.

"Of course I do" he said.

"Yes, but do you really?" she persisted.

They crossed La Salle Street dodging the oncoming traffic.

"What do you mean really?"

"Well, some times I look at you and I think you seemed so bored with everything, me included. It seems like you're going through the motions but in reality you're miles away, thinking about something else, on some different planet."

They walked along Chicago Avenue toward the parking lot.

"I don't know, Sonia. Sometimes I feel like everything is closing in on me. I feel kind of temporary about myself. Everything is so mundane, so completely normal and predictable. I don't want to be a sheep. Mutely going through the motions being led unprotesting to some slaughterhouse."

"What do you mean, slaughterhouse?" There was an edge in her voice. "Nicholas some times you're so weird."

"I mean a slaughterhouse of mediocrity. I don't want to be some moron who buys a house in Geneva and washes his car every Sunday. I don't want to be normal, predictable, or bland."

"What do you want, Nicholas?"

"I don't know. I don't know."

They got into the car in silence. She drove. Later when they got back to the apartment she opted to stay. Maybe she felt bad about the conversation they had earlier. She generally didn't like to argue with Nicholas, though increasingly now, as her expectations for the future more of an issue she knew that was inevitable.

They lay side by side in Nicholas's bed, without showing any intimacy. Nicholas felt an involuntary surge of anger when she told him it was that time of the month. It annoyed him to be so confronted with the evidence of his own desire. It didn't seem so bad when those desires were reciprocated in another person. But to be the sole harbourer of those impulses was a less desirable state.

As they lay he pondered his situation. What could lead to such an unbelievable funk? Maybe it was a consequence of age. Youth is latent, unrealized potential. Greatness, success, all the desired things of this world, are somewhere off distant in the future. It's only with the passage of time that it becomes apparent that all is not well.

What shape or form this greatness should take, Nicholas had no idea. Time, it seemed was his principal enemy. Already there were younger more aggressive pushers of this idealism, with more ability and fewer hang-ups. Nicholas knew he didn't just want money. Money he knew could ensure a certain degree of status and prestige. What Nicholas wanted more was respect.

Truth of the matter was Nicholas was an incorrigible snob. Nothing obvious or blatant. He was too subtle for that. Just now and again if you looked for it there was a patronising smile, or a little grimace of condescension. The Jesuits were partly responsible. Hadn't Joyce accused them of churning out little English gentlemen at the beginning of the century? They certainly had that reputation. His father was fond of dubbing them the 'intellectual wing' of the Catholic Church. Better than those half-witted but well-meaning country clerics who seemed to comprise the major part of the hierarchy.

His father had been a religious man while he lived. Mass every morning at seven fifteen, without fail. With enough spiritual justification on his side he was ready and able to abuse everyone around him, including Nicholas' mother. He wrestled with and finally defeated a drink problem, to settle into a bitter and cynical middle age. He died of a heart attack when Nicholas was sixteen, not before he had brought much grief to everyone around him. Nicholas for one did not mourn his passing. Their relationship had always been rocky. There was no more terrifying a prospect than his father, drunk as a lord, administering chastisement with all the self-righteousness of a zealous Christian.

In contrast Nicholas had always maintained a close, almost claustrophobic relationship with his mother. She reeling from her traumatic marriage was pushed closer to Nicholas. He had always been her darling.

His brother and only sibling was not so favoured. They had always been rivals. Michael hadn't felt the urge to travel. Being more inclined to work for a bank in Dublin, having his pint of beer in Donnybrook on Sunday afternoons. Conservative by nature, twenty five years ago he would have been a teacher or priest. He regarded Nicholas as some cultural half-cast, ("space-alien" was the term Nicholas coined), for having thrown off the background he had so steadfastly fought to maintain.

Nicholas could hardly figure out who irritated him more, his long-suffering, martyred mother or his boorish brother. He felt much better about both of them when they were three thousand miles away.

Christmas the only time they enacted the ritual of family. Nicholas would fly in from Chicago. Michael lived less than a mile away from the family home. They would sit around in the tawdry living-room of their semi-detached home, consuming copious quantities of tea. Michael would regale Nicholas with amusing anecdotes from the bank. He worked in the branch in Ballsbridge. Credit was tight these days on account of the shenanigans in Brussels. Computers were the big thing, he told Nicholas. Everything was being computerized. They had lay-offs, even in his branch!

Then his mother would start-up. There was the new financial center down there on the quays. A lad of Nicholas' ability could certainly get a job. What was the thing he did? Operations that was it. After two weeks of that he couldn't wait to get on the plane back to O'Hare.

He looked over. Sonia had fallen asleep, tired out by the demands of her biology. It must be the equivalent of losing pints of blood, every month, Nicholas reflected.

He too was weary, but in a different way. It was a self inflicted misery. He wanted something from the world, an acknowledgement, recognition of him, Nicholas Martin, as an individual, free-thinker. He just wanted to be noticed. So far he had been denied his rightful place. And for the first time he was starting to question his ability to get there. He was driven towards what he didn't know. There was a general dissatisfaction, a compulsion. He wasn't content with the average, the bourgeoisie lifestyle. This automaton said no. He was pretty good at saying no. Nicholas knew everything he didn't like, but what he did like he could not say.

He felt very small and very alone, a minority of one. Where he was going there was no room for passengers or companions.

Great men, he consoled himself with the notion, were always loners. Visionaries and prophets, theirs was a lonely destiny. Just now, though, he didn't feel particularly great or prophetic.

He felt tortured by his own vision of greatness. Sleep finally overtook him as he lay prone, the furiously churning of his mind momentarily forgotten.

"Nicholas, wake up. It's time to go."

He opened his eyes. Norman was standing over him, shaking him. He must have fallen asleep on the couch. Jefferson and Roberto stood around sleepily in the background.

"Is it time already?"

"Yes" said Norman. "Go and wake Tyler. Jefferson go with him."

The bedroom was dark saving only the light from the street. Tyler must have broken the light in his frenzy, earlier.

"Who's there? Is that you, Nicholas?" said Tyler, sitting up in the bed, when the door opened.

"It's me. Tyler, it's time to go, now."

"So this is it. You're really going through with this aren't you?" he said straining to see them in the dark.

"You better believe it" said Jefferson. "This will shut you up" he said, placing a gag in his mouth. Tyler tried to struggle but his hands and legs were already tied.

"Is that really necessary?" said Nicholas.

"Norman's instructions."

Jefferson untied his legs and pulled him roughly to his feet. Roberto and Norman were standing outside, waiting for them, in the hallway.

"Okay, let's not waste anytime" said Norman. "The sooner this is over the sooner we can all go our separate ways. Wait five minutes after I've left, before following. As soon as you're safely in the car I'll come and join you."

They stood around uncomfortably after he left. Nobody wanting to make eye contact or say anything. At the appointed time Jefferson covered Tyler's head in a sheet and bundled him swiftly into the elevator. The ride to the parking lot was quick, their ascent uninterrupted.

"Nicholas, go first" said Jefferson, when the elevator stopped, assuming command in Norman's absence. The car was some distance from the door, glinting dully in the cheerless glare. Again Nicholas led as they quickly hustled Tyler out into the lot, all fearing exposure in the open space. No shout rang out or challenge was made as they took their places in the car. Jefferson went in the back pushing Tyler into the trunk. Nicholas, as before took the drivers seat, Roberto up front beside him.

"What's keeping Norman, so long? He should be here by now." said Roberto.

"Give him time. He's only a minute late" said Jefferson.

"Start the engine, Nicholas. So we'll be ready to go when he gets here."

"There he is" said Roberto, a moment later. Norman emerged from the elevator, looking quickly around him, as he walked briskly to the car.

"I thought that guy would never shut up" said Norman, getting in beside Jefferson. "Once they get going those guys never stop. Okay. Let's get this over with. Let's go, Nicholas."

The streets were deserted and windswept. A sleety rain blowing in off the lake, drummed incessantly on the windows and roof of the car. Again they avoided the highway, favoring instead the seclusion of less frequented streets.

"I've got everyone's share counted out. As soon we've disposed of the body, you'll all get your money" said Norman. "You don't look too happy, Nicholas."

"Do you expect me to be happy?"

"Look on the bright side. You'll never have financial problems again in your life."

"Wonderful".

The rain seemed to intensify as they passed through tree-lined streets, the palatial homes of the rich could be glimpsed, sequestered, behind high stone walls and thick hedges.

"Take a right at the end of this street" instructed Norman.

"We'll use one of the side gates".

The street gave way to a wooded lane, the road suddenly degenerating into a trail.

"Keep going. It's a half mile, at least" said Norman.

They bumped and jostled along the track, the rain having delved huge pot-holes and craters in the road, dimmed headlights waving crazily. The road turned sharply round a bend, and gave out abruptly. An immense iron gate, old, rusted and shrouded in ivy, blocked their path.

"Is that the way in?" said Roberto, in disbelief.

"That's it" said Norman. "Okay, everybody out. Nicholas kill those lights." Darkness descended suddenly, complete and absolute. They groped and felt their way out of the car. The rain had, by now, dwindled to a drizzle. Nicholas could vaguely see the outline of the others against the blackened sky, his vision gradually adjusting.

"We have to open the gate, first" said Norman.

"How are we going to do that?" said Roberto, inspecting the rusted lock and weed-ridden driveway that led away into the shadows, beyond. "This gate hasn't been opened in years."

"Try this" said Norman, handing him an ornate, weighty key, "it should open the lock at least."

After a moment's hesitation and a resounding click the key turned and the lock opened. The gate still refused to budge.

"Jefferson, Nicholas, help him with the gate" ordered Norman. In the end it took all their combined weights to move it. Finally and begrudgingly, with a high-pitched squeak of protesting metal, the gate swung open.

"Okay, Jefferson, get Tyler. Let's be quick about this."

Jefferson disappeared into the darkness, reemerging a few moments later with Tyler who wavered groggily on his feet.

"Okay we need to follow the road for another half mile at least. Let's move. Nicholas go first. And remember, everyone no talking."

The path wended in and out of the trees. They must have been following the perimeter wall, as it reappeared periodically through the trees. To the right lay the resting places of the dead, row upon row of moldering tombstones, the lasting legacy of their human inhabitants.

The road suddenly came to a fork, the right fork continuing along the perimeter, the left seeming to plunge into the heart of the cemetery.

"Take a left, here" said Norman, after a moment's deliberation.

"I've never been here by this route, before."

The road was sloping down more. Tyler tripped and stumbled, as he walked, almost losing his balance, his tied hands and covered head, affording him no assistance.

"Keep moving" said Jefferson, prodding him from behind.

"Around the next bend, should be the family vault" said Norman.

The trees parted suddenly, to reveal a large clearing in the center of which was, dimly visible, a squat, grey building inset by a metal door.

"Jefferson, bring Tyler over here."

A sudden noise in the bushes made them all freeze. As if on cue or command radiance flooded the clearing from all directions.

A voice, amplified by megaphone, reverberated through the trees.

"Put your hands in the air, all of you. This is the police. You're surrounded. There's no escape."

Behind the dazzling light grey shadows moved. From the corner of his eye, Nicholas saw Norman, pushing Roberto aside and making a lunge towards Tyler. Something grey and metallic glinted, brightly, in his hand. Without warning he winced, as though an invisible hand had reached out and slapped him across the face. He tottered, stumbled and fell to the ground.

A moment later a searing pain shot through Nicholas's leg like a red-hot needle. He fell to his knees. A second shooting pain knocked him forward on his face and then numbness. The earth, soft and yielding, seemed welcoming to his touch. Roberto, he could see nearby, struggling to drag himself forward. His words bubbled, so faint and garbled he could barely hear.

Uniformed figures emerged, cautiously, from the trees and approached.

He wanted very badly to explain that he was so very tired. All he wanted was to lie here for a while, and rest. Rest and sleep. The thought like mist on a sunny day dispersed over the darkening landscape of his mind.

Chapter 14 – The burial of Nicholas Martin

The day was bitterly cold, squalls of driving rain followed rapidly by periods of sunshine. Beyond the cemetery wall the land rose slowly up to meet the hills that encircled it, its dull coloured hues partly swathed in cloud. Michael stood beside his mother, supporting her on one arm. The rest of the onlookers huddled in knots of two or three, trying vainly, to ward off the bitter gusts that swept in off the hills.

A fresh mound of earth lay, neatly piled, the exposed earth like some huge gash in the otherwise unblemished grass, as Father Morrissey said a few last words.

Nicholas, he had known, for much of his short life, and believed that he was possessed of many fine qualities, that his tragic and untimely end could not detract from.

They lowered the coffin into the ground, returning him to the sodden earth.

An elderly man detached himself from the crowd of spectators and approached the coffin. "Sorry for your trouble" he said to Mrs. Martin.

She looked up, drying her eyes.

"I know you" she said. "You're the man they kidnapped. I saw your picture on the television. You travelled all this way to be here?"

Tyler signed. Behind him workmen were already busy shoveling the dirt.

"I needed too pay my respects. After all, he did save my life. I have a son, too. I wanted you to know that he got caught up in something he couldn't control. He was more a victim than I."

"I knew he was incapable of doing all those things."

"No" said Tyler, "he knew what he was doing, maybe not that it would turn out the way it did."

She recoiled in anger. "What do you mean?"

"Only that sometimes, a man can prefer death to guilt. It can be the easier option."

"I don't know what you're talking about" she snapped.

She turned her back on him.

"Michael, I want to go home, now."

Her son led her away, supporting her on one arm.

The rain started again, sheeting down off the mountainside, scattering the crowd to their cars.

Tyler stood there for a long time, the hills invisible now in the spreading mist. A dog barking, on the farm nearby, broke in on his thoughts.

He turned and walked slowly to the gate.

THE END