

MUFFLED SOUNDS  
by Diana Durbin

PART 1

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## PROLOGUE

Felix looked up. He had stepped onto the busy street where the subway station was. Out here the train tracks no longer ran underground but were elevated. The meandering lattice of steel beams and connecting struts that carried these tracks towered over him, at once pulling into existence a structure that made sense and had purpose as it negotiated its path through the sky, in step with the street below, yet up close, on a smaller scale, was without direction, its components chaotically bolted together, disguising a greater mission. Somehow, Felix thought, the streets under these elevated tracks were always narrower, likely because of the way the large supports for the railroad tracks above ate away any extra room on each side. He walked towards the stairs leading up to the train platform. Each vehicle in the congestion on the street beside him nudged the one in front along, without touching, as pairs of magnets do when their polarity is so aligned. Left with only one lane to move along on in each direction, and with no hope of maneuvering around any obstructions, the traffic was understandably choked. Cars snatched at the chance to parallel park into open spots that magically surfaced, causing everything behind to stop. Others stood double-parked while their drivers dashed into one of the many stores lining the sidewalks. There were several buses stopping to pick up and drop off passengers, since the streets around a subway station always served as bus routes, only adding to the stop-and-go sluggishness. Knowing in advance that there would be so many cars, and delivery trucks and taxis and buses, he had not even bothered to look for a parking space at the station. Instead he had left his car several side streets away and had walked from there.

Usually Felix had no reason to be on the streets around his nearest subway station, a good ten minutes by car from his house. But today he needed to be, because he was going to the city and however bad the traffic was out here it was worse in there. His only choice was to travel by train, a train he would board many feet above street level and one which would be many feet below street level by the time he reached his destination. That's why they called it the subway, even out here, a neighborhood in a borough far from the city's heart.

He reached a crosswalk and waited for the light to change to get to the station stairway. Foremost in his thoughts was his appointment in the city but at the same time his mind could

appreciate the energy of the thousands and thousands of lives going about their busy day around him. With the rails overhead and the buildings on each side he had a sense that he was in some sort of tunnel, a connector to someplace else, teeming with people going in both directions. All sound was being channeled to his ears, bouncing back and forth off the enclosing structures on its way. He reasoned that if ever there were stillness in this place, at three o'clock in the morning, perhaps, the acoustics were such that he would be able to hear even the sound of a mouse scratching in the garbage outside one of the stores.

Once again the traffic had slowed to a crawl. Before the light changed he and the group of pedestrians he had been waiting with stepped forward into the road. As he carefully calculated the right moment to move between two cars he picked up on the early sounds, above all the others, of an approaching train. At this time of day, in the early afternoon, a train would pass through at least once every five minutes and Felix knew from many years of boarding the train at this particular station, for one reason or another, because the city was always beckoning, that it was going to be a noisy experience, noisier than all others even in a city as large as this.

He knew not to brace himself, knowing how useless it would be to resist. Instead he prepared to let it wash over him, to accept it, his thoughts continuing to drift back to his main concern, the reason for his trip to the city. He continued to cross and then paused in the middle with everyone else to allow a couple of cars coming in the opposite direction to pass. The train was closer now. In a matter of seconds, not minutes, it would be stopped, discharging and picking up passengers on the platform above.

The rattling of the railroad's supporting structure and the rumbling of the train's engine continued to grow louder, merging into one thunderous cacophony, its powerful imprint beginning to make itself felt. Though he had been through this many times over it always surprised him how quickly the encroachment of the train, whether one coming from the city or one going there, overpowered everything else. Often when he was in the company of others on such occasions, when a train was first detected, he and they both knew to cease conversation, knowing full well how futile it was to continue speaking, even if they shouted. He often wondered how insane it must be to work on such a street, or worse, live in one of the cheap rented apartments above one of the storefronts.

As he stepped onto the opposite sidewalk and the train came yet closer he was reminded of a blacksmith he once saw when he was a child long ago, on an outing to a riding stable. The man was making a new horseshoe, building the ferocity of his every strike against the white-hot metal, shaping it, creating it, on the forge until he had reached a frequency and intensity that made the whole of his shop ring out. But Felix knew that at its peak the noise from the train would be even greater than that and as he stepped onto the bottom step of the station stairway it had come directly overhead. All eleven of its cars were traveling across him now.

The volume rose sharply then and sustained itself for longer than made sense. Felix always thought that once the beginning of the train passed overhead, as it slowed to stop at the platform, the noise should start to subside. But it never did. It continued to grow, in a cumulative way, for all the sound the train was producing was getting trapped under it, adding to itself, reverberating in the canyon that was the street, until every nerve ending Felix had was left raw. Not until the train had stopped was there to be any respite. And this time, for Felix, it went on longer than ever before. And it was more dominant, more violent. Every time Felix believed it had reached its climax it would increase yet again.

He struggled to climb the steps. The sheer force of the noise was now beginning to wear him down, driving all other thoughts from his head, so that all he could do was surrender to it, as it showered him with its pounding hammer blows. He felt irritated, as if he were being inconvenienced, that things were not going quite as expected, and then he felt a lightness in his body, as if he were falling through space. His irritation left him as quickly as it had come and he became scared. He stopped climbing the stairs. Something more powerful was at play here, something he recognized that, in spite of his troublesome arrogance, he could not control. He could only submit to it and hope it passed quickly. He held on tightly now to the handrail. The

blood was draining from his face and he felt the stares of the people going up and down as they passed on by him. He felt weak and slouched against the wall of the stairwell. He forced himself to look up, for he was desperately trying to hold on to his senses, afraid that he was losing his grip on reality. But when he caught someone looking, he didn't see surprise in their eyes, nor curiosity, but he saw what appeared to be some form of knowledge, as if they understood what he was now going through. In that instant he felt he was being reset, purged of all experiences. And he sensed a newness, a moment of perfect whiteness. As if he had been dragged through a passageway into a new world, into a different time and place. As if life were starting all over again.

He was still afraid and dazed when he got the first inkling that his surroundings were returning to normal. He heard the train doors open and realized it had finally come to a stop on the platform above. His eyes had closed before and now he opened them again. As a new flow of people came down the stairs past him he could feel the strength return to his limbs and slowly he resumed his climb. He knew he wouldn't catch up with the train that had just arrived so he resigned himself to catching the next one. He still had to take the time to pay his fare at the token booth. He reached the top of the stairs and while he waited in line to pay the train left the station. Strangely its departure was muted in comparison to its arrival, and the same could be said for the following train when it came, the one that was to take Felix to the city.

As Felix sat in the subway car he felt relief, although he could not explain to himself why. Sometimes waking up from a nightmare he would feel like that, that he had gotten a second chance and everything in the bad dream didn't count. Somehow he knew that what he had gone through back at the train station was not a nightmare, but an escape from one, the waking up part.

And so it was for Felix as he traveled to the city that day. Something had shone a bright light in his eyes and his vision had a large burn spot right in the middle, its colors bright and fantastic, its shape irregular. His train moved from station to station, neighborhood to neighborhood, from the streets of the rich to those of the poor, and back again, more than once. Eventually, as it started its long descent underground, he became distracted again by his worries and his fears. Gradually the familiar vision of his world returned.

## CHAPTER ONE

Felix had given himself plenty of time for his appointment so when he duly arrived at his destination he had some to kill. He had overcompensated because of his tendency to play it safe when something was at stake, whereas he often astounded his friends and family by arriving at gatherings and other more relaxed events at precisely the moment, almost to the second, that he had promised. He had an uncanny understanding of the behavior of time, always knowing exactly how long it would take to get somewhere, somehow factoring in all the potential delays along the way in some innate probabilistic model that ticked in his subconscious. But today, as the bright afternoon sun welcomed him when he came up to street level, he had once again turned a blind eye to his instincts and was early by almost a half-hour.

The street was busy but the number of people on the sidewalks was not overwhelming, perhaps because most were at their jobs in the buildings all around. He knew the address where he was headed by heart and went to seek it out.

Since he had never met the people who wished to interview him for the position, he ran no risk of running into anyone he knew while he scoped out the building. Although later, during the actual interview, someone might remember seeing him outside if they happened to be on the street then too. But with so many faces around the chance of that embarrassing event happening was unlikely. And if it did, he would worry about it then. Being late was one thing, it would certainly rule him out of contention, and thus narrow his options, but the result of being caught snooping around outside the building was harder to predict. It could make him look silly on the one hand, or dishonest, but on the other it might endear him to them. Neither outcome troubled him much. All he wanted was to come across as someone capable and competent enough to do the job. In truth, he wasn't very enthusiastic about getting hired but the position did come with better pay, and that was good. It fitted nicely with his image of himself as a good provider. And if he was turned down he still had his current job to go back to. He would simply pick up and continue his search for a new position elsewhere.

A couple of blocks later he was there. To him there was nothing special about the building, with its plain non-descript architecture. It looked like they were a little behind on the its upkeep, the window frames being in need of some paint and its facade lacking a cleaning to

rid it of its dreary look. But the sunshine was brightening up the street, giving the building a more attractive aspect, and, after all, this was a place of work, not a hotel.

He felt it held some promise for him as he looked at it from the outside. Perhaps it was the lure of the city itself, where the possibilities were endless. But he had worked in the city before and even then had become bogged down in the uninspiring drudgery of his daily work, regardless of his surroundings. So he wasn't sure if that was why, or if it was merely the most rational reason his mind could attach itself to.

Since he still had over twenty minutes until his appointment time he stepped in to a coffee shop. Coffee would sharpen his mind too. But within five minutes he was getting too restless to stay sitting there. Now he just wanted to get on with it, the butterflies were beginning to flutter and his mind was starting to create a drama. He imagined the room and the faces of the interviewers and the questions they would ask, and what his answers would be. His daydream went into full swing, though the presence of other customers in the coffee shop prevented him from talking out loud to himself as he often did when alone in his car or in his home. And anyway, he wasn't passionate enough about people he had never met to be conjuring up conversations with them. But as usual the vividness of his reveries took hold of his body, and being tensed and ready for action he left to go into the building, his cup of coffee unfinished. That would put him arriving ten minutes early but such was the advice he had always heard about job interviews, so maybe it would make him look good.

When he reached the building he took the elevator as he had been instructed to the fourth floor. He got off and stepped into a small reception area, beyond which he could see across the whole floor of the company. It was bright compared to the outside of the building. The walls were white and the carpet a light gray. The electric lights made up for the lack of sun, which was prevented from fully penetrating the windows by some beige blinds. The place was clean too. His current job was in a dark and dusty office and he knew it was bad for his health. He had visions of emerging after twenty years with the kind of ailments that coal miners get.

A receptionist greeted him. He told her the reason for his visit. She asked him to wait in a room along the hall. He went there and sat down at a table. Very soon after he heard the noise of a toilet flushing and almost immediately the sound of a door opening and closing, which, from the fluctuation in the volume of the flowing water, had to be to the bathroom. A woman appeared in the doorway.

"Felix?" she said.

"Yes", he replied and got on his feet.

"I'm Miss Silvestri", she said with a pleasant smile.

Felix quickly absorbed the image of the woman in front of him. She was older than he, perhaps by ten or fifteen years. She was shorter but not particularly short. She was neither fat nor thin. She wore glasses and her looks were not striking. Her light-colored hair was long and straight, cut in a style more common among women twenty years her junior. She held out her hand and he shook it, one of those quick business handshakes, short lived with a slight squeeze that needs to be administered with expert timing.

"I'm pleased to meet you", Felix replied.

"Yes, thank you, let's sit down and wait for Mrs. Wilhelm", she said. "She'll be here shortly. She's the general manager and owner's wife, he being Mr. Wilhelm, the Chief Executive Officer. And they run the company, with their son Steven." She paused and added deliberately, "And with me."

She imparted all this information in a slow steady tempo, fixing Felix in her sights and all the while shifting her head from side to side, in a shimmering motion, like a bobble-head doll, placing great emphasis on names and titles. Felix got the impression he was being lectured, that this was information she didn't want to have to be repeating, but at the same time wanting it to be known that she was the one official spokesperson for the company hierarchy.

She continued, smiling again, "While we're waiting, let's have a look at your resume."

He reached into his jacket pocket and took out an envelope. From it he removed a neatly typed page and handed it to her. As she read down through it, nodding, he began to relax, feeling that his experience would speak for itself.

Another much older woman strode into the room. She was elegantly dressed.

"Hi, I'm Mrs. Wilhelm, and you must be Felix", she said, loudly.

"Yes, pleased to meet you, Mrs. Wilhelm."

Another brief handshake, but the squeeze from either of them was not as firm, a function more of chronological seniority than of a level of respect.

"I can't stay long, Miss Silvestri, but I wanted to meet Felix before I left. I have to go pick up some things on the way home today. I've been running around all day preparing for our get-together on Saturday. Mr. Wilhelm and I are entertaining some friends of ours from out of town and I thought it would be nice to eat outside. The weather is supposed to be delightful."

"Indeed it is", said Felix, feeling the need to engage in this banter to show how personable he was. And there was something grandmotherly about Mrs. Wilhelm that compelled him to respond this way.

"I read that it is going to be sunny and not too hot," he said.

But he wasn't sure either was listening to him at that moment, as Mrs. Wilhelm took her seat alongside Miss Silvestri across the table. He noticed them exchanging a fleeting glance.

"Would you happen to have another copy of your resume, Felix?" asked Miss Silvestri.

Of course he did, and retrieving the envelope once more from his jacket he pulled out another copy and handed it to Mrs. Wilhelm. She put on her glasses and arched over the resume in front of her, studying it closely. Miss Silvestri started talking.

"We're looking for someone who can cover a number of aspects of our operation, a good manager, to help me, because we are starting to get busier and busier. There's just no way I can keep up with it all anymore, the way things are going, which is really great, touch wood."

She made a fist of her left hand and gently rapped the top of the table with her knuckles. Felix noticed her fingers were thick and short for a woman. There were no rings.

"And we are very interested in finding someone creative," she continued, "a person who can inject fresh ideas into how things are done around here."

By now Mrs. Wilhelm had finished reading and her gaze had alighted on Felix. Her face had a nice relaxed demeanor but her eyes betrayed nothing, the upward curve of her lips not causing them to change shape nor to crease the wrinkles in their corners. Felix knew the time had arrived where he was being evaluated.

"I should probably tell you about our company", Mrs. Wilhelm said, "because it's important to know a little bit about us, if you're thinking of coming to join us."

This last remark made Felix feel more confident still. Even if he didn't end up caring to get this job, he wanted to be the one in control.

With much pride in her voice, Mrs. Wilhelm spoke of the history of the business and the things accomplished over the years; the different types of products they had brought to market, the office and staff expansions, the growth in sales, their emergence as industry leaders. All the while Miss Silvestri was nodding, almost girlishly, beside her as if this was some kind of soothing bedtime story she had heard many times. With her right hand she kept flicking her long treated hair back over her shoulders. Almost in passing Mrs. Wilhelm mentioned that Steven, her son, had introduced some great innovations and, quite frankly, was the future of the company. Felix sat smiling and nodding in agreement, and saying "Yes" every so often. He found it an interesting story. Mr. Wilhelm had started with nothing, or at least very little, but now thirty years later was seeing the return on all his efforts and all the risks he had taken.

Mrs. Wilhelm concluded her official version of the company history by saying, "We all pull together and we're really like family here."

And she said it in a way that almost dispelled Felix's distrust of the workplace. He was starting to warm up to the idea of working there.

The interview continued along the usual lines with each party to the negotiations asking and answering questions. Felix learned what the position entailed and realized he would gain strong experience from it. The job was becoming more and more attractive. With his talent for knowing what people like to hear and wanting to win over Mrs. Wilhelm, Felix found himself praising the entrepreneurial spirit of Mr. Wilhelm. He was taken aback when in reply she exclaimed, "Oh he would love to hear that! In fact, if he was here in the office today I would take you across the hall to meet him."

Maybe she was really telling the truth, Felix thought. She would wheel him in to see the founder himself, just like that. Perhaps there was a family spirit there after all, where everyone felt included.

Another short while passed before Mrs. Wilhelm announced, "I've got to be going now. It looks like you have the kind of experience we are looking for, Felix. What do you say, are you interested?"

"Oh very much so, Mrs. Wilhelm", he replied, with a sincerity that he would not have been able to muster only minutes before.

"Very good then. I'll leave you with Miss Silvestri now. She can answer any other questions you may have. You'll be able to show Felix out, Miss Silvestri?"

Felix began to feel that the possibility of this company and he coming together was becoming more real, more rapidly, than he had expected. And the push seemed to be coming from them. There was an air of inevitability to it. It excited him, as it always did when he felt wanted.

As Mrs. Wilhelm was getting to her feet, forcing Felix to his also, a tall younger man appeared in the doorway. He looked close in age to Felix, and carried his height impressively.

"Oh here's Steven!" Mrs. Wilhelm said and Felix noticed both she and Miss Silvestri had become almost joyful.

"We were just interviewing Felix here for the open position", said Mrs. Wilhelm, "so it's good you are getting a chance to meet him. It's the new position we spoke about", she added, more for the benefit of Steven than for Felix it seemed. "We're not replacing anyone," she reminded him. "It has to do with our growth."

The young man reached out his hand and introduced himself, "Hi, I'm Steve Wilhelm. I hope these two ladies are treating you well."

"Indeed they are", replied Felix.

"That's good." He paused a moment, observing Felix. "Well, I'll leave you all to it then. Nice to meet you, Felix", he said as he left along with Mrs. Wilhelm.

Both Wilhelms now gone, Felix felt more relaxed than he had at any time since the interview started. He had met at least two of the people that would make the decision whether to hire him and those encounters had gone well. To maintain his gains all he had to do was stay on the right side of Miss Silvestri as he left, to avoid scuttling the venture, even though she was not as important. This was a family business with a line of succession and he could tell Miss Silvestri was not family, but a staff member, albeit a senior one, just like he now hoped to be. Felix knew where the wallet was in these situations and anyone who was not family could be close to it but would never have it. The most Felix hoped for from any job, other than to learn and enrich his professional experience, was to be paid fairly for his efforts. And be respected and valued by the owners and other staff. It had worked like that in his previous jobs, and there had not been many since he didn't move around a lot like some folk. His initial impression was that this company offered that and more.

Felix had no further questions for Miss Silvestri, at least none that came to mind at that moment. She walked him to the elevator. She was very sweet in her manner. Felix felt she might be an ally as much as a supervisor, after all she was looking for someone to make her life easier. But the job would be a challenge in the beginning and it made him insecure to think about it. In a company such as this there would be no place to hide and he could be let go on the spot



for any number of reasons, any failing or weakness. What would he tell prospective employers on interviews after that? He gambled on Miss Silvestri having a soft side. After all, she appeared to be sympathetic.

"Miss Silvestri", he began, trying to hide his nerves, "I realize that there's a lot going on here and no matter what experience or abilities I have I'll need some time to get to know how things are done. So I trust you will be patient, but I promise you I'll learn quickly."

Miss Silvestri smiled again as she pushed the button to summon the elevator.

"Don't worry, Felix. You'll be fine. I'll hold your hand."

The gamble had paid off but then Felix felt presumptuous to be talking like that since he hadn't been offered the job yet.

"Of course, that's if I get hired."

"Well, I do so hope it works out because I like you", Miss Silvestri said, watching the lights change as the elevator climbed to meet them.

With that she reached out and squeezed his elbow. This made Felix feel a little uncomfortable. He could tell the gesture was not intended to be anything other than affectionate, but it had too much familiarity to it, as if already expectations were being placed on his shoulders. But to be made to feel like he fitted in so well from the beginning was breaking down all his resistance. He was sold, almost, for he never acted on impulse. Yet this opportunity might be the closest he would come to doing so.

Miss Silvestri was still looking at the signal lights of the elevator as it climbed, floor by floor.

"By the way", she asked him, "did you have a hard time finding the building?"

"Not at all", replied Felix. "It was a piece of cake really. Came out of the subway, came straight over and was outside ten minutes early. I came right up."

Miss Silvestri's face darkened. "Ten minutes early? That's funny because I saw you a good fifteen minutes before that standing across the street when I was coming back from the post office".

She turned away from the elevator door and stared directly at him over her glasses. Felix sensed the change. He thought he saw slight tremors in the muscles of her face. He felt lost. This was against the run of play. In an instant, Miss Silvestri had shown a power over him he had not expected, a power to put fear in him, and a sternness that she had so far been good at hiding. Before he could scramble to say anything to address what felt like an accusation of lying the elevator arrived and the doors opened.

"Oh look," said Miss Silvestri, softness returning to her voice, her face relaxing, "the elevator is here. Well, Felix it really has been great meeting you. I think you'll fit in really well around here".

Miss Silvestri's resumption of an encouraging tone was a let off. The successful interview was still intact. Felix stepped on the elevator and the doors closed.

"I thought it was going to be a hot one today", said Sarah. "It was starting to feel like that this morning, but then it got a bit cooler. It turned out to be a nice one in the end. I'm so glad we've left that cold winter behind once and for all."

They had finished eating dinner, and were sitting on their sofa. Sarah never rushed to wash up, although she kept a very clean house. She always said she wanted to be able to look back on her life and have memories. Doing dishes did not make for good memories. After dinner conversations with someone you loved did. The dishes could wait.

"Or maybe it was just me", she continued. "I mean, thinking that it was going to be hot."

"Why so?" asked Felix.

"I don't know", she replied. "I was feeling a little sick this morning, but it soon passed. I've been feeling fine since."

"You're sure?"

She put her arms around him and reassured him with one of her strong hugs.

"Yes, I'm fine", she said. "So tell me, how did it go?"

Felix looked out of the window beside him. The lights of the other apartments around were growing stronger as night began to fall. Soon he would draw the curtains to protect their privacy. Usually Felix found it hard to let Sarah know his thoughts about his job and his career. For the longest time he fooled himself as to why. It was because she was not familiar with the kind of work he did, he told himself. Or he was too close to it. That for her he could be out working for anyone, it hardly mattered who. He went off out the door every morning and towards early evening he returned. Neither did it matter to her what he did, as long as he was safe and happy doing it.

But the real problem was that he couldn't even tell himself his thoughts, he got so lost in them. He was living little scenes in his head all the time. But he had come to see her as the wisest person he had ever met. Letting her know his thoughts was the first step in letting her guide him back from one of these journeys, so that he could begin to see himself from the outside and what he was doing to himself. That first step took a lot of work, since it meant him being honest with himself, to put his finger on the thing that was fueling his daydreams. Too often that thing was fear.

"It went fine", he said. "Better than I expected. I think I might be able to get them to hire me."

"And what do you think of them?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said, "they seem OK, nice even. And there'll be more money in it. I reckon I'll have to work hard in the beginning as I get to know how they do things. After that it won't be so hard. I think the work they have for me will help me get an even better job later, once I have the experience."

He wasn't sure if he had put forth his real thoughts. Already he was starting to worry, and was reliving parts of the interview; how he could have answered some questions differently, maybe said less in reply in some cases, more in others. How he could have avoided walking into the trap set by Miss Silvestri.

At the same time he felt he was starting something which was new, and that he was wanted. The rough edges would smooth out, he predicted. He trusted his luck.

"Have you thought about the trains?" asked Sarah.

"How do you mean?" he answered.

"The trains. You'll spend a lot of time going there and back every day", she reminded him.

"Yeah...yeah, that's true, I will", admitted Felix, "I'll just have to get used to that".

"Well", said Sarah, "sounds good." Then she added softly, knowing his mind was made up, "Go for it."

He was lying thinking for a short while before he became aware that he was actually awake. The room was dark, but not completely, because Sarah always kept a soft nightlight on. He could see the objects in the room; the pictures on the wall, the curtains, the closet doors, the shadows on the ceiling. He was cozy and warm. He had been sleeping peacefully and didn't know whether a lone noise from the street had woken him. Perhaps it was a neighbor shutting a car door or clanging about with a garbage can, or something else.

The street could be very quiet at night. Most residents there had jobs. They went to bed early and got up early. Even before he had to get up himself each morning he would hear various tradesmen loading tools into their trucks and warming their engines. The exception to this normal quietness was the fire trucks. When they passed they were so loud that he knew that couldn't have been what woke him. It was quite a show, the room filling up with red and blue swirling lights, the sound of the siren blasting through as the great engines from the Hook and Ladder on the corner came barging up the street, on their way to the boulevard. That was something he didn't sleep through.

No, he had awoken gently, as if his mind for the time-being had had its fill of sleep. He couldn't tell if he had been dreaming because he never did remember any details of his dreams, except on the rarest occasions, and then Sarah would try to put some meaning to them as if she were some sort of gypsy fortuneteller, if he told her of them. He could feel the swell and retreat of her breathing beside him. She was in a deep sleep. Maybe nothing had woken him up. He couldn't say.

This was happening to him lately but he wasn't sure exactly when it had started. These were times when he thought about his life in a good light, sometimes thinking of things that he had lived through, of people he had known. At such times he felt relaxed and free from fear. The past came to him without being obscured by the din of the present. And it was a safe place, the past. It didn't scare him. He knew that was because he had survived it, no matter how bad it was at times.

Curiously, as he lay there, he began to hear the faint sound of a woman singing softly. She may have been singing for a while by the time he became conscious of her. He couldn't make out the words but he recognized her song as some kind of lullaby. He wondered which neighbor it was, since the sounds from other households often leaked through their walls. He didn't recall seeing any mother with a small child around recently, but he didn't exactly know everyone on their street either. Sarah was better at that. He often teased her about this, telling her she was nosey.

The singing continued and the song was reassuring and soothing. Soon he found himself drifting back to sleep. During this brief nocturnal interlude in his unconscious slumber he had not thought for an instant of the future.

## CHAPTER TWO

One Friday, several weeks after he had taken the job with the Wilhelms, Felix was sitting at his desk reviewing some paperwork when Miss Silvestri came by with his pay. He glanced at the amount, and it upset him. He had been docked a day's worth of salary. He did his best not to show his feelings. He had half suspected that they would do this to him. Actually, deep down he had become sure they would do this to him, he just wasn't able to voice it to himself that they would renege on what he had believed was an understanding when he was hired.

He had told them up front, through Miss Silvestri, that May 25th, a date that also happened to be his birthday, was a day he could not be in the office. Sarah and he had planned something, and there was no getting out of it even if he had wanted to. Everything had been arranged months in advance. At the time he had intended to use one of his vacation days from the job he was working at then. In the meantime the Wilhelms came into the picture. It was they that had approached him, wooed him, and lured him away. So when Miss Silvestri called to let him know the job was his, he had made sure to tell her that he would be taking a day off within the company's probationary period, although at the time he didn't know they had such a thing as a probationary period. But he knew that generally new hires didn't take time off, so he mentioned it. He thought it fair that they should take into consideration that he had banked some vacation time where he was. After all, did they actually think they could redirect the course of someone's life, for their benefit, and there would be no loose ends for them to pick up? He wasn't asking that they should carry all of it, just one day. He didn't put this on the table

during the hiring process, because he believed there was a little bit of honor in every agreement, things that could and should be left unsaid. To iron out every single detail went against common sense.

No problem, Miss Silvestri had said when he told her of May 25th, and he took that to mean that he would be paid for it. Now he was beginning to see that what the Wilhelms took to mean honor differed from what he took it to mean. He knew Miss Silvestri was not the one that could make an exception but she was close enough to the Wilhelms to know how they would respond when she told them. If it was to be otherwise, that taking a day so soon would lead to the withholding of pay, then she should have said so there and then. But she didn't.

Now she stood there, detecting his disquiet, hovering over him. He knew she wanted him to question the deduction so she could repeat the company's policy, delivering it in her usual brutally condescending fashion, verbatim, stressing each syllable of each polysyllabic word, from the company handbook, that until an employee was on the payroll for six months, the duration of the company's probationary period for new employees, there was no paid time off. He could see her relishing the chance to suppress one more uprising from a subordinate, one more chance to rid herself again of any renewed doubt she might have about her own importance. He said nothing, merely placing the money in his pocket.

"Right then," she said and walked away.

He didn't know if she was disappointed that he had offered no challenge or pleased to know that he was one more subject firmly under her rule.

And so he was, afraid of what she could do to him. She could see to it that he would lose his job and that would leave him tainted. It would give any prospective future employer a reason to reconsider his candidacy, if they didn't summarily dismiss it. Getting fired is a hard thing to conceal, especially if it happened in the recent past. Even if someone were willing to hire him it would put him in a position of weakness during the bargaining phase and after too. He would have to prove his worth all over again. He had spent too many years doing that to start over. So they had him. His only recourse was to look for another position and that was not something he wanted to do. He wasn't in the job long enough, and that too would reflect poorly on his resume. A new employer would be slow to take a chance on someone who appeared so flighty. And he didn't want to go through the subterfuge of a new search anyway, for they watched his every move, nor the upheaval and emotional drain of another job change so soon.

His feelings of injustice, and of being trapped, were compounded by the helplessness he felt from not being able to talk directly to the Wilhelms about this and about other things that had begun to trouble him. They were clever. They had been learning all through the years of their business that Mrs. Wilhelm had so fondly recounted at his interview. Their seeming lack of formality was a control device on their part, to keep them closer to their subjects, for as time went on he saw they trusted no one. That same approach, where they purported to encourage a workplace that was a second family for the employees, with themselves firmly installed as the parents, also discouraged an openness to address grievances.

They left their dirty work to Miss Silvestri. That placed a layer of separation between them and the nasty workings of the class system that is inherent to running a family business, while their friendliness made it hard for their employees to tell them anything that wasn't positive. It was all about currying favor with them, and the people around him seemed only too willing to fall into that role. You couldn't do that by complaining or undermining another one of their hires, especially the one entrusted with keeping the operation running smoothly and with preventing headaches from percolating up to them. For all these reasons he did not want to derail himself so he held his tongue with Miss Silvestri.

It was disturbing how quickly his perceptions had changed from the first day he had started there. In the period following the interview he had spoken to Miss Silvestri several times and she had continually stressed how much they needed his expertise, often quoting Mrs. Wilhelm to that effect. In fact, there was one time he had called for Miss Silvestri and finding that

she was unavailable had asked to be put through to Mrs. Wilhelm. In the conversation that followed Mrs. Wilhelm had validated everything Miss Silvestri had been saying. Felix got the impression that they were a little in awe of him, or at least of his skills and his experience. They had never hired someone with his background before and he thought they must value it highly. And in his first few days there they continued to reinforce that message, Miss Silvestri even apologizing at one point for not spending enough time with him, as she had promised, because of the demands on her time. And all three Wilhelms, including Mr. Wilhelm, went out of their way to drop by his desk often to ask him how he was doing and wish him well in his new position. He thought it odd they should phrase it so, as if he were taking some test, external to them, of which they were not the examiners giving the final grade.

In those first days he thought he was being left alone to figure the business out for himself, something he had no problem doing, so that he could then begin to contribute. For a position of responsibility like his there wasn't much in the way of training that they could offer him. The quickest approach was to learn by doing, and he knew it.

But in short order he came to know that they were keenly aware of everything he was doing. He had flattered himself by thinking that he could be special to them, that he could become so intrinsically valuable to the operation as to be indispensable. The real truth was that they were initially unsure as to the impact of his presence on their payroll. They didn't understand his particular areas of expertise to any great depth, but they knew what they wanted the results to be, higher profits. To them he was an investment and like all investments there was a risk, except with him the risk was considerably greater than the usual clerks and lower level managers they normally hired. Sure they would express how fond they were of him, that they liked him even, but never would they value all his achievements as anything other than what it had done for them lately. As the Wilhelms became more familiar with him their signal began to change. Everything was subtle with them, discreetly sending messages through Miss Silvestri, who apparently had very little trouble passing them on, adding her own amplification and distortion as they were channeled through her. Little by little, it seemed, they were starting to view him as just another widget off the assembly line of the labor supply. They were not unhappy with his work. On the contrary, the more he did a good job for them the more likely they were to funnel new issues his way, away from other desks, for him to solve. But the moment arrived not long after the day they docked his pay when he saw what they saw in him, or rather what they didn't see.

He had just sat back after lunch at his desk one day when he found a written note there.

"Felix, please see me immediately re: Armitan.. Miss Silvestri," it read.

The note was marked urgent. He wasn't sure why this was so important. He began to feel the kind of stress a child feels when he is called on at school and knows, even before the question is asked by the teacher, that he won't know the answer. He walked to her office. He stuck his head in her door.

"You asked me to come and see you," he began.

"Yes, come in." There was no offer to sit.

"You received the draft of the new Armitan contract yesterday. Is that correct?" she asked.

"Yes, that's correct."

"And?"

"I'm not sure I understand," he said, his voice revealing minute traces his fear. It was the kind of scent she could easily detect.

"Explain to me why Mrs. Wilhelm got a phone call from Phil at Armitan's wanting to know why no one had gotten back to him?"

"Well," he said, "my hands have been pretty full with the list of things we agreed need to be taken care of."

"Listen to me," she barked, "Mrs. Wilhelm always wants the Armitan stuff taken care of right away!"

"But I was working my way down my list. I was going to get to it tomorrow morning."

"Let me finish!" she shouted.

This shocked him because he was sure he had not cut her off. Her voice became quiet once more but he could still hear the anger contained in it.

"Finch is a priority. Marlin is a priority. And Armitan is a priority," she continued.

The muscles in her face started to have tremors in them, like the ones he remembered seeing at the end of his interview, and for the first time he noticed something odd about her face but couldn't figure out what it was.

He paused for an extra second before he spoke. He was thinking how unusual a dialog this was, as if she were some kind of machine and the normal protocol of conversation between two persons did not apply.

"But these are routine procedures. Whenever they come up I get to them soon enough," he stressed, still incredulous as to why this was causing Miss Silvestri to become so irate.

"Your job is to take care of them, not to assign priority. Take care of Armitan now!" She was raising her voice again.

"I may have difficulty getting this back to Phil today," he said, again counting an extra beat before he spoke. He continued cautiously. "With the slow down in..."

"I don't care," she blurted. This time the interruption was real and coming in the opposite direction. "I don't care," she repeated, "get on with it."

It took him hours past the normal end of the day to get the Armitan contract completed, and he walked several blocks across town in the rain to deliver it by hand that night. Had he started it in the morning of the day following, as he had originally intended, he could have gotten it done much more quickly. Because the right people would have been available to query the information, instead of him having to dig it up for himself, and he could have had it delivered through the normal channels. By the time he made the delivery to the Armitan office mailbox it was so late and he was so tired and wet that he did not care if he was seen by anyone there, reduced as he was to the role of delivery boy.

As he rode the long train ride home he felt his confidence erode. People of lesser intellect, at least by his measure, had firmly put him in his place and he resented it. There were such compromises to be made to keep the wolf from the door. On the one hand they had entrusted him with creating transformations in their business, but on the other they starved him of what he needed to get things done, the empowerment to think for himself and make his own decisions. They seemed not to understand that some employees were more than foot soldiers carrying out orders. He wondered why they had hired him in the first place. They had pushed him to a place where he was now weak, and he was beginning to look to them for his strength, like a well-heeled dog. In his exhaustion he hoped Miss Silvestri would praise him for acting so swiftly after their conversation. His daydream, as he sat in the near empty subway car, pictured her saying kind words, like on the day of the interview. For a short while he let himself be comforted by this vision. It felt good.

Sarah was awake but sleepy when he got home. He tried to tell her how crushed he was feeling but his words failed him. All he could do was say with bitterness what a foul person Miss Silvestri was. It was hardly enough for Sarah to run with.

"You're there for a reason," she offered instead. "Give it time, and you'll see why."

If he could have swept away the fog in his head he would have seen that the Wilhelms were trying to control him through Miss Silvestri. That it was nothing personal. That if they didn't need to hire people they would just as soon not, and he didn't need them for his own sense of self-worth. With Sarah he had everything necessary to know how loved and special he was. But he was a long way from being able to think that clearly and it wasn't certain he would ever get there.

## CHAPTER THREE

The weekly Monday morning managers' meeting began at 9 a.m. sharp, all were told, but it really began after Mrs. Wilhelm made it to the conference room with her little cup of coffee. Her grand entrance was always followed by some chit-chat where everyone pretended to be interested in her weekend; what she did, what movie she watched, how she was feeling, where she shopped. Mr. Wilhelm only attended the meeting occasionally and when he did he never imposed a strong presence on it, sometimes even making small self-effacing jokes, but he listened.

Steven ran the meeting. On his cue, each manager rattled off a few lines about their accomplishments from the previous week and the status of various projects they were involved with. Not many questions were asked. Only large problems were highlighted. Felix did not see any flaws in that. This was supposed to be a way to foster broad communication of the many operational matters and market conditions affecting the company. There were many smaller meetings that took place throughout the week to handle issues as they arose.

In those early days Felix carefully prepared his notes in advance of the weekend and when his turn came at the meeting he delivered as sincere a monologue as he could to his employers, trying at the same time to educate his co-workers about what he was trying to accomplish, since he often enlisted their cooperation. He was nervous, as he always was when speaking before a group, and relieved upon completion of his delivery. Eventually, he realized, no one except the Wilhelms and Miss Silvestri was listening to him, and his employers' comprehension of what he was saying was questionable. He thought for a time it was his inability to explain the complexity of the work he was engaged in but it became apparent that had nothing to do with it. The others were nervously waiting their turn to sound productive and busy, for that is what the elder Wilhelms really wanted to hear, and once their performance passed they sat back, content that they had lived through another such meeting. It didn't matter one whit to them what anyone else was saying. He wondered if they all had taken as long to arrive at the same conclusion about the Monday morning managers' meeting as he had.



Characteristically the Wilhelms never gave an oral report to the group but it was telling that Miss Silvestri had to. It was one more way the Wilhelms drew an invisible line between the company family and their family. For her part, Miss Silvestri used the opportunity to reinforce her lofty position with the Wilhelms by repeating, week after week, how her role impacted every department, inferring how crucial she was to the entire operation, and backing her claim with almost no detail, all the while speaking in that soft voice she could draw on at a moment's notice. And, of course, no one dared question her.

It was towards the end of one such Monday meeting that Steven mentioned he needed a better way to work on his files when he traveled, which was frequently, that his briefcase was getting more and more stuffed and cumbersome.

"Maybe we can get something going on that," he remarked.

Many matters of great importance to the company's overall well-being had surfaced at the meeting by the time Steven brought this up. The meeting concluded shortly thereafter and Felix thought no more of the need Steven had expressed.

It was a Saturday afternoon and Felix was alone at home when he again heard the woman singing the lullaby. Sarah had told him she was going out shopping in the stores. It had been perhaps two months since he had first heard it. He hadn't remembered to ask Sarah about her. By now the summer had arrived in force and he had opened all the windows to let a little breeze flow through their apartment. But it was still hot. The song had crept through the walls and into Felix's head at least a few minutes before he was conscious of it, just like the first time he had heard it. Again he couldn't make out the words, and he wasn't completely sure if the song was a lullaby since he was not familiar with the tune, but it had the air of one. Soon his curiosity got the better of him and he went to see if he could find out where it was really coming from.

He stepped out through the front door of his apartment. From the hallway of their floor it seemed to be coming from a neighbor's apartment. Since that man was a retired bus driver who lived alone Felix thought it highly unlikely. He walked to the man's door and paused there, listening. Sure enough he could hear the woman's song coming from within, but it was as faint as when he heard it from his own sofa. That's odd, he thought, as he headed back into his apartment, he was sure to remember to ask Sarah this time.

But as he was about to step back into his own home again, it struck him that the sound was now coming from the stairwell directly opposite his front door. That would make more sense, perhaps the woman lived underneath his neighbor. He went down. Along the hallway of the floor below he thought his mind was playing tricks on him. The song was coming from every apartment. His heart started to race now. He ran down the stairwell to the ground floor of their building. Same thing, he could hear the song coming gently through the door of every apartment on that floor too. In fact, there was no other sound to be heard, and there was nobody to be seen.

He ran outside to the street. It was deserted but the song, the sound of the woman's voice, was everywhere, soft and strange, in every direction that he turned his head.

And then it stopped. The normal sounds of the neighborhood returned, as if someone turned the dial on a radio, moving from one station to another. Car engines, children playing, dogs barking. And the background noise, that low grumble, of a vast city that stretched out from him to all points of the compass, for miles of distance, and for years back in time.

He composed himself. On his way back up the stairs of his building he passed a couple of people he knew, on their way down. He wanted to ask them if they had heard what he had heard but he was too afraid and embarrassed to do so. He just knew they had not.

Sarah came home soon after. She hadn't bought anything. She saw him sitting on the sofa, staring out of the living room window.

"Are you OK?" she asked.

He didn't seem to hear.

"Do you know of any woman with a newborn baby living close by?" he asked her.

Sarah thought for a moment.

"No, can't say that I do," she answered. "Why do you ask?"

Again there was no answer.

"Anyway, I didn't find what I was looking for," Sarah continued. "Then again, maybe I did."

That night Felix had a dream, one of those rare ones that he could still remember after he woke up. In the dream he was being escorted around a large office that he was unfamiliar with, full of people he didn't know. His escort, a nicely dressed young woman, was speaking to him about the wonderful computer network the company had, how everyone was connected and information was being shared as efficiently as possible. On each person's desk he saw a flat-screen monitor and a detachable laptop.

"Our people can carry their lightweight laptops anywhere they go while on company business," the young lady said, "and when they find an Internet connection, in a hotel room, at home, in a customer's office, wherever, they can get right back onto our internal network. We have people moving between the field and our headquarters, and our satellite offices, even overseas, all the time. We need to keep them as productive as possible. Our business demands it."

At one unoccupied desk she stopped to show him some email and intranet applications the company had. In the dream Felix was very impressed with what he was seeing.

He awoke then to find himself lying in bed, the room bathed in the softness of the nightlight. Sarah was sleeping soundly beside him. He thought about his dream. That's what they needed to do at his job, he said to himself, to leverage information technology. It would open up all kinds of possibilities to strengthen and grow the business. He would start putting together some ideas immediately. It was so obvious he was surprised at himself that he hadn't been thinking along these lines already. But somehow it didn't seem to make any sense until that moment, until he had had that dream.

Felix looked at the clock on the nightstand beside the bed. It was eleven minutes past four. He could rest another couple of hours before he needed to get up. He tried to relax so he could fall back asleep again, but his mind had started to run with his new thoughts. It didn't help that Sarah had started tossing and turning beside him.

"Are you feeling OK?" he asked in whisper.

"What?" Sarah responded, sleepily.

"Are you feeling OK?" he asked quietly again, "because you've started tossing and turning, and moving around the bed."

"Hmmm" she said. "I'm fine, don't worry."

She then turned towards him and put her arms around him.

"I'm pregnant," she said. She fell back into a deep sleep.

He had come to dread contact with Miss Silvestri during the course of his day. He learned that the other employees of the company felt much the same way, both the managers and their subordinates, for there seemed to be no restriction on Miss Silvestri overstepping a manager to instruct or berate one of their reports. An issue could arise at any moment along some tentacle of the business and she would select some hapless wretch as the one that had to make it right, or bear the brunt of it being wrong to begin with. In fact, being called a manager was somewhat misleading since nobody felt that they could make decisions on even the smallest level, instead engaging in a guessing game as to which would be the path that would lead to the least humiliation. He came to know these things piecemeal through hushed conversations in an atmosphere more akin to that of a totalitarian state. It was nice to know that his feelings were reflected elsewhere but also sad that people he had come to respect for their intelligence and experience were as oppressed as he. And equally unnerving was the fact that there wasn't anyone with the courage to do anything about it, least of all himself.

There was always an element of uncertainty about a visit, or a phone call or an email, from Miss Silvestri which heightened the tension. She could be having a good day and just dropping by to spread a little sunshine, or so she would view it. When that would happen, Felix could not relax until she left because there was still no guarantee she wouldn't switch moods in an instant. More than once he had seen her do this, even in mid-sentence, a feat he had never before witnessed in anyone else. Later he would tell a new hire that there was no point in trying to warn anyone in advance about Miss Silvestri, she had to be experienced to be believed. Her other introductory thrust, observed much more frequently, was one of a simmering rage, which sent Felix scrambling to contain her from exploding, as if he were dissuading a wild animal from charging by making the right sounds and refraining from any sudden movements.

The day she came to speak to him about Steven's laptop was not one of her sunshine days. He was on the phone when she sat in the seat in front of his desk, glaring.

"Jeff, I'll have to call you back. Yes, yes. Great... Thanks. Goodbye."

"Steven asked me again about the laptop he's been asking for," she started. He recognized her signature state of agitation.

"Laptop?" Felix asked. He remembered Steven making a passing reference to something along the lines of a laptop at that managers' meeting weeks earlier, but he hadn't heard him ask for it since. Nor did Felix consider it his role to acquire one for him. Should that not be something he could do for himself?

"Yes, you heard him asking for one. You haven't gotten it yet. Why?"

"For one thing, I didn't know I was supposed to and for another I've been pretty tied up myself with..."

"Do me a favor," Miss Silvestri said, cutting him off with her usual precision, "start looking for a laptop for him. I wouldn't want to be you the next time he's going on a trip and looks around at the last minute for some other way to take all his files with him."

Felix said nothing.

"Make sure it has all the bells and whistles he'll need. Get three quotes and show them to me. Mr. Wilhelm always wants to see we did our homework when we spend the company's money. And make sure it is light. He doesn't want backache carrying it around."

She stood up and left.

She had turned what was a pleasant day into a miserable one. He had found some time to work on the interesting project of assessing what it would take to bring a better computer network to the company, although he was not sure how a proposal of this nature would be received. It was the kind of work that satisfied him, the kind for which he had been trained and had experience in, the kind he thought he had been hired to do. He had not worked so hard to end up running glorified errands for an exalted one such as Steven Wilhelm, who through an accident of birth had the power to cause others to hop to it by merely gesturing in the direction of his enforcer. He brooded for a while. Miss Silvestri will get her three quotes, he said to himself, and Steven Wilhelm will get his laptop. In his mind's eye he could see Miss Silvestri poring over the quotes, flicking her hair over her shoulders as she always did, making sure that everything was just to Steven's liking. He saw Steven looking at his new laptop, almost irritated that he would have to spend time learning how to use it properly, a distraction from his world of high-level decision-making. He swore that if Sarah were not having a baby he would have quit there and then and taken his chances looking for another job. But now more than ever he needed to be sure of having a steady income, and also the medical insurance, that bare bones policy provided by the company, for the pregnancy and for the baby. He had to wait it out, at least until the baby was born. He would never have to tell any of this as it really was to a new employer. He could put any spin he wanted on his experience with the Wilhelms.

What was it that was really eating him, he asked himself. If he could set it aside he had much to be thankful for. The pay was good. The hours were reasonable. He knew of others who had to work longer days for less in this city. And the news was full of stories of poor souls toiling

in filthy factories in other countries. Shouldn't the gratitude of not being one of those unfortunates light a candle of comfort within him and place a wall of insulation around him so that nothing Miss Silvestri did, or the Wilhelms for that matter, could cause him to be bitter?

But he was someone that refused to settle, to quit, someone who nobody could own, someone with ambition, he told himself. It was a good way to be, he convinced himself. It would prevent him from selling out, from becoming a zombie, from losing forever the boy he once was, the one who believed the world held so much more promise than kowtowing to Miss Silvestri and her ilk. His jailers would try to get inside his head and he had to guard against that, even as it got harder and harder to resist. He wanted the child that was coming to someday look up to him.

In those first few months at the company Felix seldom crossed paths with Steven Wilhelm. He spoke more frequently with his parents, especially Mrs. Wilhelm, despite the fact that they were present less and less in the office as time went on. Mrs. Wilhelm would sometimes summon him to her office if Miss Silvestri were unavailable, when she needed something or couldn't understand a report he had put together. The only occasions he spoke to her husband was to exchange pleasantries with him when he dropped by Felix's desk on his many daily rounds, although Felix suspected he was more involved in his affairs than he pretended. Those suspicions were borne out one afternoon when Miss Silvestri berated him for not letting anyone know he had taken a late lunch and that Mr. Wilhelm had been wondering where he was.

It was well known that Steven Wilhelm was becoming increasingly involved in the running of the business. He would be one of the first to arrive each day and was often still working long after the official end of the day. The story was that initially, when he graduated from college, he had no interest in participating in the family business but within a couple of years had changed his mind. The company had quadrupled in size in the ten years since and most attributed that growth to Steven's business prowess. He had taken the company in a whole new direction, to a whole new level, taking full advantage of opportunities in several niche markets. He seemed far less concerned than his parents with keeping a watchful eye on the hired help and more willing to make investments that didn't necessarily realize any immediate returns, but would pay off later.

Felix looked upon himself as a ground-breaker of sorts for the company because Miss Silvestri had once alluded to the fact that they had created his position in the first place only because Steven had recommended it. While this piece of information increased Felix's frustration at his subordinated role it also offered him the hope of actually getting to where he understood he was headed when he first took the job. If he could find a way to work on something directly with Steven, some project, it would place him higher on the younger Wilhelm's radar screen. Once there he was sure he could command the recognition he deserved for his abilities.

It was also helped him surmise why there was such a disconnect between his original vision for the job and the current reality. Miss Silvestri and the two elder Wilhelms had hired someone to help with their growth based on Steven's prodding, that much was clear. What was also a possibility, given Miss Silvestri's authoritarian bent, and the old-schoolness of Steven's parents, was that their definition of Felix's position was entirely different to Steven's. It could indeed be that Steven had pulled his resume from the heap and placed it on the top, because none of the others would have been looking for someone with any potential and would instead have been focusing on getting another grunt in the door. And once hired, they didn't know how to handle him otherwise. Although they may have been able to verbalize how important it was to have smart creative people on board they had no real comprehension as to what that meant.

So the question in Felix's mind was why would Steven Wilhelm, having fingered him for one of the people he needed to build up the company, take little active interest in his progress? The answer to that was more of a guess. Did Steven not see the stifling culture his parents had created and Miss Silvestri enforced? Perhaps he did not. After all, he was never exposed to

anything other than Miss Silvestri's sweeter side. But perhaps he knew it only too well and Felix's survival in the short term, or willingness to persevere, was not his concern. Perhaps his opinion was that Felix would have to prove himself despite the obstacles. Perhaps he did want to make it easier for Felix but found there were too many sacred cows to be slain than he cared to slay. This last thought led Felix to thinking about the relationship Steven had with his parents.

Most days, if they were all in the office, the Wilhelms, and no one else, would close the doors of the conference room and eat lunch together. Felix often wondered what they discussed. Did they talk of the business itself, or just chat like families do? Steven already had children of his own, although he was younger than Felix, and Mrs. Wilhelm delighted in being a grandmother. Their lunchtime meetings were probably a forum for both business and pleasure, Felix reckoned. How could they not be?

What was also curious was how the Wilhelms treated each other when in public view. For the uninitiated it was not obvious that they were related. Their discourse was entirely professional with no undue hints of familiarity. Usually the only clue was when Steven addressed his parents by their first names, Morgan and Sandra. Steven never came across as overtly spoiled but it was clear that he got his own way. He was known to have a temper and could sometimes come down hard on people as only someone whose position is very secure could do. There were even stories of him arguing furiously with his parents behind closed doors, his competitive passion often in conflict with his parents' more conservative approach. But much of this was hearsay since Felix had not witnessed it at first hand.

What Felix could tell from the little contact he had with him, and from reading his company wide memos and bulletins, was that Steven thought of the company his father had started as his own. There was no doubt people saw him as privileged, with a safety net most people lack, for the Wilhelms had money, it was often said. But there was no way to tell if he had gambled with the company in the early years, something that was easy to forget in the light of their successes. Had he failed he would have hurt his own family financially, and damaged his own credibility in the eyes of his father. That may have been a greater risk to take than most. Only Steven himself could tell the pressures he withstood then and even now.

Felix looked at his paycheck.

"It's less than usual," he said in a low voice, barely containing his anger. "Something was taken out. Why?" he asked, knowing full well what the answer would be.

"You were out on Monday," answered Miss Silvestri.

"But we had an understanding."

"What are you talking about?"

"I told you I would be taking the day off and you said OK," said Felix, raising his voice slightly. "Why didn't you say then that you would dock my pay for the day? And who authorized this?"

"You know you're not getting any vacation time yet. I don't know what you are talking about when you say we had an understanding. Company policy is clear. It states there is no paid time off until the employee is with the company for six months and then the amount of paid time off is pro-rated for the calendar year based on the amount of time served by the employee, including the six months."

It was like listening to an audio recording of a deliberately dull rendition of the company manual, the one that was sitting on his desk when he first sat there on his first day. Now that manual languished at the bottom of one of his desk drawers, the one he opened most seldom.

"So to answer your second question," she continued, peering at him over her glasses, "there is no need for me to get any authorization because it's policy. It's my job to monitor peoples' hours. Mr. Wilhelm was asking me the reason for your absence. He was a little annoyed when I couldn't tell him, since you never told me."

"Well, did you tell him it was none of his damn business, and that his policy is crap?," Felix said, raising his voice again. "I miss a day and Mr. Morgan Wilhelm has to get his money

back, as if he might be cheated out of a few bucks, as if he wasn't getting enough sweat out of me. Where the hell does he come off thinking the people on his staff owe him something? Well, why don't you tell him this? That a week ago on Wednesday morning I stopped working for a whole hour. I was feeling tired. Guess what? I'm only human. For part of that hour I just stared at some document. I pretended to be reading, but I wasn't. And then I surfed the web the rest of the time! Why don't you tell Mr. Wilhelm that? I bet you he'll have a canary when he finds out I swindled him out of an hour's pay, and by the way I don't work by the hour, I'm on salary remember?"

"Don't worry, Mr. Wilhelm won't have any trouble figuring out what an hour of your time is worth to him, if it's worth anything after I speak to him about this conversation we are having." Miss Silvestri had a hint of a smile on her face as she said this.

"You know what?" Felix snapped. "Tell him whatever you want. I'm sick of dealing with you. Now get out of my face!"

"Fine," said Miss Silvestri and turned to walk away.

"Lying snake."

"I beg your pardon?" She spun around again to face him.

"I said you lying snake," Felix said as he rose to his feet.

"You watch it!" Miss Silvestri said, jutting her chubby little index finger into his face. Felix slapped her hand away.

"Don't stick your finger in my face, you little bitch," Felix shouted.

"Don't touch me!" screamed Miss Silvestri.

"Oh that's right, Silvestri, raise your voice, you stinking bully. Well I can raise my voice a lot louder than you!" roared Felix.

Miss Silvestri took a step back. He had startled her with the volume his voice unleashed and for the first time Felix sensed she felt afraid. He could see it in her eyes. He was totally irate now. He wanted to pound her into the ground with his shouting so he stood over her, for he was a lot taller than she was, and let his booming rage stream out.

"You make me want to puke, you little vermin. You've found a place where you can dump on other people, you spineless little weasel, and you suck up to the Wilhelms like you were the most caring kindest person in the world."

It was all coming out now.

"They never hear how nasty you are when you order people about. How come you never scream at the Wilhelms not to interrupt you? Because you know if you did, they would throw you out on the street before you could quote a paragraph from the company manual. But the rest of us, we don't even get the basic courtesy and respect that any human deserves!"

"I'm not listening to this," Miss Silvestri whimpered, covering her ears with her hands.

"Let me finish!" Felix screamed, letting lose an extra bolt of fury as he delivered the same line she had often thrown in his face.

"I'll tell you why you are the way you are. It's because you're nothing but a loser, with an education you couldn't wipe your behind with, so you have no idea when you're dealing with people much smarter than you. And you have no one to go home to at night, so you're all twisted up inside. You're a miserable piece of scum, and you don't even know it!"

"You think everyone here likes you, since everyone is always kissing up to you. Well, I have news for you. Everyone thinks the same way I do, that you're a rotten bitch. And the only reason they act as if they like you is because they fear you. Do you understand now, you sack of garbage? And do you think the Wilhelms like you? They only have you around because you keep the prisoners in line. You do their dirty work. You're just their little Nazi camp guard!"

"Stop it, stop it!" Miss Silvestri cried. Her eyes had welled up with tears.

"I'm still not finished!" Felix continued, continuing to shout at the top of his voice. "You want to know why I was out on Monday? Do you? Sure, I'll be happy to tell you, and you can go running to tell the Wilhelms like the fawning yokel that you are..."

"Please stop," said Miss Silvestri, sitting down in the chair in front of his desk, cradling her head in her hands. She started to sob.

"Don't interrupt me!" Felix screamed, grabbing her by the shoulders and squeezing hard, digging his thumbnails into her skin through her blouse. "I'm going to tell you why I was out this past Monday so you and those beautiful Wilhelms can all delight in the fact that you got me for a day's pay. OK, Silvestri, OK...?"

The train doors shot open and Felix was jolted from his thoughts. He watched as several people got on. His daydream had been so furious that he wasn't completely sure if he had blurted something out loud during the course of it. He was almost certain he had not, but he knew he must have been moving his lips, in tiny quivers, as the daydream unfolded and became more intense, as does the ventriloquist with a puppet on their knee.

He looked around discretely to see if anyone in the train car was looking at him strangely. Perhaps someone might have noticed him mouthing the words of his imagined bust-up with Miss Silvestri, or heard him whisper the dialog, especially the parts where he was shouting madly. No one was looking at him at all. He was relieved. It was no guarantee his odd behavior had not been noticed but at least nobody on the train was eager to put him on the spot about it.

Ever since he could remember he acted out scenes in his head. They always recreated something unpleasant that had happened to him, but in his mind he was able to change the course and outcome of events, favorably for himself of course, and defeat those who sought to have power over him. What troubled him about this daydream was that somewhere in it he had failed to separate it entirely from reality. He had, at times, lost track that he was day dreaming. He often talked to himself during his reveries, speaking the lines for both himself and his adversaries, but only if he was alone and sure no one could hear him. This time he had completely forgotten where he actually was, and that he was surrounded by others.

It must be the stress of that stupid job, Felix thought, and that Sarah is having a baby.

At the end of the day, one day, Marty Ostler dropped by Felix's desk. All the others normally seated close to Felix had gone home for the evening.

"I just wanted to thank you," Marty said.

"What for?" asked Felix.

"For helping me edit that data file we sent back to the customer yesterday," Marty reminded him. "There's no way I would have been able to handle that on my own."

Marty had been with the company longer than anyone else, except for the elder Wilhelms. He had entered the workforce long before the age of personal computers and the World Wide Web, and it was becoming increasingly hard for him to keep up with the rapid advances in information technology.

"Oh right, right," said Felix. "I remember now. Well, glad I was able to help. You picked it up pretty quick, mind you. Next time it happens, you can do it without having to ask me for help."

"Oh I doubt it. The stuff you do, I could never learn. Maybe if I stared twenty years ago, but not now. I'm just looking to retire at this stage. I'm so slow with my work. That's why I'm always here till the crack of midnight."

They both laughed.

Then Marty asked "So how's it going for you here, kid?"

"How do you mean?"

"It ain't a trick question. How's it going for you?"

"Honestly?"

Marty nodded.

"I'm not sure, Marty."

"How so?"

"I have to tell you, I thought it would be a bit more of a step up for me to come here. Instead I feel like some entry-level gopher or something."

"I have to be honest, Felix, I was surprised when they hired someone to do your kind of work. Way back, they would never dream of doing such a thing. After Steven came to work here they have, at times, hired consultants but even then Steven has a hard time persuading them to do even that."

"You've see a lot of changes here, haven't you?" said Felix.

"You're looking at the corporate memory," Marty said with a wry smile. "I can remember Steven coming here when he was a kid in high school on summer vacation."

"Was he a good worker?" Felix asked, jokingly.

"He was OK. He was just a kid. He works a lot harder now."

Marty paused.

"It's Silvestri, isn't it?" he asked Felix.

"It's mostly because of her. You know how she is."

"I bet she was sweet as sugar when she interviewed you."

"Yes," Felix admitted, ruefully.

"Yeah, I thought as much," said Marty. "She told me once that was one of her tricks, to get people in. I've had my fair share of run-ins with her myself, but you know, I was already here fifteen years when she started so I let her know early that I wasn't going to take her nonsense."

"I wish I could do the same thing," Felix said.

"Technically she's my boss too," Marty continued, "but for me it's different. I've been loyal to the Wilhelms for a long time and, you know something, they are capable of some loyalty in return. So if ever it was down to them siding with Silvestri or with me, they would think long and hard about it. And Silvestri knows this. That's why we get along."

Marty smiled when he said this.

"But for you, and a lot of others here, it's a different story. The Wilhelms take a long time to trust someone so Silvestri likes to use that nugget to play power games with people. But what you don't know about Silvestri might change how you think of her."

"How so?" Felix asked, his curiosity aroused.

"You ever see that scar above her eyes?"

"Not sure that I noticed," Felix replied. "I think there's something weird about her face but I just can't figure out what it is"

"The rim of her big round glasses kind of gets in the way," Marty continued, "so you can't always see the scar. And she covers it with makeup. It's been there so long that it doesn't look so deep, more like a thin line, but it's long. Runs right across her eyebrows. Makes her look like she has two sets of them sometimes. That must be what you see as weird."

"So what happened her?" Felix asked.

"It's a sob story, for sure. It was from a car accident when she was just a kid. Her parents and her older brother and sister got killed. She survived but her face was messed up. She spent the rest of her childhood in an orphanage, or several rather, and they weren't no picnic for her, as you can imagine."

"I had no idea," Felix said, his voice subdued now. "How did you come to hear of this?"

"Mrs. Wilhelm. Seems Silvestri told her once, and she told me. Silvestri doesn't go around trying to hide any of this. In fact I hear she says it helps her accept it to talk about it sometimes." Marty then turned and began walking away. "Well kid, I gotta run. The wife will be worried. See you tomorrow."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll see you then. I'm getting out of here for the evening right now myself," Felix shouted after Marty, but it was several more minutes before he got up to leave.

"Some mornings I feel nauseous, but most of the time I feel great."



Sarah was out walking with Felix in the small park near their apartment. Her doctor had advised her to get fresh air and exercise whenever she could.

"I'll be at the end of the first trimester soon," she said, "and after that it's supposed to get easier. Until nearer the birth, anyway. That's what they say."

The weather was warm and humid. The heat didn't bother Felix. In truth, it felt more natural to him than cooler weather. It didn't seem to be a problem for Sarah either.

She decided they should sit on a bench. Not because she was tired, but because she wanted to take in the beautiful sunny day. Felix, on the other hand, was totally preoccupied with something.

"Where are you?" asked Sarah.

"What?" said Felix, in reply.

"Where's my Felix. What are you thinking about?"

"It's nothing."

He let out a long tired breath.

"I don't know...?" he sighed.

"What don't you know?"

He was struggling to turn his feelings into words, as usual. The people he worked for were hiding in all corners of his mind. He saw Miss Silvestri's shadow in everything, lurking, waiting to pounce on him. He saw Steven Wilhelm talking with her, instructing her to do something, or fix something, so that soon she would be at his desk, giving orders without so much as a please or a thank you.

"What's the use in talking. All it will do is make me more wound up."

"No it won't," said Sarah, "you'll feel better. I know you're thinking about your job. Tell me what it is that they are doing to you that makes you feel the way you do. Since you started there you're not happy."

She got up and stood in front of him. She took his face gently in her hands. He looked up at her, his eyes full of self-pity.

"Tell me what it is, Felix"

"I don't know," he said. It's just such a cold place, underneath it all. She's such a cold woman, Silvestri. She acts like it hurts her to have me around when all I do is make her life easier. She is so rude, it's demeaning. Her personality is disgusting. And the Wilhelms just sit above it all. I could die tonight and they wouldn't shed a tear. They would just go and stick someone else in my place. Is it wrong to want to feel like I make a difference, especially after I've worked so hard to make something of myself?"

"Oh course you make a difference," Sarah said, soothingly. "I love you, my Felix. You mean everything to me. Now that's something of worth, right? You don't need them to tell you that."

"You're always looking to be told you're doing a good job. You want people to be saying 'Good job, Felix, good job'. But the truth is that you are doing a good job, a great job, for me, for us, and even for those Wilhelm people and that Silvestri one."

Her words made him feel better. They were silent for a moment. Sarah held his head against her pregnant body.

"You know," he said then, "Miss Silvestri has had a sad life. I was told she lost her family when she was just a child."

Soon Sarah spoke, softly.

"You see, it's not the same when you look at it through her eyes. Think of the pain she endures inside, every day. She has no one to go home to, no one to share with, like you do. I'm not saying she's right, just try to put yourself in her shoes, so that you feel better. You should forgive her".

"Forgive her?"

"Yes, when you forgive someone that has hurt you, you do it for yourself. It lifts the burden off your shoulders. You'll see. If you can do it, find a way to forgive her, you'll see her power over you just go away."

"But she'll still boss me around."

"Yes, of course, but you won't see it quite like that anymore. Remember, no one owns you."

"I know," said Felix. "All this makes sense. You've said these things to me before. My head knows it but one way or another I can't connect it to my heart."

"Just keep trying," she said.

"Yes, yes, I know," Felix said, resigning himself to the struggle. "There's something else going on too."

"What's that?"

"It's crazy, but I keep hearing the sound of a woman singing. It's happened a few times, and more and more lately. I'm beginning to think I'm going nuts. I thought it was someone who lives around us somewhere, but I could never figure out exactly where. And then a couple of times I heard her at work, which really spooked me. And even the other day, I heard her when I got off the train. It's some kind of lullaby she sings."

"Don't worry about it." Sarah said.

"What?"

"I said don't worry about it."

"How can you be so sure? Am I going crazy? Is this job driving me around the bend?"

"No it's not," Sarah answered. "Just don't worry too much about it. Trust me"

Felix shook his head. Sarah's intuition never let her, or them, down. But this time he didn't know how she could be so sure.

"And there's something else bothering you too, right?" Sarah said.

Felix had long ceased to be amazed at how she seemed to be able to read his mind.

"Yes."

"And what would that be?" Sarah asked, teasing it out of him.

"The other day, I was daydreaming. You know how I get when I'm hurt or afraid or angry. I was on the train home, would you believe? But this time I got lost in it, like it was actually happening. I very nearly shouted something out loud in front of a whole bunch of strangers in the train car."

Sarah sat back down beside him again. She reached out and held his hand.

"That's what I would worry more about, Felix, if I were you." she said.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Every summer the Wilhelms organized a company picnic for the staff in one of the city parks. It was another chance for Mrs. Wilhelm to act the part of the grand hostess. For weeks beforehand she fussed over the details. Her constant clucking over the affair inspired little confidence in others that she could pull it off, and many offered to share in the planning but she would make frequent statements to the effect that she had everything under control, that no one needed to be interrupted from their normal work. Some of the clerical assistants were heard to mutter that they would be left to do much of the legwork at the last minute. Sure enough, when the morning of the big day arrived they were pulled away from their desks to run around doing emergency errands; things that, Mrs. Wilhelm pronounced, nobody had thought to do.

Perhaps it was the summer sun but in the week prior to the picnic, which was always held on a Friday, everyone in the company was relaxed and happy even, including Miss Silvestri. She went around making little jokes. People laughed more out of relief than anything else that her proximity to their desks did not mean they were in for a tongue-lashing. Felix could feel the usual tensions of the office dissipate. In need of some relief himself, especially from his own discontent, he allowed himself to be cheered by the lighter atmosphere in the office, though he knew it was to be only temporary. Come the following week everything would return to its normal state. But that was next week and for now he could look forward to a nice day on Friday.

There would be beer there and Felix was not against having one or two. It crossed his mind every so often that this was exactly how a prisoner would feel if given a concession, an extra hour outside in the yard, say, and it irked him. He suppressed those feelings. He would resume his inner conflict soon enough, but not right away.

The staff was encouraged to invite their spouses and children. Felix saw no reason to drag Sarah all the way into the city, given that she was pregnant. Neither did he care for her to meet anyone from his job. He was hard pressed to believe that he would still be there for the same picnic the following summer so it hardly mattered that Sarah become acquainted with any of them.

He had kept it a secret from them too that Sarah was having a baby. He did not wish to see the fake smiles nor hear the insincere congratulations of those who just as soon would talk to him like a servant, or show him the door in an instant. It was none of their business and the less they knew about him, and the things he held precious, the better.

The doors of the business closed at noon that Friday. The Wilhelms hired a large bus to take everyone across town, including themselves and the families of the employees. They also relaxed the dress code for the day so everyone got to wear shorts and sandals. After all, there would be some games to play at the picnic. There would also be plenty of food.

For Felix, the picnic was a way for the Wilhelms to show the loving side of the parental role they played in the lives of their workers, but since employees often seemed to come and go quietly, one way or the other, it was hard for him to feel cherished as a child should by his or her parents. He concluded the picnic was more for the benefit of the Wilhelms than for anyone else. They must need this, he reasoned, to ease their conscience that they held such sway over peoples' lives. It was easier to think of their employees as children for whom they were the ones making sacrifices. This irony was not lost on Felix but he could think about that again, on another day.

As everyone piled onto the bus, laughing and joking, the word went around that Steven would be delayed. There was some issue with a major customer and he was on the phone behind closed doors. There was a buzz of appreciation among the staff, acknowledging that he was going over and above to put things right instead of jumping on the bus with them in wild abandon. Keeping customers happy, somebody said, was vital to the success of the business.

The Wilhelms and Miss Silvestri sat in the seats up at the front of the bus. After some horseplay and good-natured jostling to get on, Felix found himself in the seat beside Colleen Ryan. She was Steven's personal assistant and worked more closely with him on a daily basis than anyone else.

"Miss Colleen Ryan, assistant to the President, how are you?" Felix joked. Steven Wilhelm held the title of company President. "I hope you don't mind me plonking down here beside you, dear."

"Not at all, Mr. Felix," Colleen said. "I don't mind you plonking down here at all. Plonk away."

They both laughed.

"I see your boss man there got delayed up in HQ. Do you think he'll get over to the picnic?" Felix asked.

"Sure he will. He says it's a big deal but it's not. It could have waited until Monday, and someone else could have handled it. One of our deliveries was all wrong, or the merchandise was damaged or something, so there was a complaint. So Steven has to get on it right away. He's so weird sometimes."

Just then a loud cheer went up as Marty Ostler stood up and flipped the top off a beer.

"No time like the present, I say!" he shouted.

Everyone laughed, even Miss Silvestri.

"I'm with you, Marty", Felix shouted. "Someone send one my way!"

More laughs.

"Right, Mr. Felix, going to get well oiled this afternoon then?" asked Colleen.

"Who knows? I'm just glad to be out of that place on such a nice day. And stop calling me Mr. Felix." he said, pretending to be annoyed.

"What is your last name again? I forget."

"So do I," Felix said with a laugh. "Seriously, you couldn't pronounce it anyway if I reminded you of it."

"Silly man," said Colleen.

The energy on the bus subsided as everyone took in the tall buildings of the city around them. Felix could see the transient euphoria, the feeling of liberation, disappear from the faces of several people as the recurrent worries of their own lives found their way back to center stage.

Others had a look of wonder in their faces. Everyday they came to this part of the city to work, yet they looked out of place, out in the open and almost free on such a lovely Friday afternoon.

From where he was sitting, Felix could see the profiles of the elder Wilhelms as they conversed with each other. Even their faces seemed tired, he thought. Felix realized for the first time that it was work for them too, this business of theirs. The years of effort had given them a pallor as faded as the bleached tint of an old photograph.

The beer Felix had asked for finally arrived. He flipped the top off the bottle and took a long deep drink. The day was hot and he had worked up a thirst. The beer was cold and felt good in his throat. He thought about Sarah. He missed her. He wished he was going to the park with her instead in this wondrous city. He spent so many hours apart from her.

Little pockets of conversation sprang up throughout the bus as the driver guided it, city block after city block, to the park, stopping at the lights at almost every intersection. The noise level rose gradually again until the many conversations blended into an amorphous cloud of sound. Loud laughs and guffaws were to be heard up and down the length of the bus.

A section of the park had been reserved by the company for the picnic and the caterers had already fired up the grill by the time the bus pulled up. The smell of cooked meat was everywhere and Felix felt his stomach awaken, as it were a separate organism, behaving independently of him. He was always hungry in the middle of the day. He continued to drink the beer in his hand while he waited for someone to tell him that the food was ready.

Some of the staff were involved in the work of putting up a volleyball net and others were marking out a small softball diamond. Everyone else hung around in groups in the shade of the trees while the children played. Felix saw that some employees seemed decidedly uncomfortable trying to make small talk. It was odd, Felix thought, that there was still some ice-breaking to be done among people that saw each other most every day and spent more time in each others' company than with their own families and friends. Such was the cagey atmosphere of the Wilhelm workplace, a place where people spent every minute in a watchful, defensive, posture, more concerned with avoiding mistakes than enjoying their work.

Felix was standing in a group which included Miss Silvestri. The topic of conversation went from sports to politics, and back to sports. Anything but work. To bring up any outstanding job-related issue was taboo and woe betide anyone that would do so. Miss Silvestri loudly voiced her opinion as to why some of the local professional teams were underperforming that summer. Others contested her reasoning, vehemently at times, something they would never do back at the office, especially on matters relating to the business. It was as if she operated her own form of infallibility. To question her knowledge of extra-curricular affairs at the company picnic was fine, but to do so on matters of the business itself within the walls of the operation, where she always spoke ex-cathedra, was something approaching heresy. Felix saw she was drinking her beer quickly. In that moment he remembered seeing her on some mornings at the office with a reddish face. She excused herself to fetch another one from the cooler.

It was announced that the food was ready and the children rushed to line up. This saved some face for the hungry adults who did not want to appear too eager to start eating. Felix took his place on the line. He stocked up his plate with the usual fare; macaroni salad, a burger on a roll with lettuce and tomato and some ketchup, a hotdog with mustard, some potato chips, food that was only attractive prior to eating and repulsive thereafter. He grabbed another beer and sat to eat on one of the folding chairs the Wilhelms had provided.

By now the mood of the gathering was more relaxed. As he ate he listened to the talk around him. People told stories of friends and relatives, of children, of grown children, of grandchildren, of celebrities and the intrigue of their magical lives, of things in the news.

His appetite satisfied, Felix sat back in his chair to finish his beer. The sun was high in the sky and the warmth made him drowsy. The alcohol was beginning to take effect too. He closed his eyes. He started to hear the woman singing her lullaby. It no longer scared him. He didn't trouble himself to look for her either, anymore. Rather, he let the lullaby do what lullabies are

supposed to do, to put him at ease and make him feel safe. Hearing it again did not even cause him to open his eyes.

"What, you're just going to go off to sleep then?"

The person's head was blocking the sun. He had to squint to make out who it was. The voice was familiar. It was Colleen Ryan.

"Can't you go and pester one of the younger single gentlemen?" asked Felix.

"No, I've come to bug you instead, Mr. Felix" she said as she pulled up a chair beside him. The lullaby had stopped now.

"I see. So that's the end of my little nap, then?"

"I guess it is. Look they're starting up a volleyball game."

They had set up to play close by. Several people were assembled around the net and were picking sides to make teams. Felix liked to play but at that moment he was too relaxed to move. Mr. Wilhelm was there, showing his fun side. He saw that Miss Silvestri, still wearing her glasses, was also among those getting ready to play. So was Marty Ostler.

"This should be interesting," Felix said and sat up in his chair.

Everyone who wasn't playing was now a spectator. The game started and the ball began popping and bobbing around in the air. There was much hooting and cheering. When someone missed their shot, or made some other error, there was a lot of chuckling and ragging. Mr. Wilhelm showed quite a bit of athleticism for his age. He was particularly accurate with his serve, able to send it in with force, just clearing the net as it crossed over into the other team's half. He scored his side a few points as the opposing team struggled to cope with it. Marty Ostler groaned after trying to get to one, grimacing and clutching at his thigh, hobbling around a while before he could continue.

The game was close, despite Mr. Wilhelm having the best serve, and the lead changed hands several times. It was hardly competitive however, and there was lots of laughter to be heard on the makeshift court. Some of the younger employees proved to be quite agile, making it exciting to watch at times.

On one of Mr. Wilhelm's serves he sent in a rocket. Miss Silvestri was too slow to react. It hit her smack in the face and knocked her onto her backside. The hum of conversation among those watching was silenced. Her glasses had come off. She looked dazed. Without her glasses the irregularities of her face were more noticeable. Marty Ostler was the first to react. He picked up the glasses and helped her put them back on her face. Then some giggles broke the silence, followed by some louder laughs. And then someone started to clap and, as it always does, the clapping shot through the crowd until everyone was doing it, and laughing, including Mr. Wilhelm.

"Are you OK, Miss Silvestri?" he called out, when the noise subsided.

She had stood back up and was dusting herself off. She looked around at everyone, but at no one in particular. She had a big embarrassed smile on her face. She didn't appear to be focused on singling anyone out for later retribution, as bullies often do, Felix thought. He relished seeing her flop like that in front of everyone, but was impressed by the way she dealt with it.

"I'm fine," she shouted to Mr. Wilhelm. "Go on, shoot me another!"

A while later Felix was on the volleyball court himself. The teams that had played previously were now resting, Mr. Wilhelm's team taking the spoils in the end, and an urgent cry had gone out to get another game going. There had to be something happening or else people couldn't be having fun. Felix was dragged out to play when others noticed how comfortable he looked sitting in the afternoon sun with a cold beer in his hand. He didn't mind, really. His sleepiness had passed and he wanted to have a little fun. He threw himself around a while, making some good shots and missing some others.

Before too long the volleyball was losing its appeal and a decision was made to end the game prematurely and to hold the raffle. Felix was handed some tickets as he sat down again on the folding chair.

"How come you didn't get up and play some volleyball, Ryan?" he said to Colleen, who was still sitting in the same spot.

"Ah, I figured you would take care of it," she said. In a lower voice she added "It was so funny when Silvestri fell on her ass."

"Tell me about it. At least everyone got a laugh out of it."

"It's been a great picnic, just for that reason alone."

Felix laughed. "So tell me," he continued, "what's so weird about him?"

"Who?"

"Steven. You said on the bus he was so weird sometimes."

"He is. I mean he just is. There's no other way to say it," Colleen said.

"How so?"

"I don't know, you'll just have to find that out for yourself."

"There must be something about him, or you wouldn't have said it," probed Felix.

She paused and then continued. "It's like he has a wall around him, like he's a loner or something, like he can't relate to us mere mortals. His mother is always saying what a genius he is."

"And is he?"

"He's smart, for sure, but what does that mean, a genius? He's always changing his mind. You don't know if he's telling you to do something or just throwing ideas around. He'll sit and talk about his thoughts for the business with me for ages and he'll keep asking why we don't do this or that, and you end up feeling that he's dissatisfied with your efforts. And then you remind yourself that you don't have the power to make the changes he wants, and why doesn't he just tell people to do the things he wants, he is a Wilhelm after all, and everyone jumps when he gives an order, but then you figure he doesn't know himself what he wants sometimes."

She paused a moment and then continued.

"I mean, he's just hard to work for most of the time, he's so intense. And he blames others before he'll blame himself when something goes wrong."

"That's not good."

"Yeah, I mean a couple of weeks back he sends me this nasty email because one of our competitors is doing something he wanted us to do. The problem is that I was all set to get it going when he cut the budget at the last minute. And it's still my fault. But then later he comes back, all nice, and starts talking with me about something else, like it never happened."

"I don't envy you, trying to figure him out."

"But I'll take it over having to answer to that Silvestri woman," continued Colleen. "I used to have to go to her for stuff, you know, like forms and checks and such, but she's always so difficult to talk to, so obnoxious, that I told Steven, I told him, that I wasn't going to deal with her anymore."

"What did he say?" asked Felix.

"He understood. Now he tells her what we need and it gets brought over. I don't think she suspects I don't want to deal with her."

"I don't think she suspects that anyone has a problem dealing with her," Felix said with a dry laugh.

"But he can be OK sometimes too, especially out of the office. I've gone on a couple of trips out of town with him and he really loosens up. We ate out at a couple of really nice restaurants and he picked up the tab, although I'm sure he expensed it. He was very chatty. But even then, he sits on his own on the train and reads stuff from his briefcase the whole way there and back. Or he types on that laptop you got him. Anyway, did you notice? He's here already. I told you it wasn't such a big deal, those calls he supposedly had to make before he left."

Felix took a quick look over his shoulder and saw Steven standing over by the grill, beer in hand, in his shorts and sporting a baseball cap. Several people were gathered around him. His height gave him a commanding presence in most company. His audience was eagerly listening to how he had saved the day with one of the company's largest customers. Marty Ostler wasn't

one of them. Marty's duties covered the company's traffic and shipments. The incident would be brought to his attention in some form or other before too long.

Mrs. Wilhelm presided over the raffle. She drew the ticket for a first prize of a bottle of fine red wine. Mr. Wilhelm's number was pulled and as he went up to get it there were cries that something had been fixed. Thereafter the prizes declined sharply in quality and in value, and there were so many of them. It looked as if it had been deliberately planned that everyone would walk away with at least something. Mrs. Wilhelm had words of congratulations for each winner. Two of Felix's numbers came up. It was a nice feeling each time. Beginner's luck, Mrs. Wilhelm laughed, on each occasion. The prizes he got were a picture frame and a big round blue candle. Well, Felix said to himself, Sarah will be happy with these. She was forever lighting candles around the house and putting up pictures. Miss Silvestri won only one prize, a tacky green plastic frog, meant to serve as some sort of office ornament.

Following the raffle the more energetic among the group went to play some softball on the simple diamond they had put together, using paper plates weighed down with stones to mark the bases and the mound. There had been some additional debate over distances and angles but in the end they had all come to an agreement and their little ballfield was ready for action.

Felix fished out another beer from the cooler, for by now the ice had melted to freezing water, and sat back down. Colleen Ryan had moved off to converse with someone else. Felix realized that he had already drunk quite a bit more than he had done for several months. He knew that later, after he gotten off the train in the suburbs, he would have to drive the rest of the way home, since he didn't live within walking distance of the nearest train station.

Some days he took the bus to the station, so that Sarah could have the car, or if he knew in advance he wouldn't be able to find a spot on a day when parking restrictions were in effect. But this particular day he had taken the car, because he hated the bus and avoided it whenever he could. He knew he needed to remain somewhat sober for now to have any chance of being able to drive later. But he didn't feel the alcohol had started to affect him yet, at least in a way that impaired his faculties. On the contrary, he was feeling a great release of pent-up pressure.

Someone had been thoughtful enough to organize several bats and balls, gloves and helmets, for the game. Among the several large softballs Felix noticed a couple of smaller hardballs. He wondered how they had made their way into the pile.

Felix had always enjoyed sports, although very early in his adolescence he knew he did not have the ability to become a professional athlete. He played all different types of sports; basketball, volleyball, baseball, and his favorite, soccer. But he lacked speed. Understanding his athletic limitations did not weigh heavily on him in his youth, instead he set his mind to making sure his education would open some doors for him. And it had, to some extent, but it wasn't always so obvious, especially when life could still land him under the thumb of a person like Miss Silvestri.

Of late he had taken again to swimming for exercise. He was fortunate in that had learned to be comfortable in water as a child. Now when he swam, usually at a local indoor pool, he was overcome with a great sense of ease and peace in the water.

The softball game was in session by now, but it failed to gain the same level of attention that the volleyball game had done earlier. For one thing, neither Mr. Wilhelm or his son were participating. For another, it was growing late in the afternoon and people were tiring, preferring instead to cluster and talk in small groups. Even the children had slowed down, tired from their own games, which consisted mostly of running around under everybody's feet. Some people went around taking photographs, which were sure to be distributed at the office the following week. Soon people began to say their goodbyes and drift away.

Felix wondered why he was lingering himself. He wouldn't be the first to leave. Since some had already departed, the invisible bonds that had held them all there were broken. True, it was still within the hours of a regular work day, which meant he was still on company time, as



Miss Silvestri often liked to characterize it. But now at that moment this law did not apply. At least not so explicitly. He wondered if the Wilhelms, who were all still present, were secretly ranking each employee as they bid their leave. It was frowned upon when someone left the office without saying goodbye to Mrs. Wilhelm each night, not to mention it being an absolute no-no to leave even a minute early, or arrive even a minute late, so the practice naturally carried over to the picnic. Felix asked himself if it was fear of a bad rating, a penalty point, from his bosses that was keeping him from simply clocking out and boarding the subway home to his beloved Sarah. After all, these were the people who would decide the amount of his next raise if they should choose to give him one. The people who, at their discretion, would give him a bonus at year end. The people who determined each and every day whether he still had a job to go to.

Perhaps it was this fear, but Felix knew it was also something else. Part of him didn't want the afternoon to end. He couldn't face the realization that the next time this same set of people would gather together again would be back in the office, back behind the prison walls. There would be the air of a hangover, of deflation, how he remembered the day after the birthdays of his childhood. He was in no rush to get to that on Monday morning. At least there was a weekend to cushion the blow.

And he was excited by the fact that he was for once in the company of Steven Wilhelm, outside the constraints of the office. It was opportunity for exposure with the one person at the company who could give him any reason to stay on there after the baby was born. When Felix saw Steven casually walk over to the softball game he knew that was where he should be too.

He stood up. For the first time he began to feel a numbing of his senses due to the alcohol. He was able to recognize that he was drunk, if only slightly. He still felt very much in control of himself though he feared he may not be much use swinging a bat. Then he remembered that some of his best nights on the bowling alley or in the bar playing table soccer were when he was at that low level of inebriation. It helped him to focus. It heightened his fear of losing control to the point where he bolstered himself with extra mental concentration. He had trained himself to follow two rules in particular, at such times. Avoid speaking and listen.

When he got over to the diamond, Steven was talking with the few remaining men about the baseball scholarship he had turned down as a teenager. The school was the problem. It was too far away and when he went to visit he felt the other students were not very partial to boys from his part of the country. It was great to be given the opportunity, he said, but he wasn't sure at the time that he wanted to be a major league pitcher, even if he was good enough. So going to that school was too big a sacrifice for someone so young and undecided. Anyway, he said, by the time he was in college he had all but ceased to play for anything other than recreation. And now with a young family and the business he hardly ever got out on the diamond at all.

There were not many people still left at the picnic by now, even the elder Wilhelms were packing up. Miss Silvestri, and Marty Ostler, had already left. So had Colleen Ryan. The caterers were tidying up. They were collecting the folding chairs. The bus was gone too and somehow someone had managed to cart off the volleyball equipment. The men on the softball field continued talking until Steven moved things along when he reached down, picked up a hardball and issued a challenge.

"Here's the deal.. I'll pitch against all five of you, and if anyone can put the ball in play or draw a walk, I'll buy everyone of you a beer over in McGovern's there." He was referring to a bar on a street by the park.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" one of the men said, and there was laughter.

"For sure," said Steven, "I'm psyched. You'll have to figure out who's catching and umpiring yourselves. And I want no tricks. A strike is a strike. Anyway, I'm only going to throw strikes, just so you know."

"What happens if you win, Steve?" another man asked.

"Simple, you'll all just have to buy me one drink between you. I think that's a pretty good deal, don't you?"

"For sure."

Felix didn't say a word. He was religiously following his self-imposed gag rule. He could hear the confidence in Steven's voice. It was intimidating, but now he badly wanted to get his bat to the ball, to be the hero. He wanted to show Steven that he could rise to the challenge. He wanted Steven to notice him. Somehow it came to be that he was to bat third, and wouldn't do any catching or umpiring. Perhaps because the other men didn't know him too well. No problem, thought Felix. The less he had to worry about the better.

Steven was throwing some soft tosses to the catcher when his mother called out.

"We're off now, Steven," she said. "We'll talk over weekend. Say hello to everyone."

"OK, Sandra, take care."

"Goodbye, Steven," Mr. Wilhelm said over his shoulder as they walked from the park. "Go easy on the guys."

"Goodbye, Morgan."

"Goodbye, everyone," said Mrs. Wilhelm.

Some of the men shouted their goodbyes to the Wilhelms.

"How will they get home," someone asked.

"They'll hail a cab on the street," Steven said.

The first of them stepped up to bat. Felix watched intently. He did not want to give in to the alcohol coursing through his veins and arteries. He was fighting hard to concentrate on everything he was seeing and hearing. Steven's first pitch was straight down the middle. They barely saw it. The batter was frozen in place. Steven smiled. He threw another pitch, equally as hard. This time the batter flailed at it, missing it completely, and spun himself around. There were chuckles. Few spectacles are as funny as seeing someone miss a pitch and twist themselves into a corkscrew. The next pitch was again straight down the middle, but didn't have as much velocity. It fooled the batter who swung too soon. By the time the ball reached him he had already passed his bat through thin air. Strike three. One down, four to go.

"Batter up," someone cried. It had always been a legend in the office that Steven could pitch. Now it was real for them. The next man had been swinging two bats around to loosen up, just like they did in the big leagues, and he looked very serious when he stepped into the imaginary batter's box.

It was obvious Steven had perfected the proper mechanics of his pitching in his youth; the grip on the baseball, the leg kick, the arm action, the accuracy, the strength. His first pitch to batter number two started off coming in high and then dipped sharply as it crossed homeplate. The batter's swing missed completely. There were no giggles this time, only the silence of admiration.

Steven wasn't smiling now. Perhaps his pitches didn't have anything like the speed and power of the professional leagues, nor was the distance so great, Felix thought, but they were as good as anything you would see outside of that. His next pitch was another fastball that again froze the batter. Two strikes. He finished him off with a pitch inside that broke back across the plate. Six pitches, two gone. Steven's face relaxed again. Now it was Felix's turn.

"Who's next?" asked Steven, "You, Felix?"

"Looks like it," said Felix, breaking his silence as he stood in.

"So we meet at last!" grinned Steven.

He wasn't sure what Steven meant, but it wasn't something he could dwell on. He was now on the spot, in direct combat with his true boss, and he couldn't let anything distract him. It was difficult enough coping with the alcohol. He readied his bat. Steven held both hands in front of his face. Felix saw the narrow slits of his eyes looking out from under the rim of his cap, above his glove. Steven delivered. Felix swung. His bat caught up to the ball and fouled it off.

"All right, Felix!" one of the men said.

"Strike one!" barked the umpire.

"You don't have to shout it out so loud!" he was told by the catcher. "It's just us."

"Sorry, I got carried away," said the umpire.

Steven got the ball back from the umpire and examined it for scuff marks for what seemed like an unnecessarily long time. All the while his face was without expression. His next pitch was high.

"Ball one!"

So much for his boast about strikes. His next pitch after that was also a ball.

"Ball two!"

Now Steven was behind in the count. He stepped away and rotated his shoulder, like the big leaguers do. Ready again, Steven stepped back onto the little paper plate that was his mound. Felix knew he was going to throw another fastball, because he needed a strike. Felix was ready. Steven threw. Felix fouled it off again. It was a fastball. It was funny, Felix thought in the immediate aftermath of his swing, how the body can do things faster than the mind can keep pace. He replayed the pitch in his head, more slowly this time. He saw the head of his bat come around and connect with the baseball. He saw it barely miss hitting the ball square, his conscious mind not able, in that millisecond, to tell his hands to make the tiny adjustment needed to make contact with the center of the ball. He saw the ball fly of his bat and go back behind him. He wanted that pitch again. But it was gone. The count was now even. The umpire held up two fingers on each hand. The momentum had shifted back again to Steven.

But not for long. Steven missed outside. The count was full. The whole bet was down to one pitch. This time Steven didn't step away to regroup. He stood ready to pitch again as soon as he got the ball back. Felix could see Steven's eyes narrow one more time. It was suddenly harder to predict which of his arsenal of pitches he would decide to throw. Felix saw the ball leave Steven's hand. He could see the spin on the ball. As it got closer it started to move away from him. It's going outside, Felix thought, he's thrown another one outside. Felix held up his swing. In that instance the ball curved back and smacked into the catcher's glove. Strike three.

"Tough, Felix", the catcher said in a low voice, "You almost had him."

Felix was still looking down at the silly round paper plate that marked homeplate. He could see again the white ball coming across the white paper below. Then the numb feeling induced by the alcohol returned, compounded by the shock and letdown and the emptiness of his instant elimination from contention. He wasn't going to be the hero that got a hit off Steven Wilhelm.

"Good work, Felix," Steven said, "Nice effort." He said this as if the result had never been in doubt, even on that final pitch.

"Thank you," said Felix, stepping back to allow the catcher to come to bat.

Thank you? Felix was amazed at himself that he had uttered those words. Even now when he felt subdued and defeated, humiliated even, the only stance he could take was one of deference. It made him angry, first at himself and then at Steven.

The catcher was ready to bat, having swapped his role with one of the men that had already batted. The last to bat would be the one currently acting as the umpire. Steven was already focused on the new batter, no more thoughts of Felix. Felix could feel resentment rise in his throat and he wanted to shout something obscene at Steven, something about 'getting him someday'. Now the alcohol was blurring his reason. The part of his conscience mind that was still on solid ground was struggling, but in the end it won out. You'll be fired if you say anything, Felix, he said to himself. Instead he cursed Steven under his breath.

The next batter didn't last long. He popped the first pitch straight up, high in the air. "Damn!" the batter said and slammed his bat to the ground. Steven laughed and hardly had to move faster than a walk to come to homeplate to catch the ball.

It was all down to one last at-bat. It occurred to Felix that each of the other men had also been striving to be the one to outplay their boss, to be the one that stood out in his eyes. to show they were better than he, at least at this one thing. The prize of a beer at McGovern's pub was far less important.

Perhaps Steven knew this was how it would happen when he issued his challenge, as if he realized that they would all be so worked up to look better than each other that all he would have to do was pick them off, one by one. Some people are masters at controlling others.

The batter who had been the umpire was the only one to pitch left-handed. Steven may have gambled that there were no lefties among them. The batter fouled off Steven's first pitch. The ball went straight back and nearly hit the catcher in the face. Luckily for him, since he didn't have a protective face mask.

"You're on top of him," the catcher said quietly to the batter, "Stay focused."

And the batter did just that. The next pitch curled low to the outside. He followed it down and got a piece of it. The ball shot off his bat fair, towards first base. Steven watched it roll away from his control. The men cheered, including Felix.

"Looks like we have a batting champion," Steven announced with a smile, his hands on his hips. "You can thank him for your free drink across the road. Let's pack up! I can use a cold one."

"Well done, my man," he continued, addressing the batting champion and patting him gently on the shoulder. "Where did you learn to swing the bat like that?"

"Oh I've been playing ever since I was little," the man replied, adding "Some days you're hot, some days you're not."

McGovern's was a small pub by the park, with low lighting and a bar with a darkly stained finish, one of those establishments that had the air of a local watering hole for people living in the surrounding area, except it was in a city center business district with only a small population of local residents. The patrons were mostly office workers, having a bite to eat at lunchtime or hanging out there later after work, in transit to their homes. When Steven Wilhelm and the others arrived, at just after 5 p.m. that Friday, McGovern's was enjoying one of its busiest hours of the week. The air was smoky. The man whom Steven had referred to as the batting champion was the person that had brought all the softball equipment to the picnic. Now he had to get it all back safely to his local amateur baseball club that evening. He had a large bag for the helmets, balls and gloves and the bats were bound tightly together. It was a manageable load. He placed it all at the base of the bar. Other than this baggage their entrance was hardly noticed, except by the barman.

"What'll you have, gentlemen?" he asked.

"Give these guys a beer", said Steven, and threw a crisp twenty dollar bill on the bar. Felix couldn't help but notice the ease with which he did this with such a large note. "And don't forget me," Steven added.

The beer was served up. The walk across from the park had largely helped Felix return to sobriety. There was a degree of uneasiness in the group. The men themselves were barely used to socializing with each other, let alone with Steven Wilhelm, the aloof son of Morgan and Sandra. The eye contact was furtive. Each man took a first gulp of beer. Now that he was a host of sorts, it appeared as if Steven felt obliged to generate some conversation.

"What did you guys think of the afternoon?" he asked.

"It was very good indeed," one man answered.

"Absolutely," another said.

"Really? And the food, how was it?"

"Smashing."

"Super."

"Not bad at all," Felix said.

"Great, we were hoping that you would all like it. We brought in a good caterer for it."

"Yes, they knew how to cook," said the man who had played catcher. "And the service was excellent."

"So who do you think will win the World Series this fall?" asked Steven, switching the topic to more generic conversation.

"Who knows," offered the batting champ. "We're out of it for sure." He was referring to the town's professional team.

"With a record well below five hundred I can't see them catching up," offered Felix.

"They made some good trades in the spring, brought in some great talent," said Steven. "But it just goes to show, you can have the best players but if they don't click as a team, forget it."

"For sure," someone said.

"I mean, look at us, the company I mean," Steven continued, "there's something that we have that makes us tick as a company. You can't define it."

Yes you can, Felix thought, that something is fear, fear of the consequences of putting a foot wrong. But he dared not speak this aloud.

"I couldn't agree more," one of the men said, practicing the time-honored craft of letting people of authority hear what they want to hear. "Things run very smoothly at the company because people know their jobs and work with each other to get things done. And people know how to adapt to solve problems quickly, to be creative."

Felix had conflicting emotions as he listened to this. What the other man had said was simply untrue. People were afraid to work creatively because unless it was a direct order from Miss Silvestri, it couldn't be done. That fact just about killed teamwork too, unless people were conspiring together to keep each other out of trouble, which also happened to his knowledge. But what the other man had said was how it ought to be. Felix felt the urge to speak out. It swept over him like a wave of panic. A chance to say something had presented itself and he had to act. If Steven had believed what he himself had just stated, about the togetherness of the company, and if this false belief had been reinforced by the other man's reply, then he should be told the truth somehow. He should be shown that the way things stood prevented the company from truly becoming the success story that Felix knew Steven wanted it to be.

And Felix's desire to make that difference was tied to his stubbornness at not wanting to give up on the hope he had when he first came to work for the Wilhelms, thereby admitting to himself the decision to work there had been a wrong one. He wanted to be in a place he could call home, a safe place, a place where he would be appreciated and rewarded for his efforts. He could still turn it around, he convinced himself, if only he could get through to the young and ambitious Steven. If he could do that then stupid people like Miss Silvestri and even the elder Wilhelms would lose their stranglehold on the running of the company, and of his life.

"Yes I agree," Felix said forcefully, "but we can make it even better."

Well said, Felix thought, you didn't insult Steven for being so far off the mark, instead you created an opening to suggest your ideas. If Steven noticed what Felix had said, of course, and how could he not? And he did.

"That's interesting, Felix," Steven responded, seeming almost cheered-up that a provocative note had been introduced into the conversation. "How so?"

Felix felt the spotlight on him. The other men were looking at him, partly out of surprise, because none of them had any motivation to be so bold, and partly out of curiosity at the spectacle that was about to unfold. Felix knew he had to hide his nervousness and stay calm.

"Well, Steve," Felix said, "I don't believe we are sharing information efficiently." Felix often used the word 'believe' in place of 'think'. It lent him greater credibility with his listeners, or so he believed.

"And how is that the case?" Steven asked, now feigning his own form of mild curiosity. But his stare betrayed him.

Felix continued, his nervousness now giving him an air of enthusiasm. "Well, a lot of times, and this is just one example, when our salespeople call in to get the status of important orders, they often have to leave voicemails because they can't get anyone on the phone, or they're put on hold for a long time, or they get bounced around from one person to another. And, I hate to say, the information they finally get is not always correct."

"Wow," said Steven, "it isn't easy to hear this. And let me just tell you, I've heard it a couple of times from the sales force themselves. So what do you think we can do to make thing better, Felix?"

The weeks spent ruminating at his desk had prepared Felix well for his response. "Well, first of all," he continued, "the sales force should not have to be calling in to find out silly little things about orders in the first place." Felix grew in confidence as he spoke. "All this information should be databased in one central location. That way we can share it among ourselves at the office and remotely with the sales force. Why, we can even share it directly with customers using a well-designed password protected website."

"This sound really cool," Steven enthused. "As we grow, and we will for sure, all the silly little ways we've been doing things for years will really get in the way. We won't be able to handle the strain. We'll implode from the weight of our own growth!"

"Exactly," Felix added. "Now is the time to make information, the quality of it and its delivery, a big priority."

"I hear you," said Steven, his eyes widening, "You know, you and I have to take some time out one of these days and brainstorm."

"I'll hold you to it," said Felix, and laughed. "You'll be sorry!"

A little joke to break the rush of the moment, at least from Felix's perspective. Steven smiled and as he took another drink from his beer glass he cast a sideways glance at Felix.

Felix had accomplished his mission. He had gotten noticed. He could see that he had struck a harmonious note in Steven, something he could build on in the days ahead. There was no need to continue with this tactic right now, he thought. Besides, the other men had been sidelined during this exchange with Steven. It was time to include them again.

Talk returned to the safe topics of sports and current affairs. Every so often one of the men would come up with some exaggerated story of some adventure or other. Steven left soon after, as soon as he had finished his one beer, in fact, not waiting for another round and leaving a healthy tip for the barkeep. Felix hung on for a little while longer, but drank no more. He didn't want to make it obvious, to the other men or to Steven, that the only reason he was there was to connect with his boss.

By the time he had traveled on the train and reached his car, his head was clear. He felt that his luck had changed, that things were looking up. That there was hope.

And so ended the day of the company picnic, a day where the usual behavioral straightjackets were cast off and both master and servant behaved just a tad differently to each other. And to top it off, Felix said to himself, he had impressed Steven Wilhelm

## CHAPTER FIVE

Felix enjoyed going to the swimming pool. He always felt comfortable in the water. Treading his arms and legs in water seemed as natural to him as walking around in air. He preferred a pool to the sea. The sea was too vast and was never truly calm while the pool, if he was lucky to be the only swimmer at the time, could have a surface as perfect as a pane of glass until he broke through it with his body. That was how Felix liked it best, to be the only swimmer, and he hoped for it ever time he set out for his local indoor pool.

That was rarely the case, however. The pool was not very wide, which meant that if more than six swimmers showed up it was crowded. This was always the most likely scenario because the hours allowed for lap swimming were few and far between. Most of the other hours were set aside for the general mayhem of family swimming and instructional classes.

The other swimmers tended to be show-offs, thrashing about, alternating their techniques, sprinting and diving, and generally churning up the water. Felix stuck to one technique, the crawl, the one he knew best, taking a breath on every stroke. He swam for long steady stretches, rather than for short speedy bursts. Often the other swimmers secretly raced with each other, and with Felix. He would notice them timing their push-off from the side of the pool with his. He didn't care. All he wanted was to be alone with his thoughts when he swam. He had nothing to prove to strangers. Sometimes he beat them to the other end of the pool, usually he didn't. But sometimes, in the throes of the challenge, he couldn't help but try to squeeze out a little extra effort.

After many months he had developed an instinct for the best time to arrive at the pool, just as he had for finding a parking spot near the train station on his morning commute. The hours for lap swimming were either very early in the morning or late in the evening. Felix learned which hours tended to be less crowded. It varied between morning and evening, depending on the day, and he made it his business to make it there at those times.

One weekend morning he went to the pool to find his predictions were off. There were more swimmers than normal and the swimming lanes were saturated. Some had three swimmers in them, all trying to swim in tandem in a rotating pattern. Felix hated when they tried to do this with him. He was always slower than some and faster than others, and it upset his rhythm. He decided to wait by the poolside until some of them tired and left. He didn't expect to be waiting very long.

In a misguided attempt to be considerate, however, the lifeguard insisted that Felix get in the pool. He had become familiar with Felix from his frequent sessions at the pool. To him, Felix was one of the regulars and had gained his respect. Despite Felix's polite protestations he forced two swimmers who were sharing a lane to stop and change to swimming in rotation so that Felix could join in. Felix put on his goggles and lowered himself into the water. He shuddered as the water hit his skin above his waist. He started swimming after the other two had resumed. He could see them in the water ahead of him. It was just as well he was last in line because he could not keep pace with them and didn't need them breathing down his neck. It would be a while before they came around behind him so for now he could enjoy his swim.

Soon Felix had settled into the steady repetition of his stroke. He felt his muscles loosen as they stretched out. His motion became more fluid. He could see the morning sunlight coming in through the high glazed windows each time his face came out of the water to take in a breath. After a few laps his goggles started to fog, leaving him with barely enough visibility to know where he was in the pool as he swam. He didn't mind. It served to insulate him further from his surroundings. He retreated into his private world.

His mind wandered to thoughts of the baby that Sarah was carrying. He wondered what it would be, a boy or a girl. He imagined the child's face, the color of its eyes. It was all going to be new for him. He wondered how things might change for them. He still could not picture a little baby in the house. For a moment he worried about how to provide for this new helpless person, how to pay for food, for clothing, for shelter, for doctors. The worries passed as he let the water wash them away. There was nothing he could do about it now, anyway.

He was also able to keep his tormentors at work out of his head. On he swam, looking at the floor of the pool under him and the blurred images above it when his face rose above the water.

Eventually, he noticed his two swimming companions had left the pool. He had the lane entirely to himself now. He reveled in the solitude, reaching out more with each stroke, pushing harder with his arms as they passed beneath him, putting more strength into each kick. He felt himself glide in the water. His breathing was so relaxed it was effortless. He began to feel joy, yet he could not understand why. It circulated in him.

He closed his eyes, peeking now and then to see where he was. He knew every tile at the bottom of the pool. He could always tell exactly how far away, how many strokes, it was to the side of the pool. He realized he was smiling when he wasn't opening his mouth to breathe. He was tempted to start giggling.

On one of his laps he reached the end of the pool and, as he always did, dived under so he could bring his legs around to thrust himself back in the direction he had come. But suddenly, on some impulse, he continued downward. He rolled himself into a ball several feet below the surface. He was in the mood for play. He whirled himself around like a spinning baseball. It dawned on him that he was not feeling in need of another breath. Somehow his body was getting the oxygen it needed. It had been perhaps thirty seconds by now since he had dived under. He asked himself if he was dreaming. Still he felt no need to return to the surface for air. He wondered if he would drown, if his body was crying out for oxygen without him knowing it. But he felt extremely safe, as safe as he could ever remember being. Now, with a renewed innocence he moved about under the water, gently moving his arms and his legs about. Several minutes passed. He closed his eyes.

Then he heard a woman speaking. Her voice was the voice of the woman that sang the lullaby. He couldn't make out what she was saying. She wasn't speaking to him, he didn't think.



Her words were muffled by the water. So too was the sound of a train passing. Now he began to feel as if his world was really turning inside out. There were no train tracks anywhere near this swimming pool. Where could all these sounds be coming from, he asked? What was happening to him?

And like in a dream that is so sweet that it can't be true and is impossible to continue, Felix began to get nervous. He opened his eyes and noticed that the lights from the surface were not as strong as they had been. He got the first twinge in his chest that he needed to take a gulp of air. He lengthened his body out to swim to the surface. He kicked with his legs. He pushed down with his arms. What he thought was a short distance to the surface was turning out to be much longer. He started to swim faster. And faster. His fear grew. Now he was greatly in need of a fresh mouthful of air. His chest and head began to hurt. Still the surface would not come. He kicked harder. He was running on empty. He wanted to cry for help. Instead a squeak of desperation came out of his throat for he dared not open his mouth. He was very afraid now. He could not understand how he had come to be so far below the surface. His legs kicked on furiously. He couldn't tell which direction the surface was, only that the only light he could see was straight ahead. He fell into complete panic. His leg kicks and his arm strokes accelerated to a frenzied pace. He closed his eyes again. His heart was pounding.

Then he felt a different level of pressure on his face and a cooler temperature. He had finally burst through, crossing the boundary from the world of water to that of air. He inhaled great heaps of it, desperate for the oxygen contained within. The enormous weight of the knowledge that he had escaped drowning almost pushed him back under again. He opened his eyes and saw that the place was almost dark. It was night outside, and dim electric lights had been turned on all around the pool. He pulled off his goggles. There was no one else present, not even the lifeguard. The surface of the pool was calm save for the ripples he had created. He could see them make their way to the far end of the pool and break against the side.

The only thing that made sense to him then was to get out of the water. He treaded his way to the ladder and pulled himself out. He found the door to the showers was locked. So too was the door from the spectators' gallery. He couldn't get out. He pounded furiously on that door, screaming with all his might. He did this until he saw one of the custodians through the glass. The man recognized Felix. After telling Felix it was 10 o'clock at night he pulled out his keys and opened the door. He then opened another door so Felix could get back to his locker and his clothes. Everything there was still as he had left it, although when he had left it there was now a mystery. He had no desire to linger to take a shower, instead drying himself quickly and dressing. On his way out, Felix asked the custodian what date it was. The man told him. It was still the same day. The custodian asked Felix not to complain about the incident or someone would get into trouble for locking him in the pool.

When he reached home Sarah was still waiting up for him. She held him close and reassured him that he wasn't losing his mind.

In the weeks after the company picnic Felix noticed a definite change in Miss Silvestri's attitude towards him. She continued to funnel work his way but was more polite and friendly in her dealings with him. He wasn't summoned to her office for a dressing-down, nor did she talk condescendingly to him during any of her visits to his desk. Sometimes she even complimented his work. When they spoke, Felix found himself filled with happiness that she was not displeased, as a dog might feel when its master is content.

Perhaps this mood of hers was coincidental with other factors in her life and in the business, which were one and the same thing. Perhaps she had received a raise, or had been heaped with praise for her efforts by the Wilhelms. Perhaps it was this that had taken the edge off her bitter side.

But Felix thought it more likely that his increased access to Steven was the reason. In the time following the picnic Steven had asked Felix more than once to come to his office to shoot the breeze, as he had termed it. Miss Silvestri was always acutely aware of who Steven had with him in his office, more so than who might be in with one of his parents.

Steven loved to hold these types of free-flowing brainstorm. The discussion would be replete with ideas and very little plans for implementation. When the right thing to do presents itself, he would tell Felix, the means will also appear.

Felix enjoyed their meetings also. It fueled his motivation. It gave him an opportunity to demonstrate the deep knowledge his experience gave him. And he learned from Steven. He admired Steven's ability to prevent the niggling problems and perceived obstacles of the present to cloud his vision of the future. He would often encourage Felix to picture himself at a Christmas party. What would he like to be telling others he had accomplished for that year? When some of Steven's utterances smacked of pure fantasy, Felix reminded himself that Steven had been the driving force behind the company's great success in recent years. If Steven had chosen from the start to believe it could not be done then it would never have happened. At times, Felix wished he had a similar mindset.

Their conversations focused primarily on exploring ways to use the Internet to build the company brand, and to better service their customers and build stronger partnerships with them. Steven had been reading and seeing in the news how much an impact this new electronic channel was having. The Internet had become very sexy, and Steven wanted to understand it better and learn how his company could use it. For him, tapping into Felix's knowledge was an obvious starting point. In return, Felix began to learn the true dynamics of the business and its industry, knowledge that Miss Silvestri had done all within her powers to obscure from him.

Typically Steven would not define any specific project for Felix to undertake. Oddly, it seemed as if he enjoyed talking about changes more than ordering them to happen. So in some ways Felix did not feel explicitly empowered. On the other hand, however, he felt he had enough backing from Steven to effect change. It was up to himself to figure out the details. He decided to move on with his research into a better computer network for the company, better applications, and an enhanced web presence.

He knew it would be hard to turn his ideas into reality. For one thing, the steps on the path there were not clear. He wasn't sure how anyone, even Steven, would react once he presented the projected costs and estimated benefits. People would be resistant no matter what, uncomfortable with doing things differently to the way they had always done them. But he could see the end result, and wanted to get there.

He had a new optimism in his future at the company. He felt the yolk that was around his neck, in the form of Miss Silvestri, had been cast off. Even Sarah began to notice. The upsetting incident at the swimming pool was fading from memory and his trust in his own sanity was returning. Curiously, he still heard the muffled sounds of the woman's voice and a train, sometimes.

Some time later, late on a Friday afternoon, Steven was working away at his desk when Steven called him.

"Could you drop in to see me for a minute, Felix?" he said, "if you are free."

"Sure," answered Felix, "I'll be right there."

Felix was just finishing up an email to a web hosting and development company he had been assessing. They showed a lot of promise and he liked their ideas. Steven had been enthusiastic about creating a website to enhance his strategy to market the company's brand. It was more along the lines of the kind of computer capabilities he understood and valued, rather than the new network and application installations that Felix had planned and overseen. It had all happened within a matter of a month, much to Felix's surprise. He had met with no opposition along any avenue, not even from the elder Wilhelms. He knew that Steven had brushed aside any obstacles, indirectly. Just by associating with him more closely he had

elevated Felix to a higher level and people feared the repercussions of not cooperating. Thus Felix had very little trouble getting budgets approved. And once the new computers and software were running, the staff made it their business to use them. He had become very upbeat about his role, despite some lingering misgivings about Miss Silvestri. Although he was left to do his own thing now, he still had to report to her, at least on paper. But he was convinced now that he had made the right choice to come there, and was eager to continue making progress.

"Sit down, sit down," said Steven, and got up to close the door behind him as he entered.

For an instant Felix felt some foreboding. Marty Ostler had told him once that the Wilhelms often fired people last thing on Fridays, usually to their complete astonishment. Steven sensed Felix's disquiet.

"Sit down, sit down," he repeated, "Don't worry."

Felix sat. Steven took his seat.

"This morning, I terminated Miss Silvestri," Steven said.

Felix was astounded. He felt a swell in his heartbeat as it struggled to cope with the electric surge that passed through him then. The person who had kept the workers so firmly pinned under her jackboot was gone. A most sacred cow had been slain. Felix could barely speak.

"Oh, what..ah..the reason?" he mumbled.

"I'm sorry and disappointed to say," Steven answered with an air of gravitas, "that she had been stealing from us, I mean, from the company."

There was a pause as Steven allowed Felix to absorb the news. Felix gathered his composure.

"Frankly, Steven, I'm quite shocked at this news. I had known Miss Silvestri to be a fine supervisor, one of great integrity, or so I believed. I'm at a loss for words."

He cringed inside at his total lack of sincerity. But even now, it would serve no purpose, and could only work against him, if he openly gloated at Miss Silvestri's departure. At the very least it would bring out into the open the fact that the Wilhelms had shown poor judgment in giving Miss Silvestri as much trust and free reign as they had. Steven would not like to be reminded of this. And Steven might doubt Felix's honesty too, if he found out how much he loathed Miss Silvestri and had said nothing. No, it was better at this time to make a Wilhelm feel cozy about the matter, by reinforcing what a great surprise it all was.

"We have evidence to show that she stole funds," Steven continued, "and we will be taking appropriate action. In the meantime we must continue as normal. I will be sending an email to the entire staff explaining the situation and asking for their cooperation as we gather evidence to press charges. We haven't brought the police in just yet."

"When did it happen?" Felix asked Marty Ostler, quietly, out of earshot of anyone else.

"Early this morning."

"Really? What time exactly?" Felix was one of several who had been curious why Miss Silvestri had not been in the office all day.

"About 7:30. When I got here she was already in with Mrs. Wilhelm. I could hear them chatting. Everything sounded OK, like it didn't seem like anything was up. But I thought it was odd because neither of them are ever in that early. Come to think of it, neither am I. The trains were running on time this morning, for a change."

"And...?"

"Well, the next thing Steven comes in. He barely says hello. He's got this look in his eye. I call it the Wilhelm look. You know, when you see it you know something is about to go down. I've seen it in the old man often enough. Now I've seen it in Steven. The apple and the tree, right?"

"So he goes into his office but he leaves his door open. I presume at this point Mrs. Wilhelm heard him come in. And Mr. Wilhelm was already in his office too, by the way. Anyway, Miss Silvestri comes out of one office and goes into the other, into Steven's. She shuts the door. Pretty soon after I hear her crying, whimpering and sobbing, kind of."

"So the next thing is, after about what seemed like fifteen minutes, she comes out, and she comes over to me. She asks me if I can find her a cardboard box. Her eyes were all red and puffy. I said sure and I went to the storeroom.

"When I got back she was in her office, collecting up her things, cleaning out her desk. It was sad, really, I have to say. She was sniffing. I felt bad for her. She even put that stupid plastic frog thing in the box that she won at the picnic. Like, what the heck does she want to keep that for?"

"I couldn't say," said Felix. Now that he was getting over the enormity of the event he was surprised to find that he too found it moving.

"So then," Marty continued, "she asks me to leave her alone for a moment so I did. But then Steven steps out of his office and hovers just outside her door. Typical of them, like she's going to set the place on fire or something ridiculous, or shred something. Then he says to me to watch her and to escort her out. So I did."

"Well, you know, she did steal."

"I don't know about that, Felix, she doesn't seem the type."

"I wonder how much it was."

"Two hundred bucks."

"What?" gasped Felix.

"I think that's all it was, because as I was walking her out she says 'All this because of some BS over a lousy two hundred bucks'. I didn't know what she meant just then. After I came back from the elevator Steven filled me in."

"Did Silvestri say anything else?"

"Not really, just that she had always liked working with me. I told her, you know, if she needed anything to give me a call, but she said thanks, but no thanks, that she might get me into trouble if she called.

"I think she probably thought she was being called in so early so they could discuss a raise with her or something. What an ambush! You know, Mr. and Mrs. Wilhelm stayed in their offices. She didn't even knock on their doors to say goodbye. After all this time."

It was a dream, another one of the few he could remember after he woke up, that revealed to him something he had not known, Miss Silvestri's first name. He had already discussed the significance of his dream about computer technology with Sarah. She told him it was the means for him to understand how things could be done. After all, she said, technology, especially in the field of computers, was moving extremely quickly. When he asked her why he needed a dream to tell him this when he knew it already, she told him that's how dreams sometimes work. They put two and two together for you. Maybe if he had not had that dream, she added weeks later, he might not have known to tell Steven anything that day in the bar, and his chance to reach him would have been lost.

This time he dreamt that he had been given the daily task of delivering the office mail to the employees. He went from desk to desk with a little trolley full of envelopes and packages. In reality, this was the duty of one of the clerks in the accounts receivable department. They were tasked with going through the mail for customer payments as soon as it arrived and then with distributing the rest of it. In his dream Felix did not feel he had been demoted or that there was anything unusual or demeaning about this. In fact he was enjoying it, greeting everyone cheerfully as he did his rounds.

Like all dreams, events took on a strange logic. For the first few days each envelope was addressed with formal salutations. Everyone was either a 'Mr.', a 'Mrs.', or a 'Miss' with no first names written on the envelopes. Then the 'Mrs.' and the 'Miss' became 'Ms.'. Then the first names began to appear, and the addresses were no longer always handwritten or typed. They were mostly printed on labels. And the salutations were mostly absent.

Later, when he relived the dream in his mind, he thought it peculiar that he had previously felt it inappropriate to address many of his co-workers by their first names. And that

it was highly disrespectful to call the elder Wilhelms by their given names, Morgan and Sandra. That was how he addressed them all the time now, and so did everyone else.

The dream ended on a stressful note for Felix. He had just delivered Sandra's mail to her office and was passing the office that Miss Silvestri once occupied, on his way to Morgan's office. Miss Silvestri's had remained empty since her departure. He assumed they were undergoing a search for a replacement, and that these things take time. He reached in to his trolley to fetch Morgan's mail when he noticed a small white envelope addressed to a Gloria Silvestri. He shuddered. He became cold. His dream was dark. It was now a nightmare. He looked around. Suddenly everyone was talking about the imminent return of Gloria Silvestri and how happy they were to hear such news. She had been miraculously reinstated, they said. Steven was delighted that everything had been straightened out and they could all go back to the good old days. Felix felt his chest tighten. He wanted to cry out, to warn them that this was something that had to be stopped. But he couldn't get his voice to work. No sound escaped his lips. The last thing he remembered before he woke up was a feeling of being all alone, as if he were the only one who remembered Gloria Silvestri as she truly was.

Felix's phone rang. He picked it up.

"Felix here," he said.

"Felix," a voice said, "it's me." And then "Please don't hang up."

"Yes," said Felix, without betraying the caller with so much as a blink. It was Gloria Silvestri.

"Don't let anyone know I'm calling. Are you still at the same desk?"

"Yes."

Felix glanced around. No one was aware that he was talking to her.

"What do you want?" He wondered why he didn't just hang up the phone, but this was the first time that they both knew he was in control. He wanted to prolong the moment. He felt the inevitability and satisfaction the determined underdog feels when everything has been turned upside down, and in its favor.

"I need to talk to you. Can you meet me?"

"What?" he whispered, "Are you crazy?"

"No, please Felix."

"Look," he continued to whisper "if they know I'm even talking to you they'll fire me. Your name is mud around here. No one can even mention it."

"Felix, I'm begging you. I just want to meet with you for a few minutes outside the office. Please?"

Felix said nothing. His anger began to rise. All his suppressed feelings were starting to surface again. There was no way he could let loose on her now, not out of the blue like that in front of the others. His breathing had become heavier. Gloria sensed his ire.

"Felix, I know I could have treated you better, I know that. But what happened to me was wrong, there's no other way to say it. I need your help. Just hear what I have to say. Please, I'm begging you."

In an instant Felix weighed the risks against the pleasure he was having, listening to her squirm. But his conscience was appealing to his better nature. Show some mercy, he told himself. No one will know you've met with her. If you don't like what she has to say you can tell her to go to hell.

"OK, tonight at 5:30. Here's where. Write it down."

He gave her the address of a diner across town.

"Thanks, Felix, I really really appreciate this. You don't know."

"Just be thankful you caught me on a good day. Just like I often was when it came to you."

He hung up. He couldn't resist making that last remark. He phoned Sarah to let her know he would be a late, but not by much.

When he reached their appointed meeting place Gloria was already there, seated towards the back. She was having coffee and smoking a cigarette. Felix sat across from her.

"Thanks for coming, Felix," she began.

The waitress stopped by the table.

"I'll just have a cup of coffee, thank you," Felix told her.

"Cigarette?" Gloria asked as she lit another. She held up the box.

"You know I don't smoke. Or maybe you don't know, since you never bothered to find out the first thing about me."

"Felix, is there a reason why you have to be so snippy with me?"

"Only that you pushed my buttons a lot, like you did with just about everyone else who had to work under you."

"How so?" She seemed genuinely surprised.

It dawned on Felix that Gloria might be oblivious to her own shortcomings.

"I'll just say this, you should hear yourself sometimes," he told her.

"Felix, I know I'm not a people person. I'm the first to admit that."

Felix was still refusing to let his guard down with her. The waitress came by with his coffee. While she poured it they both sat in silence, looking at each other. Felix noticed she looked paler and thinner than before. When the waitress left he spoke again.

"I don't know why I'm here."

"Because I asked you to meet me."

"I mean, I can't imagine what you could want," he said. "I realize it must be something to do with your dismissal by the Wilhelms, but I'm totally in the dark as to how I can make a difference, even if I wanted to."

"Because," said Gloria, "you have access to everything on the network."

"Wait a minute," protested Felix, "I'm not doing anything illegal, or anything that gets me the sack."

"Hear me out, will you." Her voice had a hint of the terseness she deployed with such exactness when they worked together. Felix felt his blood get warmer. He continued to let her speak.

"All you have to do is locate one file on the network and look at it. It proves I never took a penny from those creeps."

"I said I'm not compromising myself at that job. Is that clear?"

"I don't think you're doing anything wrong by doing this," said Gloria. "When you read the document you'll know I'm innocent."

"How come you didn't tell the Wilhelms about this document? If this proves you didn't take any money it would have saved your job."

"For two reasons," she answered. "One, the Wilhelms concocted this whole story to get me out. Two, if I told them about it they would have deleted it straight away. They don't know it's there. There's no way they could know. That's why I know it's still saved on the network, because I never told them about it."

"You're beginning to sound even crazier than I thought you were," said Felix. "What on earth are you talking about? Why would the Wilhelms want you out? You kept their ship running just the way they wanted it, and you were always the bad guy. They could go around smiling. You played the drill-sergeant bit really well, I have to tell you."

"I know it sounds crazy to you, you only saw a small piece of what's going on." Gloria told him. "They wanted me out because I started to uncover something that they were hiding, that they aren't reporting the company's income correctly. They're evading taxes. They've been doing it for years."

"This sounds insane. No, it's you that's insane," Felix said, shaking his head with incredulity. "Why would they want to do this? And what about Steven? He always talks like he's going to grow the business into a multi-national giant. How could he be talking like that if they're operating like a bunch of two-bit crooks?"

"Steven doesn't know," Gloria told him. "They don't want to tell him, since he's their pride and joy, their super-genius son."

"When he started working with them he made them invest in all kinds of new things, especially on the marketing side. This increased sales but not enough to cover the money they had borrowed to inject cash into the business. It's like parents that can't stop giving their baby all the toys he wants."

"Pretty soon they had to find some way of getting extra money that didn't come from their sales. I suppose that's when they started their cheating ways. And once that starts it's hard to stop it. As it is, their cooked books show they're barely breaking even. But of course they're drawing nice fat salaries for themselves in the meantime."

Felix was convinced her story did not add up.

"How is it that you didn't grab a copy of this document before you left?" he questioned her. "I mean, something to protect yourself with."

"Well, first of all," she replied, her voice taking on its familiar superior tone again, "they caught me off guard that last morning I was there. They had already locked me out of the network, changed all my passwords and disabled my accounts."

"What about a printout, or a back-up on a diskette? If this file was so damning, how come you didn't keep a copy in a safe place?"

"Look, it happened very quickly. I spoke to Sandra about my concerns late in the afternoon the day before my last day. Most of the time I didn't concern myself too much with the financials, but with being in charge of payroll I could get my hands on the data if I went out of my way." Gloria paused and pulled on her cigarette. "Boy, was she quick," she continued, referring again to Sandra. "I mean, these were people I adored. I would have given them the benefit of the doubt. All I wanted was for them to explain, to answer a couple of questions. I was hoping and praying they would, so everything would be OK and I could rest easy. But they weren't taking any chances, I guess."

There was a hint of emotion in her voice now.

"So you figured all this out after they canned you?" Felix asked. There was definite skepticism in his voice.

"Pretty much, isn't it obvious that I was on to something?"

"Or maybe you just stole two hundred bucks."

The old harsh look returned to Gloria's face. "Do you have any idea what they were paying me?" she asked. "Take your salary and times it by three and you're getting close. What would I want with a measly couple of hundred bucks?"

"I don't know your business," Felix said. "Even if you were making all that money, like you say. Maybe you're the one with all the debt, not the Wilhelms."

"Then let me ask you this," Gloria shot back, "how come they haven't pressed charges?"

"I can think of a couple of reasons," Felix answered. "It's only two hundred bucks. You're hardly going to go to jail for that. And maybe that's their way of giving you one last reward for the honest work you did do."

"And maybe they picked such a small amount so people like you would think like you do," said Gloria. "If it was a lot more money that they said went missing, then everyone would be asking why they weren't doing anything about it."

The tension of the meeting was beginning to rise. The waitress appeared again. "Are you going to order anything, honey?" she asked Felix.

"No, I'm Ok with coffee, thanks"

"OK, sweetie, let me know if you change your mind."

She left them alone again. Felix refused to believe Gloria's story. Instead, it was time to extract a little closure.

"You know I always wanted to ask you something," he said.

Gloria was extinguishing yet another cigarette in the ashtray.

"What?"

"That time, after I had just started working for the Wilhelms, you took a day's pay out of my check."

For a second Gloria looked as if she didn't remember, but then said "You missed a day and you had no time coming."

"I know," Felix continued, keeping his cool. "But I had told you before I agreed to take the job that I needed that day. For me, that was part of the price for the company to hire me."

"I know, Felix, and I felt bad about that, but it was the way it was. It was just business."

Felix stared at her in disbelief. Where the heck was her heart, he asked. Did she even have one? Gloria noticed his expression. She felt the need to explain herself further.

"Felix, there's business and there's personal," she said with the slow tempo of the lectures she had often given him at the office. "This was business, cut and dried. If you want to be successful you'll need to learn to separate the two."

"Gloria, I won't be taking any leaf out of your book on my climb to the top, I assure you."

"Felix, Jesus, you really bear a grudge against me, don't you?"

Felix said nothing. Perhaps he should just let bygones be bygones. All he saw before him now was an ugly little person trying to fill his head with doubt about his job and the people he worked for, not to mention trying to get him to take risks that could get him dismissed. Things only got good for him there after she was out of his way, he reminded himself. Why bother to drag anything up?

"If it means anything," Gloria then said, drawing on her cigarette, "it was Morgan that objected to you being paid for that day. That was typical of him, the cheapskate. I tried to reason with him, but as far as he was concerned you were on his time. You were his, basically. Deep down, that's all he sees. Not much point arguing with him, but I tried. And Steven backed him up, just so you know."

Felix had ceased to believe a word coming out her mouth. In his mind, she was the one that took his money that day. For all he knew, maybe she fiddled it some way so she could put the money in her own pocket. She could disparage the Wilhelms, even Steven, all she wanted. He was starting to get impatient with the conversation, anxious to leave and be home with Sarah. But he couldn't resist going after one last ounce of satisfaction.

"Did you ever wonder why I had to be out that day," he asked her. "It was May 25th, by the way."

"Right, right, that was the date," Gloria recalled. "I figured it had something to do with it being your birthday. I knew it was the 25th from your records. I thought at the time you should have told me why, I mean you had just started, but I didn't want to be seen digging around in your personal affairs."

"Well, I'll be happy to tell you the reason now."

Gloria shrugged.

"It had nothing to do with my birthday," Felix continued. His voice was calm. "That was just a coincidence. I was helping with the annual pantomime performance at St. Myrtle's orphanage on the north side of town. I was working the lights. Volunteer work, you know. They asked me to do it."

As the words left his lips the pain he held inside about that day began to escape from his heart, like air from a balloon with a tiny puncture hole. He saw a flicker of reaction in Gloria's eyebrows, though it was slight.

"That's nice," she said.

"Do you know of St. Myrtle's?" he asked, and then, before she could continue, "Of course you do. I doubt there's an orphanage in this town that you don't know about."



"Who told you?" she asked, quietly.

"Oh, word gets around. Anyway, I was told you didn't make a secret of it."

Gloria said nothing.

"You probably know as well as anyone how strange it is to have a school pantomime and no parents show up. That's why they hold them during the day. It doesn't make a difference what time they do it."

He could see her eyes had become moist, but not enough for a tear, not by a long shot.

"Well, I got to know where all the orphanages in this town are too," Felix said. "And I got to know St. Myrtle's very well, from the inside."

He stopped speaking. After a short while Gloria said, "I had no idea."

"No you didn't. You're too strapped into your own survival vehicle to see anyone else's."

Gloria's face looked very sad. Her eyes were fixed on the table between them. She no longer made any attempt to make eye contact.

"Gloria, we all make choices. I don't know how bad you had it, but I find it hard to excuse you for the way you turned out. But now I think I can forgive you for the way you treated me. That's something I'm doing for me."

He reached into his wallet and pulled out some money. Gloria saw this and spoke up. "No, I'll take care of the coffees. After all, I asked to meet you."

Felix put the money on the table anyway, and stood up. "I'm not going to help you," he told her.

"Felix, please. I don't know who else to turn to."

She reached into her pocket and took out a piece of paper. "Here. It's my phone number. Please, think about it."

Felix didn't take the number. "Gloria, it's business. Nothing personal."

Then he left.

## CHAPTER SIX

It was a hot and humid day and many in the office were complaining. It was unusually warm for early September, a time when everything starts to cool off as the long slide into winter begins. The heat didn't bother Felix as it did some of the others, especially Mrs. Wilhelm, who had called the facilities management office numerous times to have something done about the air conditioning. Their response was that the Indian summer had placed a great strain on them. They were understaffed. Their temporary workers had already been sent home as of the end of August and would not be brought back until the heating needed to be maintained, starting in November. They promised to have someone come up as soon as possible.

Felix was in Steven's office, showing him some of his plans for their website. The new development company that Felix contracted had provided an online staging site for Steven to view the progress of their work. Steven's desk was elevated on a platform, one foot off the ground. Steven's mother had designed his office. Felix sat opposite him, looking up. It was impossible for him to see Steven's computer screen. Instead, he took notes. Felix hated doing so, but the Wilhelms did not like it when one of the staff came to a meeting without a notepad. It minimized the risk that one of their many directives would go unheeded.

Felix did his best to determine which webpage Steven was viewing in any given moment. It wasn't easy to do, with Steven also fielding calls, reading and writing emails and sending instant messages all the while. Felix wondered why Steven didn't invite him around to his side of the desk so they could both see the same thing. Perhaps it was because Steven did not

want him to see sensitive company information. Or perhaps it was due to his boss's desire to keep him at a distance, for whatever reason.

Steven liked what he saw, for the most part. But good was never good enough for Steven. He clicked aggressively from page to page, asking questions and, sometimes without waiting for an answer, making numerous suggestions. He was displaying the intense side of his personality that Colleen Ryan had referred to, the side that made working with him a challenge. During these episodes his eyes widened and he would stare unblinking at Felix for long moments as he spoke. This made Felix want to take his notepad and put it over his head for shelter.

Every so often throughout the meeting Steven would make one of his usual complaints about the inadequacies of the company. We should be doing this, he would say, we should be doing that. He had a remarkable talent for being able to project blame onto the enterprise as a whole, not singling out anyone in particular for rebuke, as if the situation were not entirely under his control. As if he had didn't have the power to order immediate changes. Felix was patient with these idiosyncrasies, putting it down to the cost of working more closely with successful and powerful personalities. It was a valuable learning experience, he told himself.

As Steven continued to review the proposed website, Felix could tell their brainstorming days were over. He now had to add meat to the bones of his ideas, in Steven's eyes, and the website was the first step in that direction. Their meetings may not be so uplifting from now on. Felix was comfortable with this. He felt it was an honest approach to work, and to life itself, to walk the talk. It was like delivering on a promise. It was an honorable way to conduct oneself, and justified his paycheck, at least to himself. And with Gloria's dominant and stifling presence becoming more and more a thing of the past his enthusiasm for his work was at its highest point since joining the company. Sarah's pregnancy was proceeding along nicely too, although Felix had yet to mention it to the Wilhelms. He now planned to do so, in time. Perhaps he might yet see out another company picnic.

It was at this meeting that Steven brought up the new export opportunity. He turned away from the computer to tell Felix about it. The company was well along in its efforts to secure a contract with a foreign buyer. They had never shipped overseas before, Steven said, so this presented a new and interesting situation.

"It's exciting!" he exclaimed.

Felix felt privileged that Steven was sharing this with him. "How much volume are we talking about?" he asked.

"A lot," answered Steven. "Maybe five thousand cases a month."

"Wow.. and when do you expect it to happen?"

"Well, that's the thing," said Steven. "We're still in negotiations. The buyer works through an agent at the port. We thought things were going pretty well until recently, when we hit a snag over volume. But it's nothing we haven't been through before."

"Now, what we need is to send someone to the port to talk with the agent. That's the way Morgan has always conducted business, face-to-face, the old fashioned way. But he doesn't want to go himself, because he doesn't want the buyer to get the upper hand. Believe me, Morgan knows his stuff in these matters."

"The problem is we used to send Silvestri out for these things, but we don't have her anymore. She was good at figuring out the logistics and that sort of stuff, making sure our costs were always factored in to the price. And now we also have to consider where export tariffs and whatnot come into it, because that will also influence the price we can sell at."

"So I've talked this over with Morgan and Sandra and I've recommended that you take the trip to the port. I know it's outside your bailiwick but it's only to keep the relationship healthy as we proceed with the deal making."

Felix didn't know how to react. "What specifically do you need me to do there?" he asked.

"Oh, just to reassure the agent that we are fully committed to getting our product into the hands of the buyer, that kind of thing, and to look into the docks, to see if it can handle our containers."

Felix was trying hard to hide that he was unsure of himself. "What about the negotiations themselves? Do you see me working out the deal too?"

"Don't worry," replied Steve, reassuringly, "Morgan and I will be the ones to cut the final deal. You just have to keep us apprised of everything as it develops."

Steven saw some lingering hesitation in Felix's face. "Here's a tip," he continued, "there's such a thing as the power of limited authority. You try to get the best deal for us, but whenever it isn't going where you want it, you just have to say that we won't go for it, but you tell them you need to bring us back something we will accept."

Felix was still hesitant. But he had no choice. They could stretch him any which way they chose. He decided to look on the bright side. They believed he was up to the task or they wouldn't have picked him, he told himself. And it was the kind of scenario where he was sure to pick up a few tips on life, some good experience, things that would stand him in good stead some other time. His confidence grew. He could take care of the situation at the port, though he would have to figure out how to slot it in with all his other responsibilities.

"Here," said Steven as Felix got up to leave, "here's Charlie's number, he's the agent. Give him a call."

By now the sound of the woman, sometimes singing her lullaby, sometimes talking, had formed such a backdrop to Felix's conscious thoughts that it had ceased to unnerve or strike fear in him. He seldom heard her anyway, though it could be any time and he could be anywhere. In addition, and much more faintly, he sometimes heard the sounds of other voices, of women also, and of men and children. He began to become more familiar with the voice of one man and one child, along with the woman who sang the lullaby, above all the others. There were other sounds too, of trains and of cars and of what he thought was music.

He could never make out any words from the conversations or songs he heard, not for certain, no matter how much he strained his ears to listen. For he heard everything as muffled, as if there were thick walls between him and them.

Ever so often he would tell all this to Sarah. She would reassure him there was nothing to be worried about. If you don't trust me on anything else, she would tell him, trust me on this. And he did. Other than the bizarre lost day at the swimming pool the world of these voices and sounds seemed entirely separated from his, and he was content with that. And sometimes the voice of the woman was as soothing to him as that of Sarah herself.

One night he lay awake, half paying attention to the voices and other noises for which he had no explanation. He felt at peace. He looked back on his childhood without parents, without brothers or sisters, without a family to call his own. He was not unhappy nor miserable that this had been his life. He had not known anything else and what you never had, they say, you don't miss. He was not envious of those with families. He had not suffered at the hands of his guardians, nor had he been abused. On the contrary, there were those at St. Myrtle's for whom he had the fondest affection, people he still stayed close with many years after he had reached adulthood and ventured out on his own. If anything, the people that took care of him throughout his childhood made him feel loved, though they were hard pressed to make him feel particularly special above all the other orphans he shared them with.

There were bad times for sure, times of uncertainty and doubt, times of fear. There were unsavory characters along the way too. But no one's life was without these storm clouds, he consoled himself. He refused to allow himself to wallow in self-pity just because he was an orphan.

A happiness swelled inside him as he thought of the baby that Sarah carried. This baby would have a family to call its own, he told himself, and a mother who would make it feel the most wanted and extraordinary child in the whole world. And he realized for the millionth time

how very lucky he was too, to have her in his life. Maybe if his life had not been as it had been he might never have know her, he thought.

He believed that every event of one's life was crafted by the things preceding it. That the smallest happening, a train being two minutes behind schedule, say, could cause you to see or not see something, to hear or not hear something, to meet or not meet someone, to be in or avoid an accident, and your life would then travel on whichever track opened up before it.

This notion of his did not conflict with his belief in God. His faith was instilled in him as a child at St. Myrtle's and though he went through several periods where he tried to shake free of it, try as he might, he couldn't. God was always there, in the background, and only rarely did Felix place him at the front, except in moments of extreme fear when he found himself crying out for help. That God always answered these rare prayers of his at such moments was as much an underpinning of his faith as the influence St. Myrtle's had on his life at an early age. In fact, he viewed God as the orchestrator of his life. God determined the moment the train arrived.

Felix often wondered how God ever did find the time to give him attention, what with all the others in the world to be attending to, all more worthy than he. God was all powerful and could do anything so it must be possible. Felix did not view God as someone indifferent to him. He was willing to accept that God wanted good things for him, and he never blamed God for any mishaps or misfortunes that befell him

But he never thought of God as a God of love. Somehow his time at St. Myrtle's had not given him a sense of that. It may have been a case of bad teachers, just as some students are weak in math or reading because they had a poor instructor, or an endless stream of substitute teachers, during the course of a crucial elementary school grade. Felix did not excel in his religious instruction because his teachers failed to inspire him. Perhaps they didn't have the talent to do so, or maybe it was too hard to tell motherless children that while they weren't going to get their full complement of cuddles in this life, God would be waiting to make up for it in heaven, provided they didn't murder anyone or do similarly awful things in the meantime.

No, this class came later, from Sarah. By then he was a little long in the tooth to learn its lesson well. An adult often finds it hard to learn a new language, in contrast to a child, who picks it up right away. The adult clumsily stumbles in and out of their mother tongue, while a child can not only speak but also think fluidly in both languages, and in more than two if need be. By the time Sarah told him of God's love his emotional wiring was etched in him and he found it hard to adapt his core beliefs. Among those beliefs was one that God did not create a level-playing field upon which He dropped all his little creations, and it was this belief that rankled him.

The question now was not whether Felix understood what Sarah was telling him but whether he really believed deep down that God loved him. But like all good teachers Sarah repeated the message at every opportunity.

He had met her by chance, of course, like all first meetings, but it was as close to certain as it could get that he would never have found her at all had it not been for his orphan past. One day he was in need of a particular form he had to file with the government. It was somehow related to Social Security benefits, but only applied to former wards of the state, which he was to some degree, since St. Myrtle's received government assistance. He was in his thirties when it became necessary to make such a filing and with it his retirement benefits would improve. He was informed of it through a letter from St. Myrtle's. They never sent him the form, however, which would have made it easier for him. He could have sent away for it but he was never confident he would get a satisfactory response from a government agency. They would probably send him the wrong form, if anything. And it was still several years before these forms could be downloaded on demand from the web. He was determined to make sure this form got filed properly so he made the time to take a trip to his local Social Security office.

Once there, the first clerk he spoke to was unaware of the form he needed but sent him to the third floor. There he was routed to a department that handled exceptional benefit variations

like his, although the person he spoke to at that point was also unaware of the form. Upon locating this department, he found himself on a section of the third floor without a general reception area. He wandered into a large maze of cubicles. He saw people working at their desks as he strolled. People passed him by, seeming not to notice him or be aware that he was not a co-worker. Whatever frustration he had begun to feel in his quest left him. He thought it interesting that he could meander about at will. He was looking for the right person to approach, someone with a hint of invitation in their face.

He turned a corner and found himself in a short corridor enclosed by cubicle walls. At the end of this corridor was an office door. None of the cubicles opened out onto to this corridor, leaving the office in a strange isolation. It was an odd arrangement of work space, he thought, if not downright badly designed. It may have come about during a quick departmental transition, perhaps, when things were done in a rush. It hardly mattered to Felix.

The office looked welcoming, its door slightly ajar. He stepped inside, pushing the door gently, without knocking. In an instant he felt the peace of a place far from a city and his ears were soothed by the sudden and total absence of sound. A woman sat with a telephone to her ear. Soon he would learn her name. She looked at Felix, not yet speaking. He took a seat in a chair in front of her desk. He did not feel awkward and she did not seem surprised to see him. Not wishing to appear too familiar he stayed sitting upright in the chair, but he couldn't help but notice how at-home he felt. Finally she spoke.

"You should do that," she said to the person on the phone. Her voice was soft. "Why not call me back in a couple of days and let me know how you get on. OK. Thank you. Goodbye."

She hung up. Then she spoke to Felix.

"What can I help you with, sir?"

"Well, I'm not sure you can, I'm hoping you can," Felix responded. "I came here to get my hands on a particular form I need, but I can't seem to figure out who I need to speak with to get it."

"Which form is it?" she asked. "And I'll see if I can get it for you."

Felix reached into his pocket and took out the letter from St. Myrtle's.

"It's form number GB-659," he said, reading from the document. "It says here it's the 'Exceptional Benefits Variation Form - Schedule C', if that's any help."

"Yes, I know the one you seek. Stay here and I'll get it for you."

She got up and left. Felix sat and waited. Very soon after, she returned with some papers.

"You're in luck," she said. "I handle most of these cases. I brought you a few copies of the form, just in case you needed extras."

"Thank you." He always messed up something the first time he filled out a form, he thought. And if anyone else he knew from his St. Myrtle days needed one, he could pass it along.

She sat down and placed one of the forms in front of Felix. As she spoke she marked and circled various sections of it. "You need to fill this out, this, this, and this. You have to sign here, and here, and when you're done you send it to this address on the back." She flipped the page over and circled the address.

"Why, thank you." said Felix. "You've been really helpful. Looks like I found the right person."

She looked up and smiled at him. "Yes, it looks like you did," she said. "Here, my name is Sarah and here's my direct number, if you need any more help with this." She wrote this on a folder. Then she placed the form she had written on, and the additional copies, in the folder and handed it all to him.

Felix got up and left. He didn't tell her his name, or shake her hand. He just thanked her one more time. He felt her watching him as he walked out her door.

Miraculously he did not get lost on his way out of the building. As he made his way home he could not deny how attracted he had felt to Sarah. She was beautiful, but it was more than that. He just wanted to be in her company, to be sitting beside her, to be listening to her

voice. Then he convinced himself that she was too good to be true. He hadn't seen a ring on her finger, but she must be married. How could someone like her not be spoken for?

That night he filled out the form and the next day he sent it. Several weeks passed. Now and then he thought of Sarah. He kept the folder that had her name and number. One afternoon he plucked up courage and called her. I've nothing to lose, he told himself. He introduced himself and asked her if she remembered him. She said she did. Then he asked her to lunch. She accepted. Later she told him it was good he had asked her to lunch. If he had asked her to dinner it would have been too forward of him and she would have declined. He could never tell if she was joking.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The trip to the port to meet the agent posed numerous problems for Felix. He had to find a way to juggle his other projects to fit it into his schedule. And he had to figure out how those other projects would be looked after while he was gone, and who would look after them. There were a couple of people he could tap to help him out with that. He had to make sure too he was properly prepared for the trip and that he had everything with him that he needed when he traveled. He worked hard to be ready. Felix saw the trip as a test of his worth to the Wilhelms and was determined not to fail.

He had picked himself up a laptop just for the trip. With Gloria no longer around, it was so much easier to do a simple thing like purchasing and expensing something he needed to better do his job. It had been such a rigmarole to get anything like that done when she was there, especially before he began to work more closely with Steven. To begin with, there would be the painful experience of requesting it from her. Whatever the outcome she would find a way to put him down when he approached her. Then if she didn't dismiss the request immediately, or sit on it so long that it didn't matter anymore, she would be sure to add some irritating twist to it, such as the features it should have or how much should be spent, as if Felix were incapable of determining this himself. Then she might decide not to tell him of this stipulation until he had gone through the work of sourcing the laptop he wanted. Then she was sure to come around later anyway, probably after he had placed the order, and tell him that there had been a change in what *she* wanted. And to round it all off she would bring the laptop vendor's invoice back to him, after he had submitted it to the accounts payable clerk, and question him about every line on it before she would find it in her heart to release a payment. The vendor would be



characterized as a clever thief, a tactic of hers that always ended up straining his relationships with his vendors. He knew that this was how it would work because that's exactly how it played out when he was told to get a laptop for Steven. The entire experience left him exhausted. Now instead he was enjoying the vacuum that her vacant office created. The Wilhelms were sure to be looking to replace her, but Felix could not imagine them finding anyone as stifling as Gloria.

Foremost among the issues Felix did have to confront in planning the trip was the headache of actually getting there. A trip to the port was not trivial. No train went there directly. He would have to journey several hours north and then several more southwest, with perhaps an overnight stopover between trains. By road it was an eight hour trip. Buses did go directly but made so many stops along the way that those eight hours could stretch to twelve. Felix knew the option of traveling by car would give him maximum flexibility. After all, he would have to make his way around the port city once he got there. The trouble was that his own car was not in any shape to make a long road trip, and he didn't want to deprive Sarah of it for the time he would be gone, which was looking more and more like three whole days.

He would have to find a car somehow. He wasn't surprised to learn the company had none to offer for such situations. He thought about asking Steven. Felix believed he should be able to ask as much, but Steven was able to divorce himself well from the cumbersome details of any project. Legend had it that Steven was once heard to ask that he not be brought problems, only solutions. Felix felt that if he were to raise the issue of the car with Steven it would only irritate him. Or it would taint Felix as a problem bringer. He decided instead to ask Marty Ostler for help. He was relieved to learn that Marty had a spare car and was willing to lend it to him.

It was late September and the weather continued to be unseasonably hot when Felix made the trip to the port. The forecast did not yet call for a change. If anything there would be heavy thundershowers. Sarah was in her second trimester and was already beginning to show. She looked radiant. According to the doctor everything was going well. Felix was grateful that her pregnancy was proceeding so smoothly since the demands of his job were increasing. A difficult pregnancy would be very stressful. They both felt comfortable that he would be away for a few days, or rather Felix felt comfortable. Sarah hardly seemed to notice.

Marty had driven his spare car to work the day before so Felix could have it, and taken the train home himself. Felix had checked the oil and water, and the tire pressure, and had filled the tank with gas. He bought a map of the port city and threw it in the glove compartment. His plan was to have two days for travel and one for meetings and observations. He set off early that Wednesday morning. It was a straight run west along the highway and he planned to arrive in the mid to late afternoon. This would give him time to find a hotel and check in well in time to have something to eat and get a good night's rest. Before he left Sarah hugged him tightly and ran her fingers through his hair. Don't be afraid, she told him, everything will be fine.

He had never been to the port before, which was odd, he thought, since it was the other big city in the state. He never had reason to, he reckoned. He had met people from the port many times because they often came to live and work in his city. It rarely happened the other way around.

The traffic on the highway was light in both directions, which surprised him. Normally he would expect a legion of trucks going back and forth from the port. The reports on the radio were forever declaring a snarl-up, with everything backed-up for miles. But not this morning. The road ahead continued to look clear for miles as he drove. The sun was behind him and the day had not yet warmed up so he didn't feel hot in Marty's car.

It was a small car but it was comfortable. He had placed his suitcase and laptop on the back seat. The spare tire took up too much room in the trunk to fit much else. While he drove he took in the sights and sounds of the road, the small hills that surrounded him, and the rivers he crossed. There was plenty of farmland and livestock to see, cows and sheep, horses, fields of wheat and barely. There were small towns to pass through, names he had often heard, yet places

he had never seen before, with church steeples and town clocks. Every so often a large truck would trundle past him in the lane to his left, its driver letting it run like an unbridled horse along a path for once not mired in metal or choked with dull exhaust.

Felix kept below the speed limit knowing that every few miles a state trooper lurked in the bushes along the side of road, like a crocodile lying in wait of its prey, its eyes peeping above the surface of a murky swamp. Sure enough, as he traveled further and further from home, he began to see cars getting pulled over with increasing frequency. He didn't mind having to hold back on his speed. The eight hours he had predicted for the trip had taken into consideration the normal traffic volume for the route. It was now obvious that he would arrive even sooner than he had expected and, about halfway to the port, he allowed himself a stop at a roadside luncheonette to eat and freshen up. It was 11 a.m. The heat of the day was beginning to catch up to him.

He was struck by the different flavor of the establishment, even from the outside, from what he was used to. To begin with, there weren't any roadside luncheonette's he could think of in his own city, mostly diners that stayed open late, if not all night, though that was just a different name for essentially the same thing, a place where he could grab a quick bite when he didn't want to spend the money or the time dining at a white tablecloth restaurant. The differences lay more in the colors and lettering of the sign outside and the painted wooden notices hanging in the windows, which at one time must have made it seem like a tasteful and inviting place to eat. The paint had faded now from when it was first splashed on, all bright and glossy, and the fonts used were ones he sometimes noticed on his laptop among the hundreds loaded with his word processing software. There was something old and rundown about the place. When he went inside things were no newer. Some flies danced close to a ceiling fan. He could hear their faint buzz, zoning in and out of his ears. There were tables and chairs and a counter at which he could sit. The cash register was an old mechanical type.

There were some people there, some at the counter, some seated at the tables. They didn't have the look of a traveler as he did. Felix assumed they were locals. They were mostly elderly anyway, and men for the most part. From their garb Felix thought they might be local farmers, retired probably, or as retired as farmers get. If they weren't still wrestling with the land they were at least fidgeting with it. They wore dungarees and cotton shirts. He sat up at the counter. No one seemed to notice him, except the girl behind the counter, who wiped away the crumbs that were in front of him with a damp cloth and put down a glass of water, a knife and fork, and a napkin, with a brief smile, not saying a word. She did all this so quickly and efficiently it was as if she were juggling these objects. He noticed the knife blade was dulled by the soap of being washed a thousand times and, lying on the counter with one side of its blade facing upward, could no longer give a clear reflection of the ceiling fan that turned above him. He wondered how clean it was, really, and how safe it was to run it through his food. And he wondered how safe the food was there, but it hardly mattered. He couldn't remember his whole life having a bad tummy ache or a bout of food poisoning. He believed himself to have a stomach of iron, one that could handle anything he ate, if he were hungry enough.

The girl handed him a menu. Like the wooden signs the colors on it had faded. There was a card, held by a paperclip, which listed the special dish for the day, handwritten neatly in red ink. Felix never paid any attention to the specials when he ate out, always suspicious it was old food that they were trying to flog. But the card looked like the newest and brightest thing in the entire luncheonette and drew his eye. It told of a simple meat sandwich with some fries. That suited him just fine so he beckoned the girl and ordered it, along with a cup of coffee to drink while he waited.

When the coffee arrived, delivered as swiftly and flawlessly by the girl as when she had set up his place at the counter, it smelled rich and intoxicating. As he tasted it his head swam for an instant and any tension he had in the muscles of his temples left him. They have good coffee in this region, he said to himself. He sat and sipped, inhaling the warm air above the surface of

the coffee each time he raised the cup to his lips, prolonging the sensation as long as he could before his system learned to resist the dosage. Between moments thinking about the task ahead of him, picturing the harbor at the port city, and Charlie's face, for which he had not seen a photograph, he listened to the talk coming from the men sitting down from him at the counter. They spoke in low growly mumbles, their voices coming from deep within leathery throats, cured by years of tobacco smoke. One or two of the men he could hear more clearly than the others and from them he could follow the path of their conversation. They had much to say about the local economy and politics. Felix imagined that this was their weekly, or maybe daily, get-together, their habit. No one among them had ever said outright that this was a regularly scheduled event, he guessed, it just evolved as such. Sometimes they would all show up, he imagined, but invariably one or two would not make it on any given day.

As a child Felix had not known a grandfather. His contact with old men was rare. He had been shown a book once about a wise old man and from then on he thought all old men were wise. When he heard them speak he assumed they were saying wise things. To a child's ears the words they used were hard to understand, grown-up words, and it was easy for him to see them as wise. Even now, as an adult who could tell that often old men said things that were not wise, that were usually just ordinary statements that anyone could make, he still felt they had wisdom and dispensed it at their leisure.

His sandwich arrived as he finished his coffee. The meat was well-done, as he had requested. He ate quickly, keen now to continue on his way. The day was getting warmer and could make for discomfort. He was chewing vigorously when he heard one of the men say that the weather would help the crops in the area. He had to comment.

"Excuse me," he said, still with food in his mouth, and addressing the man with his back to him, the nearest one to him, "begging your pardon, did you just say the weather was good for the crops right now?"

The man twisted his body to take a look at Felix. He took a moment before he spoke. Felix noticed his eyes were a light green, a color so clear it stood out in his mind just as the red ink had done.

"Pretty much, that's what I said," the man said, half speaking over his shoulder.

The other men were no longer speaking. Felix began to wish he hadn't opened his mouth, but his question had jumped right out of him before he had a chance to catch it by the tail. The effect of the coffee had caused him to dispense with his normal guardedness. With the man still looking at him, and no one else contributing, he felt he had to say something by way of explanation for his question.

"Well, what I mean is, wouldn't warm weather this time of year, so late into the fall, cause problems?" Felix asked.

"What kind of problem are you talking about, mister?"

"I mean," continued Felix, trying to find the words to make his point and put it to bed so he could leave, "won't that throw off the annual crop cycle or something? Maybe these crops, these plants, these seedlings or whatever, will think it's still summer and won't prepare properly for the winter, or the land won't store up enough water or something."

"I still don't quite get you, son," the old man interjected.

"OK, I'm not being very clear. It's just that not having the seasons come around as they usually do is bound to have some kind of effect, a destabilization if you will, on Mother Nature."

"Still not quite sure I understand what you're trying to say," the old man said, "but it's clear to me that you're no farmer, for one thing." A couple of the other men chuckled, albeit politely. The man smiled. "And as for the weather, there's nothing unusual about the weather around here for this time of year."

"We're almost into October, and it feels like July, and this is normal?" Felix wasn't sure he had heard correctly. He was barely a couple of hundred miles from home, not in the Sahara.

"That's right, son."

"OK," said Felix, giving up on the entire matter, "if you say so. Well, I'll just be on my way then. Thanks for enlightening me about the climate around here." He threw several dollars on the counter, more than enough to cover the check and a good tip, and gathered up to leave. He went into the restroom. As he washed his hands he looked in the mirror. The color of his own eyes was still there, it hadn't started to fade. As he passed the men at the counter again on his way out he noticed the man he had spoken to, the one with the green eyes, was looking at him.

"Where you coming from anyway?" the man asked Felix.

Felix stopped and told him.

"I figured as much," the man said.

"How so?"

"By the size of the tip you left Annie." The money was still on the counter. "Folks from your town are very free and easy with their earnings, must be because of all the cash to made there."

The men laughed, and it brought a smile to Felix's face.

"I'm not sure I see all that much cash myself," Felix told them. "But you have to take care of people. And you can't say Annie doesn't do a good job." From where she was standing behind the counter, Annie looked up and smiled shyly.

"I figured something else about you too, mister," the man continued. "And I hope you don't mind me saying so."

"No, go ahead," Felix answered, unsuspecting.

"Well, sometimes I get myself into a little bother when I open my mouth like this, poking my nose into the business of others, but it just comes to me sometimes." Some of the other men nodded knowingly.

"That's fine," said Felix, his curiosity increasing, "what is it that you see?"

"I see someone that doesn't really have any roots, nothing that binds him, gives him an anchor, not even his own hometown. Like you don't come from anywhere."

Felix was silent. Some of the other men started to shift uncomfortably on their seats.

"I don't mean to shock you, boy, but I've seen a thing or two in my time. I have eighteen grandchildren. I'm mighty close to having great-grandchildren too. I bet you never knew your own grandpap, boy?"

"No, you're right, I didn't," Felix answered, after a moment.

Again the man with the green eyes spoke. "I can tell you this though. You might not be from any place but you sure are headed somewhere."

Felix looked away from the men, towards the door of the luncheonette. "Well, if that's the case, since you know so much," he said, "I guess I should be on my way then, to wherever it is I'm supposed to be going." Then looking back at the man with the green eyes and smiling he said, "I bid you all a pleasant day."

He started walking towards the door. He could feel their eyes on him as he left. He wasn't troubled by what the man had said. Rather, he was fascinated and puzzled by it. And he was equally baffled by the man's opinion on the weather. As he opened the door to leave, and the full heat of day hit him, he heard the bells of the cash register. Annie was ringing up his money.

The port city was famous, historically, for a siege and a naval battle that accompanied it during the first war. The siege was said to have brought out the true mettle of the city's inhabitants. They had resisted stubbornly for months, long after an adequate food supply had run out and they had been reduced to eating dog meat. They held on until their own ships and soldiers were able to break through, despite being on their last legs. As Felix drove through the city on his way to the harbor he saw numerous monuments, great statues of military men atop horses, pointing their swords to the heavens. Along the water he could see the remnants of defense fortifications, preserved and restored now for tourism purposes.

That was long ago, Felix thought. Here, in the presence of such history, he felt little or no connection between the past and the present. The faces he saw around him as he drove, and the sounds, were squarely in the here and now. In the one hundred or more years since the great siege the ethnic composition of the city had changed dramatically, with many immigrants arriving from new lands. He doubted if these new people of the present would be able to mount such a resistance to that enemy, since it wasn't their enemy.

He was more concerned with finding a suitable hotel in which to spend the night. He had arrived a full two hours ahead of schedule due to the lack of traffic. He was used to getting the timing exactly right but was pleased that the error in his prediction was a positive one. He was early.

As he had expected there were several hotels to choose from close to the harbor. Some he had to ignore. He finally settled on one that seemed within a price range that the company would reimburse without undue heartache. There was a sign outside for vacancies. He parked and went inside. The person at the reception desk was very helpful, sending someone out to his car to get his suitcase. His accent was very different to Felix's, even though they both lived in the same state. The port and his own city were two very different worlds. The port looked west to the sea while his town looked east to the other big cities further inland. Two towns that were two brothers, looking in opposite directions.

Very soon he found himself on the bed in his room, resting his eyes after staring at the road for so many hours. It was a nice room, with a deep bathtub, but he hardly had much time to spend there. He had called Sarah to tell her he had arrived safely. A little later he went to eat in the hotel restaurant. After that he checked his email with his laptop, and his voicemail. He called Sarah again to say goodnight. Finally he took a nice long bath before turning in.

Before he fell asleep he thought about Gloria. Had she found another job? How was she coping? She was sure to survive, he said to himself, fueled by her own misery, and her misguided belief that she was wronged. Was she a little crazy? Did she really think he would help her, that time that they had met? He never mentioned his contact with Gloria to anyone, not even to Marty Ostler, nor Sarah. He wondered if she had approached anyone else, citing that document she spoke of. Not likely, he thought, since he was the only one outside of the Wilhelms who could access everything on the company network. Then it occurred to him that he was in a powerful position, but he didn't dwell on it.

Charlie had just one hand, his left. In place of the missing one there was a hook, the kind that Felix remembered seeing in pictures of pirates from long ago. He held it out for Felix to shake. Felix was forced to gingerly grip the blunt curved blade of the hook for a brief instant, with the thumb and index finger of his right hand, as it moved up and down. In an age when there were so many other devices available to replace body parts such as hands, Felix thought it unusual to see something so old-fashioned at the end of a man's arm.

Felix reckoned Charlie was about twenty years older than him. There were other things too about Charlie that reminded Felix of a buccaneer. There was a scar that started on his forehead and traveled straight down through his right eyebrow, skipped across the eye itself, before it showed up again on his right cheek for another inch or so. An eye patch would look quite fashionable with it, Felix mused, along with the hook. And there was the bottle of rum on his desk.

Charlie reached into a drawer in his desk and pulled out two glasses. He started pouring from the bottle into one of them. It was 9 a.m.

"No thank you," said Felix, before Charlie could get to the second glass.

"Suit yourself," Charlie said. He put the bottle down and drank from his own glass.

Felix took a look around Charlie's office. It was located by the harbor, needless to say, but Felix was surprised to find that it was a pre-fabricated hut, because it looked as if Charlie had been working out of it for years. On the walls there were several old framed drawings of ships, ones with sails and rigging, along with a couple of pictures of ancient maps of ocean trading

routes. His desk was made of darkly stained wood, as was every other piece of furniture and fixture in his office; the chairs, the doors, the wall and ceiling panels and the bookshelves. The only things Felix saw that looked remotely like being from a modern office were Charlie's phone, his answering machine and his fax machine, along with some cheap ink pens and notepads. There was a perch for a parrot, but no parrot.

"Yeah, the parrot's gone," said Charlie, noticing Felix's curious gaze. "Died about a year ago. Something he ate, I think. Anyway he was on in years for a parrot, so it may have just been old age."

"How old was he?" asked Felix.

"I had him twenty five years. It's not easy to find the right parrot to replace him."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Don't be," Charlie retorted, "he was just a parrot. He didn't even talk. He made some kind of chirping sound, but not very often. I liked him because he was quiet most of the time. I get a little jumpy sometimes if I don't have peace and tranquility."

"I see, well I hope you do find another, if that's what you want."

Charlie took another drink from his glass. He seemed lost in thought for a moment, looking at the empty perch. Thinking about parrots, Felix supposed. Then he looked at Felix.

"So, did you have trouble getting here?" he asked Felix.

"No, none. I have this street map for the city and the harbor. Turns out it's very accurate. Took me right to your door."

"Street map, eh?" said Charlie. "I like maps myself, but maritime ones. It's a lot harder to make use of a map out at sea. There are no signposts." He chuckled at his own humor before he continued. "No, you need all your instruments to be finely tuned and in good working order on a sea-faring vessel. And a clear sky, by day and night, doesn't hurt."

He took another drink from his glass.

"I was lost once for a week way up in the northern seas, just because I couldn't get a reading from the stars. The clouds just hung there for days, can you believe it?"

Charlie paused and then added, "Well my sailing days are well behind me now. As for street maps, I don't know if I could even use one. I've never had reason to. This is the only town I've ever been in, outside of a thousand other harbors. Born and bred here I am. My people go back here for over two hundred years."

"Back before the siege," Felix remarked.

Charlie appeared not to hear this. Instead he took one long drink of rum from his glass to finish it. Then he took both glasses and put them back in his desk drawer. Felix wondered if the glasses ever got washed and felt a little better about turning down Charlie's offer of a drink.

"And so to the business at hand," Charlie said, apparently unaware of the irony. "Why did you want to come all the way out here to see me? It's nothing we couldn't have done over the phone, I'm sure."

"Well, that's true," replied Felix. "But since we've never exported our product before, the Wilhelms thought it best if I came out personally to make sure everything is well-planned."

"And how come Morgan Wilhelm didn't come himself?"

"I understand that making a trip at this time conflicted with his schedule. He's a busy man, you know."

"It's a busy world for all of us," Charlie said.

"I'm sure Mr. Wilhelm was eager to come and meet you in person," said Felix, knowing well that this was not the truth, since he had been sent as a go-between in the negotiations. In reality he was an agent to counteract the buyer's agent. What he heard next caught him off guard, however.

"Yes, I'm sure old Morgan Wilhelm was just dying to hop on the highway and come make my acquaintance. Trouble is he already has. We've done business on and off over many years. I bet they didn't tell you that!"

Felix felt compromised. Steven had not mentioned any of this. It was clear now that Charlie had him figured from the beginning.

"Of course," Charlie continued, "this is the first time I've helped him get business overseas. We've only done domestic stuff before."

Whatever grand notion Felix had about his importance in the process of securing the new business was now dispelled. Though he tried to hide his dismay, Charlie was quick to detect it.

"Don't worry about it, kid," he said. "The Wilhelms deliver and I make sure we all get paid. That's why we keep coming back to each other. There isn't much else to it. The rest, looking for the point where it all balances, where we decide what it's worth to everyone, is just details."

Then Charlie stood up. "Come on. Let's take a drive. I'll show you around this historic harbor of ours."

Charlie's idea of a guided tour of the harbor did not include any aspects of the port's cherished history. He was more interested in boasting about the capabilities of moving tonnage in and out of it, or throughput as he called it. As they drove along several miles of waterfront he delighted in mentioning the considerable capabilities of the harbor in this regard.

"Here we have the third longest loading dock in the country," he said. "We also have the longest. That's down a ways. You'll see it. And you see this warehouse on the left. More wheat gets stored here prior to export than from any other facility on this coast."

He waved his hook around as he held the steering wheel with his hand. The car's shift stick was fitted with a neat little ring-shaped device to allow him to slip on his hook when he wanted to change gears and disengage it when done.

"I hear there's been some issues with the longshoremen's union in the past," Felix said.

"Nah, that's passed. They have a new contract since last month. There won't be any concerns about that for you."

"That's good to know," said Felix.

Soon after, Charlie turned off the main harbor road and into a warehousing and loading facility.

"What you're going to have to think about is volumes," said Charlie as they continued along the warehouse driveway. "What kind of number did Wilhelm send with you?"

"Nothing specific."

"Come on, he must have put some number on it."

"Four thousand cases a month was the figure they kicked around." Felix was trying to be cautious, not wishing to give the upper hand to Charlie. He had been told by the Wilhelms the optimal figure was five thousand.

"That's what I feared," said Charlie. "Now if you can double that, or go even higher, than I think we can help each other."

He stopped the car. "Here, hop out. I'll show you."

They got out and walked through a door into a large warehouse. Before them were rows and rows of racks, filled with boxes, products of all sizes and descriptions. Numerous mechanical carts and people scooted around. Charlie waved his hook again.

"You remember I told you about the biggest loading dock in the country?. That's on the other side of that wall there, through all those big doors. Trucks come up to the loading bays on this side here, ships over there. This is one of several warehouses that work off that loading dock."

He turned and looked at Felix directly. "Here's the thing, the buyer we have for your product does a whole lot of exporting through here for a whole lot of others too. It's not a cheap place to have product sitting for too long so the more he can move through the cheaper it is for everybody, if you get my drift."

"I can see where you are going with this," said Felix.

"He pays for the storage costs here," Charlie continued, "so he has to pass those costs off somewhere. The price he sells your product at has to cover those costs, shipping costs, your price, my cut, and still leave him with something worthwhile left over."

The two men were silent for a moment as they observed the tremendous activity going on around them. It was Charlie who spoke again first.

"The buyer already has a pretty good idea of what he can sell your product at. And he thinks he can sell a lot more of it than five thousand cases every month. It was five you said, right? At five he might be paying too much to move it through here, unless you keep your price low. And how low can you go? So, Felix, you're a smart guy. It's all down to volume or the whole thing might fall through."

Felix could feel the pressure now. He knew the Wilhelms would be hard-pressed to come up with an extra three thousand cases each month just for this one customer. It would mean investment in increased production capacity and it might be a while before that could be in place.

"I'll need to look at all the variables before we come up with a price that works for us at five thousand," Felix told Charlie. "There'll be a lot to consider, like the freight to get it here, and now we have to factor in export duties too."

"What about eight thousand? Can you do that?"

"That remains to be seen," Felix answered. "But if we can do eight, we will."

"OK, Felix, let's get you back to your car. You'll let me know soon. You can reach me most any time at that number you have for me."

That afternoon Felix worked furiously at his hotel room. He had prepared himself well for the trip with charts of export duty and freight rates, and detailed figures for the company's production costs. By mid-afternoon he was making numerous phone calls back and forth between Steven and Charlie. Towards 6 p.m. it was becoming clear that he couldn't get his price down sufficiently at five thousand cases to keep Charlie happy. Both Steven and Charlie had determined the profit they wanted and that was it. The issue of volumes had to be tackled head on or there would be no deal.

He needed to get a sense of how capable the company was of increasing its capacity, and how fast. Steven got back to him with the following proposal; three months at five thousand cases and the higher price, after that it would be eight thousand per month and the price would drop twenty percent.

Steven managed to pass off another piece of wisdom to Felix during these phone calls. "The other half of selling," he said, "is buying. Remind Charlie what kind of service we'll give him. It's not just about price. Encourage him to tell his buyer to invest in us, rather than the other way around."

Felix made one more phone call to Charlie to tell him Steven's offer. Charlie said he would have to get back to him. Felix waited nervously for that final return call. He realized he hadn't eaten all day, not even breakfast. And he hadn't even called Sarah. He wanted this deal to go through. He wanted to bring home a scalp from the market so the Wilhelms would be impressed.

The phone rang. It was Charlie.

"OK, Felix, we'll do it. The buyer likes it, but he needs assurances that you'll come through with eight thousand cases after three months like you say."

In his delight, Felix made one of those silent screams and shook his fist, punching the air. He looked exactly like the television pictures of a soccer player running to the corner flag after scoring, temporarily trying to avoid being mobbed by his teammates, until the explosion of his euphoria was spent.

"Felix, are you there?"

Felix cleared his throat. "Yes, Charlie, that's great news. I'll be in touch with you from my office next week and we'll move this along."



Felix had another dream that he remembered after he woke up. He was back home safely in his own bed when he had it. It started with him getting out of a cab at an airport. There were what seemed like hundreds of cars lining the curb at the departure terminal. He paid his fare and gave the cabbie a tip. He only had one little case which he dragged along on its wheels. Inside the terminal there was a long line of people waiting to check in, but it was moving quickly. Soon he was at the top of the line. A man in an airline uniform gestured for him to approach. The man asked for his ticket and some identification. Felix placed his case on a weighing scale. The man attached some tags to the case before placing it on a conveyor belt behind him. Then the case disappeared through a hatch. The man gave Felix a boarding pass and circled a gate number. Felix walked a couple of hundred yards, passed through a metal detector, and proceeded to the gate. He stepped onto a moving walkway. It went on for miles. He was the only one on it. The tempo of his own pace was slow but the walkway kept getting faster. People coming in the opposite direction on each side were speaking into cellphones. Their faces became blurry as he increased in speed. He felt the walkway push up gently against the soles of his feet and then ease away from them, the ensuing negative pressure pulling him down with it. And then up again slightly, and then down. He realized the black rubber track of the walkway had left the ground. He ceased to move one foot ahead of the other. He was traveling on a long black rubber magic carpet. He could see it rise up ahead of him, as he hurtled along. The airport came to an end but the walkway carried him out of it, climbing higher still. It carried him up through the clouds.

Now he saw the walkway coming to an end. It was looping back beneath itself. He was up very high now. He could see the airport and the city around it when he looked down. The end of the walkway was coming quickly. He would be thrown off into the bare sky. For a second he was afraid but just as suddenly he had come off the walkway and was moving head-first through the air on his own. He was flying, up above the clouds, without fear.

He didn't feel cold. At first he didn't try to control his motion but then he realized he could. It was like swimming underwater in a downward motion, except everything was inverted. Wherever he wanted to go he pushed in that direction with his shoulders and stretched out his arms ahead of him. He could slow himself down, or speed up again, at his discretion.

He continued upwards, far, far upwards, until day became night and the sky around him was black and full of stars. On one side was the sun and on the other, the moon. Still he felt no cold. Below him there was the planet, green and blue and brown, with its clouds, tossed around like sparse patches of white hair on an old man's head. It was wondrous to see.

Then he traveled back to earth, diving downward, as if sliding head-first down a chute. It was a lovely dream. He saw mountains and rivers taking shape again, and cities and towns. And then buildings and roads, and railways and canals. All the way down to where he worked.

Then he was in the office, standing at his desk. There was no one else about. It could be a Saturday, he said to himself. Could he still fly? He pushed with his legs. Up he went and didn't come back down. Yes, he could still do it! He was floating. He tried to fly around. It was harder than before, as if the air had become more viscous, but it was still working for him. He swam around in the air, sometimes floating upwards and hitting the ceiling, before pouring himself down around the desks again. It was great. He was a king, the king of his workplace. He could control his bosses. No longer could they control him. That's how he felt in this dream. He had broken the bonds of his own fears.

He circled around the desks in the offices of the Wilhelms. There were documents left on each. He had no interest in reading them. More and more he was too important to them to be let go. Wasn't he the one moving that export deal along, for one thing? And he was bringing new ideas for technology to the company, right? Why should he care to snoop? Everything he needed to know would be coming to him anyway, sooner or later.

Felix was able to see all this again in his mind when morning came. He hadn't woken up from his flying dream at the time it concluded. He may have had more dreams after it. He couldn't tell because he couldn't remember them. He may have had no additional dreams at all. All he knew was that the dream had come to him deep in the night, the one memory he now had from a sleep that if it contained anything else he could not tell. And he could recall it exactly, every detail and every emotion. He ran through it again, determined not to let it fade as had sometimes happened to other dreams even when he remembered them as brilliantly as this one, at first. He would be left with bits and pieces and he would become confused as to what he actually dreamed and what he conjured up later. No, he didn't want that to happen to this one, not to this dream. He had heard of people having dreams where they were flying, but he had never before had one himself. The feeling of power lingered and he loved it.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

"Do you know if Steven will be available today?"

Felix was talking to Colleen on the phone.

"Not this morning, Felix, I know that," Colleen answered him. "He's tied up with his parents in meetings with the bank. Maybe in the afternoon. Give him a try then."

"Why, what's going on?"

"Sorry?"

"With the bank," asked Felix, "What's up with that?"

Colleen sounded a little puzzled to be asked that question. "Beats me. They always have meetings with the bank, though Steven only started going to them recently, strangely enough. Why do you ask?"

"Oh you know," Felix said, jokingly, "We have to keep an eye on our leaders. Otherwise you never know what mischief they'll get up to!"

"What, now you're going to handle the company's finances along with running everything else around here?"

"Yeah, right Colleen, like I have time for that too." And then he added, "Seriously, I was just curious. They seem to be meeting with the bank, and others that we don't know, a lot lately."

Colleen said nothing. Felix probed no further. Felix could tell that she was a little uncomfortable to be having a conversation along such lines.

"I'll try him later then," he said and hung up.

Felix could tell she didn't know anything particularly revealing about the recent thread of activities that was taking place solely among the Wilhelms, to the exclusion of the staff. This was also true for Marty, who was more concerned with not rocking any boats till he could retire. Marty had also refused to speculate on the matter.

Felix sat back in his chair and reflected. Colleen was a smart young woman, Felix thought, ambitious even, but the border of her job was at the furthest extreme of the marketing side of the business, wherever Steven determined that to be, and not beyond. The Wilhelms were a stepping stone for her until she had enough experience to be somewhere else, run her own business perhaps, or command a higher salary. As long as she was on the right side of the Wilhelms, and she was, she didn't care about their activities.

Felix remembered when he thought like that but as time went on a sneaking suspicion grew in him, bobbing to the surface of his consciousness with troubling frequency, that he had sold himself short by just working for others, building up his savings and so forth until he could commit to being a bread-winner and someday, while he was still young enough to enjoy it and not yet falling apart with old age, actually retire.

He consoled himself that he had done extremely well for someone with his background. It wasn't as if he had the advantages of a Steven Wilhelm. Felix could hardly imagine a life like Steven's. That man had complete job security, no matter how much he screwed up he wouldn't get fired. He could come and go as he pleased. No one distrusted him if he arrived late, or left early. No one questioned his motivation. No one counted his days off. Everybody was forever trying to justify their actions to him, rather than the other way around. If he ever did make a mistake it would be a case of the emperor's new clothes. And he drew a bigger salary than most his age, for sure, along with knowing the whole pie would be his someday. Above all, Steven could look upon the company as his canvas. He could paint any picture he wanted and reap the joy of his craftsmanship.

For Felix to get to be where Steven was he would have to strike out on his own, and risk the livelihood of others too, of Sarah and the baby. He didn't have the stomach for that now. He could have taken his chances when he was much younger and had less to lose but, back then, borrowing the money he needed would have been almost impossible. He was an orphan. No bank would entertain his notions, and no friend had any money to lend him.

And, back then, he wasn't thinking like that to begin with. For him, merely surviving outside an institution on his own two feet was the limit of his ambition in the first years of his adulthood.

Steven, on the other hand, was being groomed for his role from the day he was born. Felix felt as though Steven had been given a head start over him that he could not overtake, no matter how fast he ran. Believing he could match Steven in everything, and that he was better than him at many things, and still had to answer to him, frustrated him immensely. Why were some born with more than others, he asked himself often? And whatever job he had there would be other Stevens.

No, he wanted a place to hang his hat once and for all, a place to call home outside his little home with Sarah. That is why Felix wanted to be indispensable to the Wilhelms, so that he could eek out some self-esteem, some importance for himself, in this whole business of a working life, a place he spent more time than with the one who loved him unconditionally.

Colleen was right, Felix was getting his hands into more projects every day and becoming the go-to guy on many issues. His influence was permeating the entire business. He noticed increased deference on the part of others towards him. That is what he had prayed for and so it was coming to pass.

He thought again of Steven. Given his due, he had not squandered his opportunity. He was fully committed to the business his father started. In fairness, the company's successes could be tied to his ideas. And the company better be successful. After all, where would Steven go if the company failed? He might have to work for someone else, a fate he must surely dread. So there must be pressure on Steven too, Felix thought.

And Steven was likeable, Felix admitted. Despite the moat that Steven had around him, across which no staff member could pass, Felix detected compassion in him. Under different circumstances Steven might be a buddy, or even an older brother, and it saddened him a little that the world of money kept them from being friends.

It was hard not to admire, or to dismiss, Steven's natural ability to lead. He was probably very aware that some people looked upon him as someone who had been given everything, without judging him in his own right. How he coped with that knowledge was not obvious, but it didn't seem to take away from his belief in himself or his plans.

And he had cleared the path for Felix to come to his company and had picked him from the heap and entrusted him with greater responsibility and allowed him to run with his own ideas, thereby giving Felix his own smaller canvas of sorts.

Thus there was a conflict in Felix when it came to Steven. He had much to thank him for, but deep within there was a resentment, a sense of injustice, that, until he felt in his heart he had equal status with Steven, prevented him from being grateful.

The response he got to the email he sent Steven was brief:

"Can't meet today as you requested. Tied up until at least 9 p.m. How about tomorrow, first thing?"

It was already tomorrow, first thing. Steven had sent his response at 7:30 p.m. the night before, after Felix had left for the evening. Felix sent his original email at about 11 a.m. Steven was probably taking a break from the bank meeting to catch up on his messages and had lost track of time, Felix thought, or at least of the fact that none of the staff was ever left in the building at 7:30 p.m., except in exceptional circumstances. Or maybe he thought Felix might be checking his messages from home in the evening, as if he didn't have better things to do.

It was also another illustration of the strange time domain in which email communications exist. Felix could recall numerous incidents of misinterpretation when his messages were not read or answered by the recipients in the same order they were sent. It sometimes led to terse words from him when he found himself being asked questions which were already adequately answered in his subsequent messages. The incongruity in the thread of correspondence in this interchange with Steven was lightweight by comparison. Felix shot back his reply:

"Sounds great. Just let me know when you are available, Thanks."

Felix couldn't help but make a mental note of how long it had taken to get the response, and how he felt he had to continue to accommodate Steven's schedule even after waiting almost a day to hear from him. But, as Sarah reminded him, he was only hurting himself by not coming to terms with these realities. The sooner he did the sooner he would find some peace.

He was also quite curious about that meeting. What could they have been discussing that took hours and hours? He looked up and saw Steven passing, smiling, coffee in hand.

"Felix, I got your email just now. Why not come on in? Now is a good time, before my day gets crazy"

"Absolutely, I'll be right with you," Felix answered as he scurried after Steven to his office.

"So, what are we talking about then?" asked Steven, when they were both seated, Steven's chair perched one foot off the ground as usual. "Oh, by the way, I do apologize for not getting back to you earlier yesterday. It was hectic."

"Oh, don't worry about that. You were busy, of course."

Steven had already started glancing at his computer monitor as Felix said this. His day must be getting crazy already, Felix thought. He seemed to have gotten so much busier of late. Better start talking.

"Yes, Steven," he began, "I wanted to share some personal news with you, for a change."

"Really?" He raised his eyebrows and smiled. "So what's the good word?"

"I'm happy to announce that Sarah is pregnant."

Steven's face lit up. A smile streaked across his face from ear to ear.

"Awesome! That is awesome! Congratulations! Good man, good man. I'm thrilled for you!"

Felix was taken aback by the sincerity in Steven's tone. It was uncharacteristic of a man who usually held his emotions so well in check. Felix felt embarrassed. He had not expected this sudden bonding opportunity to arise.

The main reason he was making the announcement was because he had to, eventually. How would it look when he asked them to place another dependent on his medical insurance, if he didn't mention the baby until it was actually born? Odd, to say the least. But Felix was also feeling good about being there of late, and he wanted them all to know of his good fortune, so they could share in it to some extent. If he could keep his two worlds completely separate, he would. Failing that, he needed to manage when those two worlds intersected. This was as good a time as any to break the news.

Yes, Steven," Felix said, "We are so happy with the news."

"Of course, you have to be, right? It's true what they say, it will completely change your life. And no matter how hard you try to predict what that means, you'll be wrong."

Steven laughed heartily. Felix had never seen him like this. Perhaps it was something about children that melted him.

"So," Steven asked, "how's the pregnancy going?"

"Fine, very smooth so far, thankfully."

"How far along is she?"

It was the question Felix had been expecting, and had his answer ready.

"She's due sometime in February, so I guess that puts her sometime around five, six months I imagine." Just say it matter-of-fact, Felix had planned, let him react any way he wants. And that applies to everyone else too.

"Oh," said Steven, a puzzled look in his face. "You left it bit late to tell us." And, smiling again, as if he didn't want this last piece of information to detract from his jubilation, "Well, I'm glad to hear everything is going well. Do you know if it's going to be a boy or a girl?"

"Yes, we found out a few days ago that it's going to be a boy. We both wanted to know."

"Awesome!" This was undoubtedly the highest superlative Steven could utter.

For an instant Felix wondered if it was a good time to slap him with a request for a raise, but he held off, amused at himself for even thinking it. But he had intended to make sure that Steven understood he would be taking a few extra days off when the baby came, whether they wanted to pay him for them or not.

"Yes, thank you," said Felix. "And, needless to say, I'll have to be home for a few days during that time."

"Definitely, you'll have to be there for her, and the baby. You should take a week. And we'll pay you for it. It won't get deducted from your paid time off. We always do that when one of ours becomes a father. I'll make sure that gets communicated through the proper channels."

For Felix, this was very unexpected. There was nothing in the manual about paternity leave, or even maternity leave for that matter. If it was something they always did then why wasn't it in the manual? Why was this the only way to find out? He supposed it was because if it were written down then people would think they were entitled to it, and the Wilhelms would have to forego the groveling thanks that Felix was about to dole out.

"Why that is just so generous of you, Steven. Please convey my sincerest thanks to Morgan and Sandra also."

"I will for sure, and they'll be just as delighted for you as I am. Maybe we'll finally get to meet her, with your new son too, at our annual picnic in the summer."

As Steven spoke the memory of the humiliation Felix had felt when they stuck him for a day's pay flashed through his head, and he compared it to what he had just heard. Further evidence that Gloria had acted alone, he thought to himself. And he was happy to hear that the company could be kind, once in a while.

Then Steven became distracted by something on his monitor.

"Excuse me for a moment," he said, "I've been expecting this email. Just give me a second. Don't go, I want to talk to you about something."

He read from the screen for a few seconds and then began typing rapidly. As always, anyone sitting with him in his office could not see his computer screen. As he wrote Felix could see Steven's intense expression return and knew the lighter interlude of baby talk had passed, just like that. Steven reached for his mouse and clicked. The send button on his email program, Felix assumed.

"OK, I'm back," Steven said. He turned to look at Felix. "Thanks for your patience. Now, switching topics for a moment. There have been a couple of developments in our negotiations with Charlie at the port."

Felix didn't like the sound of this. In the weeks since he had visited the port things were going smoothly. He had helped shuffle contracts back and forth and obtained the necessary signatures. He had made the proper filings with the port authorities and the customs office. The increase in capacity was a very attainable goal. He was just waiting for the Wilhelms to release the cash needed so they could start upgrading the equipment at the company's plant on the south side of the city. Once that, and other details, fell into place he could make a reasonable estimate for an initial shipment date on the contract.

"How so?" asked Felix.

"Well, we're not in a position to finance the plant upgrade at this time."

Felix was getting nervous. "Any particular reason?"

"Oh, no, well, nothing you need to concern yourself with. It's just other factors are impacting our financing structure right now."

"I see," said Felix. "You know that will impact the timing of when we can step up from our five thousand case commitment to eight thousand."

"Yes, of course I'm aware of that," replied Steven, with some obvious irritation. It was remarkable how he had switched moods so cleanly from the earlier part of their conversation.

"OK, fair enough. Just so you know, the contract gives us a little leeway as to when we can start shipping. We can delay it a little. Do you have any idea when we can get the cash for the upgrade?"

"At this time I can't say for certain, but it will be months, maybe as many as six."

"Well," said Felix, "that's put the entire agreement under strain. I suggest we pull out while we still can. There's a clause in the contract that can allow us to do that, if we exercise that option. But we need to do that soon."

"No, no, no!" said Steven, forcefully. "That overseas business is too important for us to lose. You know who'll get it if we don't? Our favorite competitor, that's who! And where will that leave us then? We'll be the ones fighting tooth and nail to catch up with them in this overseas market. No, my father always says 'get the business first, worry about fulfilling it later!'. Sound advice, it served him well."

"So you're saying we should just go ahead with the five thousand cases, am I hearing you correctly, Steven?"

"ASAP!"

"Steven, should we mention anything to Charlie?" The naivety of the question only became clear after he heard it with his own ears.

"What do you think?"

"Charlie doesn't know."

"Right, very good" Steven said, and a small smile returned to his lips.

Felix felt the intensity drop in the conversation again. It was a trait common to all interactions between superiors and subordinates. The superior can throttle the angst of the subordinate at will, as if working a gas pedal. Felix wasn't sure if he should be happy again, since the bigger issue of dealing with Charlie's reaction had been postponed but not eliminated. And if they start shipping now it starts a clock, he thought to himself, whose alarm is set to go off right around the time Sarah is due to give birth. Again, a total disconnect between the importance of the almighty Wilhelm dollar and the importance of the lives of the staff. Yet Felix did not doubt Steven's happiness for him and for Sarah. It was as if these two different parts of his emotional engine operated in complete independence of each other.

"Then tell me, Steven," Felix asked, at the risk of sounding cheeky, "What happens when the time comes and Charlie is expecting eight thousand cases and we can't deliver?"

"I'll make some calls," replied Steven.

"OK, great, thank you." It was absurd that he felt he had to say 'thank you', but he had to. Those were the rules. "Do you think the buyer will sue?" Felix decided to ask, anyway.

"He's not going to sue."

Felix raised his eyebrows to give his face an inquisitive, curious, demeanor. Steven was prompted to explain.

"It's not Charlie's style, and the buyer is not going to want to get mired in some legal action or other, since he's not even based here in this country."

"Oh, OK," said Felix. "You make a good point. And I think you're right about Charlie, it doesn't look like his style at all."

This last comment of Felix's wasn't meant to be a joke, but it ended up sounding like one. Steven laughed.

"And," Steven added, "I think you should go back out to the port right around the time our first shipment gets there, just to keep the relationship on the right track. You know, by the time three months have passed he'll be so happy with us that he won't be a stickler about the extra product. Don't you think?"

"I certainly hope so," Felix said with a false smile. He wasn't so sure Charlie exuded leniency. He wondered if anyone had ever told Steven about Charlie's hook.

Steven had started to become distracted by his computer screen again. Felix took the opportunity to get away. He had come in with one item on his agenda and was leaving with another. He wasn't hanging about for any additional complications. He got up to leave.

"Was there anything else?" he asked Steven, already standing.

"No, no, that'll do, for now." Steven was reading as he spoke. "That's ..ah.. great news again about..am.. Sarah." Then he looked away from his computer and called after Felix as he left. "And, Felix, do yourself a favor when you go to the port this time. Take a plane. You'll get there and back much faster."

When Felix climbed the small wooden stairs to Charlie's office he noticed the door was not locked. In fact, it was slightly ajar. Inside he could hear the sounds of papers being shuffled. He pushed the door gently with his finger and it opened further. Still, he could not see Charlie. It was a sunny afternoon but the shades were drawn so the light wasn't too good. He stepped inside quietly and only then could he make out Charlie, over to his right by the wall. He was kneeling on all fours, his back to Felix, rustling among some cardboard boxes of documents he had there, and grumbling to himself. To get his attention, Felix cleared his throat with a little cough. The next thing he saw was the cardboard lid of one of the boxes spinning directly toward his head. He ducked and the lid passed through the air where his head had been. Then it lost the sureness of its trajectory, making a sharp turn upwards before slapping the ceiling and falling back to the ground. By then Charlie was standing directly in Felix's face.

"For frig's sake, Felix, don't sneak up on me like that!"



"Take it easy, Charlie," Felix gasped, cowering, "I didn't mean to startle you."

Charlie was still agitated. "Well you did," he said, "and you're lucky I didn't cut you with my hook."

Felix tried to calm him down, "Talk it easy, Charlie, OK? Again I didn't mean to catch you off guard like that. Look, the door was open."

The afternoon sun was streaming in through the open door. Felix could see the enormous amounts of dust in Charlie's office dancing in its rays. Charlie turned and walked to his desk, reaching in for his bottle of rum and two glasses.

"I was trying to find a lightbulb. I was sure I had put one in one of those boxes over there. I'll just have to pick one up at the store. I prefer an electric light to the sun. My eyes are a tad sensitive. Drink?"

"No thanks," said Felix.

"A man that won't drink with me. I wonder if I should trust you, Felix?" He poured his own glass and drank from it. He sat down.

"Why do you think you can't trust me?" Felix laughed, but he was disturbed by the possibility that Charlie could see right through him as usual.

"I never said I didn't. Take a seat."

"Well, at least I'll sit with you," Felix joked again as he sat, trying to make light of the issue. Stop playing with him like this, he told himself. Charlie did not give any indication he heard that last comment.

"You didn't catch me off guard. The last time that happened was the night I lost this hand in a bar room brawl, you know," he said, holding up his hook and examining it. "And I told you I was edgy."

Felix looked at the hook and tried to imagine the kind of brutal fight which gave birth to it.

"I'll try to remember to knock, in future."

This drew a look from Charlie. "So how was your flight to the port city?" he asked, after a moment.

"Great, just two hours, much quicker than the last time I came here," Felix answered.

"Yeah, what was that all about? Not that I would be much for flying myself. But you, that should be right up your street. A youngster like you. Tell me, how come you drove out here before?"

"I can't say for sure," replied Felix, trying to figure it out for himself. It was the first time anyone had asked him, and the first time he had tried to answer it. "It just seemed to make the most sense at the time."

Charlie drank again. "And I'm the one supposed to be weird," he remarked. And then he laughed. Felix could see the humor in it and laughed along with him. Charlie spoke, once again with an air of wisdom his age afforded him.

"I've never been in a plane, come to mind. Only ships, and cars. I think I was on a train once or twice, but that was long ago. I hear they have a nice airport built here now."

"Yes, that's true," answered Felix. "It's a lovely airport. Very clean. Very efficient."

"Ships that sail in the sky," Charlie mused.

The first shipment of five thousand cases had arrived at the port only two days before. With typical Wilhelm high-quality service levels, everything was in order. Charlie and Felix stood in the warehouse at the longest loading dock in the country and reviewed the many racks containing Wilhelm product. It was all part of the ritual men perform when doing business together. There had to be some tangible experience to derive from the transactions, now and then. Perhaps this was a vestige left over from the days when kings stood on hilltops and surveyed their armies or their herds, or their fields of wheat.

Felix and Charlie could have said whatever needed to be said to each other over the phone. If there was a problem, damaged merchandise for example, then maybe that would

necessitate a trip by a Wilhelm representative, and only if a photograph could not tell the story. But there wasn't any problem. Felix had made the trip to make doubly sure everything was going well, to provide that additional layer of caring, the kind that the customer is supposed to value. It wasn't one hundred per cent clear, however, that Charlie needed this kind of support.

"Nice," said Felix.

"What's so nice about it?" said Charlie, briskly. "It's just a bunch of cases. The whole warehouse is full of them. I have another supplier who shipped in twenty thousand cases only yesterday."

"I mean it's nice to see my work in front of me here."

"Your work?," said Charlie. "Did you make these products and put them in their boxes?"

Felix wondered why he bothered. "It's just nice, that's all," he sighed.

"Wake up," snapped Charlie, "We're just middlemen, you and I. We don't do anything to pat ourselves on the back about."

The words stung Felix and he was silent. Suddenly the rows and rows of Wilhelm product in front of him didn't seem so satisfying after all. Charlie noticed Felix's reaction.

"I'm just messin' with you," said Charlie, smiling from ear to ear. "Good job! Five thousand cases, delivered on time and in good shape, just as you promised. One step closer to somebody actually using them. Now it's my turn to move them along."

They walked outside again, towards their cars. Felix had rented one for the day at the airport. It was already late in the afternoon and the sun was starting to dip in the sky. It had been another hot day, except now it was November. The heat itself did not bother Felix but the fact that the seasons had not changed from summer to fall was beginning to stress him, especially since no one else seemed to think it peculiar, not even Sarah. Even the news stations had ceased to comment. Same old five day forecast every time; hazy, hot and humid. It didn't make sense. And there was nothing unusual about the length of the days, they were getting shorter exactly as they should be with winter supposedly approaching.

While Felix was thinking about the heat, Charlie was looking out to sea, at the many large vessels going in and out to port. Hungry birds flocked behind them.

"So what time is your flight?" he asked Felix.

"It's at 7 p.m. I'll grab something to eat before I head back to the airport."

"OK," said Charlie, "I guess that's it for now then. Just make sure you stay on top of this deal. It's a big one for me too. I'm going to need those extra cases like we agreed."

He held out his hook for Felix to shake. Felix gripped it carefully between his thumb and forefinger. Again, just like the first time they had met, he motioned up and down weakly. Charlie stood shaking his head.

"No, Felix," he said. "Not like that. I might have let you get away with that the first time we met, but not anymore. Here, let me show you."

He took Felix's right hand in his left and guided the curve of his hook into Felix's palm. He closed Felix's hand around it.

"That's how you hold it," said Charlie. "Now, give my hand a decent shake!"

Felix did so, but the guilt he was feeling prevented him from matching the strength Charlie put into his handshake. He noticed the tiniest flicker in Charlie's eyes.

"You have a safe trip now," Charlie said.

A couple of hours later Felix drove into the airport. He had stopped off for a satisfying meal at a restaurant in the downtown section of the port city. For a short while the fine taste of the food, with a pleasant glass of red wine, helped him forget his chat with Charlie at the warehouse, but as he stepped back into his rental car his troubled thoughts returned. Especially now that Charlie was placing renewed importance on getting to eight thousand cases.

He looked for ways to ease his conscience. Was it really so dishonest to pretend they were on course with the export contract? Steven had a point. After three happy months maybe Charlie should be willing to wait longer for the additional volume. It was just business, right?

Like Charlie said, he and the Wilhelms keep coming back to each other. They must have had obstacles like this in their dealings with each other in the past. It would work itself out in time, Felix reasoned. Steven would smooth it over at the right time. Or maybe Morgan would step in, since they've known each other for so long.

He called Steven on his cellphone. Everything had gone smoothly, he told him, no problems to report, make sure to send an invoice for the first shipment. Steven was pleased.

Felix's first order of business at the airport was to return the rental car. The rental company kept all their cars in a parking tower beside the departure terminal. It was a simple matter of leaving the car in the tower and taking an elevator directly down into the terminal. At the entrance turnstile an attendant asked him if he wished to put everything on his credit card, and so he did. The attendant then told him that the only level with space to leave the car was at the top of the tower, four stories up. It was a quiet day, the attendant said, and most of the cars had not been rented.

He drove around the spiral of the parking tower until he was at its summit. He found an empty spot and put the car there. He got out. He had no suitcase, since he was making the return trip all in one day. He paid no attention to the sound of another car coming onto the level.

He walked towards the elevator, lost as usual in his thoughts, looking out across the airport from his high vantage point. Night was beginning to fall. The car came along behind him. He moved a little closer to the side to give it plenty of room to pass him. But then the engine roared and the car sped past him, almost hitting him. The air from the draft of the passing vehicle brushed his face. That woke him up. The tail lights of the car shone red and it skidded to a halt. A man with a hook for a right hand and a nasty scar on his face jumped out and started walking towards him.

"Charlie?"

Charlie spoke with calmness in his voice.

"You thought you was being slick, right Felix?"

"Ah..what are you talking about, Charlie?"

There was something very menacing about Charlie as he approached. He knows, Felix said to himself. There's no other explanation for this. Felix considered running. He was scared. He might be faster than Charlie. He was a lot younger than him. He decided to try to talk to him first. Perhaps he could reason with him, just as he had done earlier that afternoon, when he had startled Charlie with his unannounced entrance.

"How did you get up here, Charlie?"

"It's wonderful what you can do with a five dollar bill, isn't it?"

"What's going on, Charlie?" Felix blurted out. "I don't understand."

Charlie had walked right up to him by now.

"Well, let me tell you then," he shouted, and swung his hook. The curve of the hook, the part Felix had held in his hand only hours before, crashed into Felix's chest. The pain was excruciating. He was winded. He dropped to his knees. He wasn't sure if Charlie had broken one of his bones. He doubled up on the ground, writhing in pain. He heard the sound of a crumpled piece of paper being unfolded. He managed to look up again at Charlie, hoping another nasty blow wasn't on its way.

"You see this?" Charlie screamed down at Felix.

No answer. Felix hadn't even gotten his breath back.

"It's a fax." Charlie spoke more quietly now. "It was sent from someone who does me little favors, now and then."

"What's it about?" Felix asked, in a gasp, struggling to get his wind back.

"Why don't I read it to you?" said Charlie, sarcastically. "It goes like this:

'Charlie, the Wilhelms aren't planning to increase their production any time soon. They're not building anything right now. They were working on it but then everything got postponed indefinitely.'"

He continued, "Look, Felix, my friend even included a copy of the cancelled purchase order for new equipment. Now if that ain't good detective work!"

He crumpled the paper back into a ball again and dropped it in front of Felix. Then he grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and dragged him to the railing. Felix was shocked by Charlie's strength. He could breathe again, but the pain was still unbearable.

It was dark now and not easy to see what was happening from the ground below. Felix felt Charlie rip the hook into his shirt behind his neck. He gripped the back of Felix's shirt tightly in his hand. Then he lifted him with both his hand and his hook over the rail and let him dangle. Felix was four stories up. He tried to hold onto Charlie but couldn't get a grip over his shoulders on Charlie's arms. He could hear his shirt rip further as the weight of his own body pulled on Charlie's hook.

He closed his eyes and prayed, "Don't let me die, God, don't let me die. Don't let me die!" Charlie heard his frightened panicked whisper and said.

"Well, something's got to die," he shouted in Felix's ear.

"Don't let me die, please God, don't let me die. Don't let me die!" Felix whimpered, more loudly.

"So which is it, Felix?"

"Charlie, pull me back up," pleaded Felix, "please!"

"What dies, Felix, you or the deal?"

"Charlie, please! God, help me. Don't let me die!"

"I still don't hear your answer, Felix!"

"The deal, the deal is dead. Pull me back up, Charlie!" Felix shouted.

Charlie swung Felix back from over the rail and dumped him on the ground. He ripped his hook out of Felix's shirt.

"Good answer," he said. "Tell your bosses what you decided."

Felix lay face down on the ground long after Charlie drove away. His breathing slowly returned to normal but the pain lingered in his chest. No other cars came onto the level while he lay there. Even if they did, they might not see him because it was quite dark now and the lights were not very strong.

It was then he heard the sound of the woman singing the lullaby again. In his self-pity he started to cry. He wanted her to appear, whoever she was, and hold him. Tell him everything was OK. Tell him he was safe. The tears dripped from his eyes and mixed with the oily dirt under his face. The woman didn't show herself, but he felt comforted nonetheless. Perhaps it was due to the tension his tears released, or perhaps the woman was sending him her love in her song. He wasn't certain.

A few minutes later, he pulled himself to his feet. The pain in his chest had subsided. It was tolerable enough to walk. His shirt was all torn, his face and hands were all dirty. I look a sight, he thought to himself. He knew he had probably missed his flight. He could get a later one. He would call Sarah and let her know. It would be embarrassing in the terminal and on the plane, looking as he did, but he would ignore the stares. He thought about calling the police but then decided that having Charlie out his life would be enough compensation.

He noticed the crumpled ball of white paper on the ground nearby. He picked it up and stuffed it in his pocket.

## CHAPTER NINE

It was getting close to Christmas when Steven announced in a company-wide email that the position formerly held by Gloria Silvestri had been filled, though he did not mention her directly by name. Steven also related how the company was using the opportunity to restructure its accounting and finance department. The new man's name was William Stokes, a seasoned financial and operational manager, and he would be the Chief Financial Officer, or CFO, Steven said. This despite the fact that Gloria had held no formal title, Felix noted. It was also noteworthy, at least to Felix, that Steven made the announcement, and not his father.

Mr. Stokes had served successfully at the highest levels of several companies throughout his career, including some publicly traded ones, the announcement continued. This added to a sense of anticipation around the office. What would this heavy-hitter be like? Everyone was invited to extend him a warm welcome.

Felix was not feeling very cheery about welcoming anyone. Since the export business had been lost Steven was decidedly cooler towards him. He had tried to call Steven from the airport that night but Steven had already left. He opted not to leave him a message. It was the next morning before he had a chance to sit with Steven and break the news. By then, his chest wasn't hurting anymore, except when he pressed against the area where Charlie's hook had impacted. He knew there were no bones broken, otherwise his body would tell him. For that, in any event, he was grateful.

The fax itself was not very revealing. There was no cover sheet and the only words on the first page were those he could hardly forget, the ones Charlie had read to him. And they were typed, not handwritten. The second page did contain a copy of the cancelled purchase order but nothing else. The only clue, the one which identified it as a fax to begin with, were some numbers printed at the bottom of each page. Felix recognized one as Charlie's fax number but the other he did not know. He was, however, able to tell that it was sent from Felix's own city. There was also a timestamp on the fax which showed it being sent about a half hour after Felix said his goodbyes to Charlie at the warehouse on the dock. Felix made a photocopy of the fax for himself and stashed it in his desk, figuring the original should go to Steven.

He knocked on Steven's door.

"Come in, come in... ah Felix, how are you? How are all the folk at the port?"

"Well, that's what I'm here about," said Felix, meekly.

"OK, sit down," said Steven, sensing Felix's apprehension. "Was the flight OK?. You look a little tired. Are you feeling OK?"

"No, no, I'm fine. Maybe I just need a little more sleep, but I'm fine."

"How's Sarah? Is she well?" Steven showed the same concern as usual for Sarah, and the baby.

"She's great, thanks for asking." Felix was anxious to get on with it.

"So what's the good word?" asked Steven.

"Well, it's bad news all round, Steven, I have to say."

Steven's face froze and he fixed Felix in his sights. "What is it?" he asked.

"Charlie's kicked us off the job, so to speak. He doesn't want to do business with us anymore, at least not on the export contract."

Steven did not speak immediately. He continued to stare at Felix.

"Are you sure?"

"Charlie was pretty clear about it." Felix's heart was now thumping. Perhaps he was about to witness one of Steven's fits. He had heard about them, but had never seen one.

"Why?"

"He found out that we won't be able to step up to eight thousand cases in time."

"Found out? How? Did you tell him?" This last question hurt Felix. He went on the defensive.

"No, of course not!" he said. That little piece of mettle in Felix's voice seemed to temper Steven's reaction to the news.

"Well, do you know how he found out?" he said, his voice softening.

"Someone told him, could be someone who either works for us or got the information from someone who works here."

"What?"

"I have a fax here, that Charlie gave me." He removed the crumpled pages from his notebook and handed them to Steven. Steven's eyes widened as he read them. Felix still wasn't sure whether Steven would round on him, so he started talking nervously while Steven continued to read.

"It seems Charlie made it his business to verify that we were true to our word.."

Steven looked up. "Verify that we were true to our word?", he said sharply. His face darkened and his intense stare returned. "Could you help me understand what you mean by that?"

Felix wished he could take back those poorly chosen words. He back-tracked rapidly.

"What I mean, Steven, what I'm trying to say, is that Charlie has his way of measuring whether we were going to meet our end of the bargain, and I guess, in his opinion, not in mine you understand, we didn't do it for him. So he dumped us." Again Felix felt his boss's tone soften. Steven went back to reading.

"Who could have leaked this? Why?" There was the pain of betrayal in Steven's voice now.

"I wish I could answer that," Felix said, consolingly.

"Can we find out who did this?"

"I don't know how easy that would be. Any number of people has access to that document from our filing cabinets. I know it didn't get printed out directly from our network, because the fax shows it's stamped with the word 'Cancelled'. And the sender's fax number is not ours. It is even conceivable that this came via the vendor of the plant equipment, when you think about it."

Steven appeared not to be listening. He stared again at Felix. "What am I supposed to do now? Perform a witch hunt?" Steven sounded angrier now. It had not taken him long to come to terms with the existence of treachery. Felix did not speak.

"We can't do that," Steven continued, mysteriously. "Now is not the time. It would be too disruptive. It could affect moral. Maybe a competitor would get wind of it. Or any outsider. We can't have that, not now."

Steven looked again at the fax. "I'll have to deal with this another way. I would ask you not to mention this to anyone. You can say that the deal fell through because the buyer couldn't pay, if anyone cares to ask."

"I won't breathe a word of this to anyone. I give you my word, Steven."

Felix was beginning to feel some relief. He had delivered the bad news and the entire matter had been taken off his plate. No more trips to the port, away from his Sarah. No more dealings with psycho Charlie. He would keep his eyes and ears open but catching the spy among them, if indeed there was one, was a bigger issue than he cared to tackle. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do to help."

Steven nodded.

"Will we be able to get our product back?" Felix asked, hesitantly.

"I don't know, we'll try. Can you call him?"

"I don't think that would be a good idea. Charlie holds me personally responsible for deceiving him. I suggest that Colleen reach out to him."

"We can do that," said Steven.

"Should we sue him, I mean his buyer, for breach of contract? I mean, we hadn't yet failed to meet our end of the deal."

"No, we can't do that," Steven answered, forcefully.

"Why not?"

"Charlie's much too unpredictable to play around with."

With that, Steven got lost in his own thoughts. Felix was angry. If he knew what Charlie was really like, he thought to himself, why had he sent him so readily into harm's way?

"I would leave it as it is," Steven continued. "If we get the cases back the losses will be minor. My big concern is that this business gets picked up by a competitor, but if that happens we'll have to live with it."

In the weeks after his ill-fated second trip to the port, and before the arrival of the new CFO, Felix had trouble pinning Steven down for face-time. He was either tied up with unfamiliar people in suits in the conference room or away from the office altogether. As the day of Mr. Stokes arrival approached, whenever they did find time to meet, Steven would frequently refer to his 'new management structure' as providing the framework for decision-making in the future. Felix recognized this as veiled double-speak for a return to the days when there was a buffer zone between the Wilhelms and the rank-and-file. This did not bother Felix, as long as Mr. William Stokes did not stifle him, and everyone else, as Gloria had done. It remained to be seen what kind of atmosphere Stokes would create.

What was more depressing to Felix was his sudden fall from grace with Steven. It was as implicit a fall as his rise had been, for nothing was ever spelled out by Steven. Those who could read the tea leaves were the ones who knew the score. As quickly as one brief exchange with Steven in McGovern's bar in July had propelled him upwards, now the collapse of the export contract had sent him plummeting.

It was unfair of Steven to scapegoat him. The entire affair may have been doomed from the beginning and, in some ways, it was as though he were set up to fail. But it was not in anyone's interests, certainly not the Wilhelms', to have him falter. No, Felix was made to feel that he been put in the starting line-up and had not shown the right magic, the kind that makes things happen regardless of the odds. For that he was benched again.

Now Steven spoke off-handedly about Felix's ideas for an Internet strategy, as if they were not key to the growth of the company. But Felix knew they were and suspected that Steven believed so also, but that Felix didn't have the depth to lead the initiative. Felix felt his resentment grow along with his insecurity. It wasn't right, he told himself, to be labeled like this,

based on one project that didn't go according to plan, especially since it was one that was thrust on him after it was already in motion. Didn't even the most successful people fail some of the time? And didn't he nearly get killed in the process? Why was this deal so definitive? The financial loss to the company was tiny, since he learned through Colleen that they had been able to retrieve all five thousand cases of product from the original shipment.

All the while, Steven continued to be pleasant and gracious with him, forever asking after Sarah, and looking happier with each update as the due date approached. His paternalistic manner also began to wear on Felix's nerves.

Felix went about his work as best he could. There were still many things to maintain and Steven hadn't come right out and put a halt to anything else he was working on. But increasingly he felt he was back to where he had started, a technician who wasn't paid to think.

William Stokes was about to exacerbate the situation.

The new CFO's first day was absent any fanfare. He arrived early, went into Gloria's Silvestri's old office, and closed the door behind him. He was a tall thin man, perhaps ten years older than Felix. From time to time, Steven or his parents would go in to talk with him. People spoke more quietly than usual as they conversed around the office. He was still there when Felix left for the evening.

The second day was another story. To begin with, there was an email from Colleen to remind everyone that the extra parking spot reserved by the company in the building's basement parking facility was now for the exclusive use of Mr. Stokes. That had been Gloria's spot and in her time, even when she was out for the day, no one dared park there. After she was fired, those that drove to work, and there were a few, would compete with each other to park in it each morning, first come first served. The other three company spots were, of course, for the Wilhelms, though two of them often remained empty, since Steven's parents were increasingly less inclined to show up at all.

It was to be expected that someone with William Stokes's experience should be given certain perks, like his own parking spot. It would be difficult for the company to attract the right kind of senior talent otherwise, if that's what they truly needed. But Felix knew it wasn't easy for some to stomach the reality that the new CFO was getting something in his first week that they could only dream about ever getting. He came across Marty Ostler alone by the coffee machine in the kitchenette, pouring himself a cup.

"Morning, Marty."

"Felix! Long time no chat, what you been doing?"

It was true that he and Marty had not spoken much in the weeks prior, for one reason or another. Marty stepped back from the coffee machine and began putting some sugar in his cup.

"Oh, just lying low," Felix replied. "Keeping myself busy, you know."

"I never did ask you, Felix, how things are going with that export contract. I see you took a plane out there the last time."

"That's right," Felix said, quietly, "But.. ah.. it fell through, the whole thing fell through." Felix started pouring his own cup of coffee.

"Really?"

Felix gave the official version of the story. "Yes, the buyer wasn't paying."

Marty looked puzzled for a moment. "That's funny."

"Why so, Marty?"

"That's one of the nation's biggest overseas distributors you're talking about. Any reason in particular why they weren't paying?"

"None that I know of, maybe they're having problems." Felix reacted quickly, he hadn't expected to have to go into the story to this depth. He took a deliberate gulp from his cup. He never drank his coffee black. "Maybe they're having cash flow problems or something. This kind of thing happens with these huge companies. Or maybe they found that the demand wasn't there for our product after all, and didn't want to suffer the loss."



"How did Steven take it?"

"You know, so so.. he didn't like it, but I'm still here, am I not?"

Felix sensed a note of sympathy in Marty's expression.

"Well, it's still peculiar that we lost that business, Felix. But, what are you going to do, right? It's not like you or I see the profits one way or the other, huh?" Marty chuckled sarcastically.

"Exactly, Marty." Felix was relieved the topic was closed. He laughed too, quietly.

"So have you met our new 'Chief Financial Officer' yet?" Marty asked, in his devilish way, pronouncing each word of the new title slowly and deliberately, in a way that was clearly an imitation of Gloria Silvestri. The reminder of that sound, so freshly delivered by Marty, made Felix wince inside.

"No, Marty, I have not had the pleasure. What's he like?"

"Well, I wish I could tell you, but I haven't been introduced to him either."

"Yes, he kept a low profile yesterday." Felix opened the fridge. "I think this coffee could use a little milk."

He took out the milk carton and topped up his cup. Now he could enjoy it.

"You know, Felix," Marty said, "I know this guy's going to be a pain."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Well, it's a Wilhelm thing, they just have to have an enforcer. It's their way."

"But you don't need to worry so much, Marty," Felix said, reassuringly. "Didn't you have the measure of Silvestri, and she was some piece of work, wasn't she?"

"Yes, but that was then, this is now."

"I'm not sure I get you?" Felix said.

"Well, let me put it this way, Steven is running the show now, not Morgan, or haven't you noticed?"

"Yes, I noticed."

"I remember Steven when he was in short pants. He used to come in and help, or think he was helping. On day I was a little snappy with him. He was twelve years old, or something, and giving everyone orders. I don't think he's ever forgotten. More than twenty years ago. So I don't know. He may not value my company loyalty quite like his father."

"You know," Marty continued, "he spoke really sharply with me during the summer when that delivery got screwed up. Remember? The one he was talking about at the picnic. Morgan never made such a big deal about those kind of things. A mistake is a mistake. We would just move on and try not to let it happen again. But this guy..."

Felix was about to comment when another staff member came into the kitchenette where they were.

"OK, Marty, we'll catch up again," Felix said, and left to go back to his desk.

"See ya."

When he sat at his desk again there was an email waiting for him:

"Felix,

In reviewing your current projects I see that the expenditures are running on average of five percent (5%) above the figures you originally budgeted. It is important that we review the reasons for these runaway costs, and determine the value of these projects you are working on.

Please make time to sit with me this week.

Billy Stokes,  
Chief Financial Officer."

As Felix read he felt his power being siphoned away. He had only shared such detailed information on his projects with Steven, and nobody else. Now Steven had handed his new CFO all of it, as if saying 'here, make sure you take care of this boy too'. His disenfranchisement was complete.

And the high-handedness of referring to his costs as 'runaway', at only five percent ! And now he would have to justify his work to this shoot-first Billy with his cavalier attitude. Felix was trying hard not to feel as humiliated and insecure as he had when Gloria would barrel in on his day. Mr. Stokes had a different style, but it was having the same effect.

For a time Felix simply sat and stared at the screen. This guy works fast, he thought, he's only been here a day. I guess his first order of business is to stamp out the resistance from within.

Felix knew too that it was his problem to work around Stokes's schedule and not the other way around. He wrote back:

"Mr. Stokes,

Is there a time tomorrow morning that works for you?

Felix"

To which he soon received the reply:

"No, make it 3 p.m. tomorrow afternoon. And call me Billy."

Very well, Billy, 3 p.m. tomorrow it is, Felix said to himself.

Felix spent the balance of the day, and the evening, and the following morning fretting about his scheduled meeting with Mr. Stokes and its outcome. Stokes, or Billy as he was now to be called, was a complete unknown. It was the unpredictability of the situation that Felix found more stressful than anything else. Could he really be as uncouth as his email suggested?

Sarah had tried to assure him that the meeting would go smoothly, whether he realized it or not. Felix felt his anger increasing again. He had enjoyed a respite from it in the weeks leading up to his second trip to meet Charlie. But now it was back, and the unending heat, already now in the week before Christmas, wasn't helping, especially since no one else seemed to notice it.

Sarah tried to help Felix see it from Steven's perspective. He had other pressures on him, she said, more than Felix knew about for sure, and he still managed to almost always be courteous and gracious. He hadn't harmed Felix in any real way, he still had a job after all, and he was very pleased for them. There were many things to give Steven credit for. She held Felix in her warm loving arms that night until he fell asleep.

The morning brought with it another shocker from Billy, this time for the whole company. All bonuses for the year would have to be delayed until at least March. When that email went around Felix heard gasps coming from various parts of the office. Then he heard some curse words. Morgan, who happened to be in his office that day, stuck his head outside his door. He looked cross. There were no additional overt displays of dissatisfaction with the news.

Billy's email went on to explain that while it had been a tradition for the Wilhelms to give holiday bonuses at the end of each year, it was never meant to be perceived as an entitlement. The decision had been made, Billy added, to make a complete assessment of the company's performance for the year, before distributing bonuses to the staff. That process would take at least ten weeks of the new year to complete.

Felix was enraged, along with everyone else, but by the time it was 3 p.m. he was more focused on his one-on-one with the CFO. As he approached Billy's office, he noticed Steven's

door was open. Felix could see Steven at his desk, poring over some reports, oblivious to the challenge Felix had before him. Felix knocked on Billy's door.

"Come in."

"Billy, we have a meeting now?"

"Yes, yes.. Goodness, it slipped my mind." Billy gathered up the papers he was looking at and put them to the side. He beckoned to Felix to sit.

"So, where are we with you?" Billy asked himself, under his breath, as he looked around his desk for something. Then he located a fat folder and opened it up. Felix recognized some printouts of spreadsheets and reports he had put together. He noticed that they had been marked up in pen with several red lines and circles, although he couldn't be sure who had made these notations.

"OK," he said to Felix, "You need to cut back on some of the things you're doing. I have a hard time locating where the return is coming on a lot of this."

"I'm sorry?"

"Too many costs, where's all this leading too?"

Felix was already reeling from Billy's cut and thrust style. For one thing, he no longer had the air-cover given him by Steven. For another, he had not been asked to justify anything in terms of return on investment before. And it was impossible to answer questions posed in such a manner. It was like being asked to teach a new language to someone, using twenty words or less. But Felix didn't want to capitulate. He would start by using terms that Billy had to understand.

"Billy, I may call you Billy you said, it's plain and simple where all this is leading to, as you characterize it. We need to get our folks working efficiently together. That's done by sharing information rapidly and making sure the quality of the information is good. It's a competitive marketplace out there. Now, measuring the return on the investments we need to build or buy the software we need to reach that goal is not something you can do with any great accuracy. But in time there's no denying it will lead to increased sales and improved market share."

"I don't agree," Billy responded, rapidly. "I don't think our industry is ready to adopt such ideal notions. We don't need to spend so much in this area to get ahead of our competitors, plain and simple."

Felix said nothing. The man's mind was made up.

"I want you to go through this folder and read my notes, in red. Some of what you are doing we can keep, but some of the other stuff..." he paused as he leafed through the pages in his 'Felix' folder, "...we'll have to cut out entirely. And I need you to pay a little more attention to keeping costs down."

Felix's blood was starting to boil. "Could you be more specific about that last comment, Billy?"

Billy rooted through some more pages and pulled one out. "Here, for example, look at this. You're a full fifty percent over on your original estimate."

Felix looked down at the page Billy had spun around in front of him. "We're talking about an original estimate of one hundred dollars," Felix said, "so any variation is going to have a big percentage attached to it."

"Yes, but fifty percent, that's quite a variation, don't you think?"

Again Felix held his tongue. He felt the conversation to be as suffocating as many he had with Gloria Silvestri. Just as then, he did not want to be confrontational with his new supervisor. There was too much at stake. But he was furious.

"Take this folder," Billy continued, matter-of-factly, "And go through it. Read my notes. We'll meet again about this after the Christmas holiday."

Billy sat back and looked at Felix, as if he were for the first time bothering to notice the human being he was dealing with. In the subsequent silence, Felix understood the meeting was over.

"OK then," Felix said and left the room, taking the folder with him.

For a couple of days after his sit-down with Billy, Felix refused to look in the folder. He didn't have to address it with the CFO again until after Christmas, anyway. He used the intervening time to allow his rage to subside, and prepare himself to deal dispassionately with the indirect insults Billy's written comments were sure to contain. Eventually, sitting at his desk two mornings later, he started into the pile of papers in the folder. Much to his surprise many of Billy's notes were altogether harmless, mere technical questions in most cases which Felix felt were easy to answer. Or they were statements like 'We can do this more cheaply', which could be a little annoying, depending on how they were read, but Felix was not giving in to that temptation this particular morning. Felix was beginning to entertain the hope that maybe Billy's bark was worse than his bite, that maybe he should be open-minded and could learn from someone with Billy's experience, when he came across a typed memo which must have been placed accidentally in the folder. It was from Morgan to Gloria and was dated May 20th that same year. The subject line read 'Personal Day for Felix, May 25th'. The message in the memo was brief and to the point. It read:

'Our response to your inquiry as to whether Felix should be paid for his May 25th personal day, due to a pre-existing commitment prior to his employment here, is that he should not. We must adhere to our policy with respect to paid time off, without exception.'

And also, written on it by hand, was the comment:

'I agree. I can't see why she thinks he might merit this.'

And the comment was initialed 'SW'.

## CHAPTER TEN

"You know, Steven," said Felix, "I was meaning to ask you something." They were having one of their meetings in Steven's office.

"Yes?"

"This desk of yours, how come it's on a raised platform?"

Steven had an expression of mild bewilderment on his face. "Can't say, Sandra set it up that way. I never thought about it." He threw up his hands in an expansive gesture.

"I bet you didn't. Maybe your mother just wanted to make it clear to everyone that comes in here to meet with you that you are truly special, a brilliant creation, a most-high born."

Steven laughed nervously. "Well, I wouldn't go that far, Felix." Then he frowned.

"You know it's a pain in the neck, literally," continued Felix, "to sit here and have to look up at you. And it reminds people, subconsciously I suppose, that they are small, in your great presence. Or at least I'm sure that's what your mother wants them to feel. But I don't, I assure you."

Now Steven looked angry. "I don't appreciate your tone, or your references to Sandra. Where's all this coming from?" he demanded.

"Oh, I don't know," said Felix, with a hint of nonchalance. "It just seems odd to me that your desk has to be one foot higher off the ground than everyone else's. Of course, it fits perfectly with your vision of the world."

Steven, or even his parents, may never have encountered this kind of attack before from one of the paid staff because he didn't say a word, letting the assailant play more of its hand before reacting. Felix went on.

"That world, of course, is one where those who have to depend on you to get by are specially provided to you to meet your needs and to generate even more wealth for you. It's no problem for you to suck them dry, to deprive them of time with their loved ones for long hours, to have them worry about things like rent, and medical coverage, just so they have proper care if they get sick, so they lose track of what's really important, while you come and go as you please. Hey, if you had to sell all this tomorrow to some other bloodsucker, why that would be just dandy, wouldn't it? You could retire on the money you would get. Work is fun, just a game, for you, right?"

There was still no reaction from Steven. Felix went on.

"Yes, Steven, for you the world is made up of two camps, those who have a life and those who toil to provide them with it. And in proper order your particular little group of have-nots should spend lots of time kissing your rear-end, just so they never forget who they need to thank for the little they have. No wonder the world is full of broken families!"

"Your out of line, Felix!" Steven shouted, no longer able to restrain himself.

"Out of line, Steven, you think?" Felix asked calmly, "I guess you're not used to hearing this. I understand. It's not easy being confronted with your own hypocrisy. I mean, isn't it just lovely how we get to call you and your parents by their first names, Morgan and Sandra and Steven. Such phony baloney! Like you three are our friends. Yeah, right! We're just riff-raff to you. It would be more sincere, more honest, if we called your parents 'Mr.' and 'Mrs.'. But then what would we call you? Junior? Hah! That wouldn't exactly fit with the track you are on, now would it, Steven, Mr. Up-And-Coming Business Leader?" Felix laughed loudly.

Steven sat, wide-eyed, shaking his head slowly. "Well, I'll tell you the same thing I tell anyone that isn't happy here. It's a big city out there. There's the door." He tossed his head in the direction of the door. His face had reddened by now, and he pursed his lips.

"Is that so, Steven? So you're saying that it's just one, two, three and I have another job?" Now Felix was the one letting his anger unravel. He raised his voice. "Are you going to pay me while I'm looking to find that job? Are you going to help me with a good reference? Will you provide us with the medical coverage I need in the meantime so Sarah can have proper pre-natal care? You seem so interested in how we are doing, what are you looking for? Another healthy baby boy in the world so that someday he can work, cap in hand, for your children? Is that what you want, is it? Is it?"

"Get out!"

Felix stood up and hopped onto Steven's podium, staying on the opposite side of his desk from him. He raised his voice further. "And then you have these fiends working for you, first Silvestri and now Stokes, a pair of trumped-up petty overseers. Just so you never have to get your own hands dirty!" Felix changed his tone momentarily to one of venomous sarcasm as he added, "So you can maintain an air of detachment befitting your station. Let others be your executioners!" And then he screamed, "So you can sleep easy at night while others spend their whole life imprisoned in this structure called a 'job'!"

"That's it, you're nuts. I'm calling for help." Steven reached for his phone, but Felix reacted more quickly, wrenching it from the desk before Steven could get to it, disconnecting the phone's cords in one jarring tug, and threw the phone at Steven's head. Steven ducked down, falling to the ground as he did so. The phone crashed into the headrest on his chair. Felix walked around the desk and planted a kick into Steven's ribs as he lay on the floor. Steven let out a groan. Then Felix kicked him again, even harder, in the groin.

"What did you think I was going to do, Steven? Sit there, like a 'yes man', year after year, saying nothing, like Marty, while you strip me of whatever feelings of self-worth I have. First I have to answer to that bitch, Silvestri, for every miniscule second of my miserable existence here, and then you bring in this robot, Stokes, and, without you even having the guts to talk to me, you instruct him to 'bring me down to size'."

He kicked Steven hard in the mouth. Blood started leaking out between Steven's teeth. He started whimpering. "Stop, stop," he pleaded.

"What gives you the right to have any control over my life?" Felix kept screaming. "Because you were born into money? Does that do it? I thought we lived in a free country with freedom of speech. But I have to watch every word I say to you just to earn my keep. And how come you get to be President of the company? Did you have to beat out a lot of other candidates for the position? No, right? While the rest of us are clawing our way up to middle management you get to slide right in at the top. Wow, what a genius you are!"

Felix stopped. He was breathing heavily. Steven lay at his feet holding his face. "Felix, stop, for goodness sake, please." His words were slurred by his injured mouth.

"You know, Charlie almost killed me." Felix wasn't shouting now but there was a new threat in his voice. "You knew he was like that. Why did you have me deal with him? Were you too chicken to do so yourself?"

"What..what are you talking about?" Steven spluttered.

"I said Charlie almost killed me. You knew he was crazy, that if he found out we were lying to him, he would hurt me. You know, I went through that for you and your company, and what do I get? Passed over, like I was a lightweight, like a kid brother that never quite measures up!"

"No, Felix!" Steven said, desperation in his voice, as he turned to look up, "I had no idea. Morgan told me that a long time ago he called him up over something and bawled him out, but that was it. He kept doing business with us."

"Save your pathetic lies!" Felix could feel his rage returning. He started speaking in a low growl. "You people make me want to puke. You're born into all this advantage and you try to squeeze every penny out of people working under you. You think this is a great and just country, just because you were born on the right side of the fence." He walked over and picked up a bronze statuette from a shelf on the wall. "Oh, you got this from Armitan. How very nice. Why did they give it to you, Steven?" he asked, his tone loaded with sarcasm. "Let's see." He read the inscription: "'Presented to Steven Wilhelm, for Outstanding Customer Service'. Well now, isn't that just lovely? Did you happen to mention that one of your minnows worked well into the evening once and then walked across town in the pouring rain with some contracts, and got home real late to his loved one? All because your dear sweet little old mother took a fancy that it needed to be done right away and instructed your fascist commandant accordingly!"

He walked back to Steven, who had not made any effort to get up. Felix was still holding the statuette. He saw fear in Steven's eyes. He knelt down on one knee beside him.

"Give me one reason why the world has to work like this, Steven?"

"I don't know, Felix. Please stop," Steven said. His voice was weak. There was blood all over the carpet by his head.

"Maybe I need to set things right then." Felix held the statuette like a club in his right hand and raised it high above Steven's head.

"Felix! Stop!" The scream came from Sarah. Felix was punching their sofa repeatedly. His face was contorted horribly. Sarah was wrapped in her towel. She had just stepped out of the shower. At seven months she looked very pregnant. Felix stopped, realizing where he was and what was happening. Sarah walked over to him and reached up to hold his raised clenched fist. "You'll break a bone in your hand or something," she said softly.

He felt peace again. He turned and sat.

"Felix, it's Christmas morning. Don't let it do this to you, not today."

"It's a beautiful thing," Gloria said, and pulled deeply on her cigarette.

"What?" asked Felix. They were meeting at the end of the work day in the same diner they had met months previously. Felix had found Gloria's home number in an old file of employee contact information on the company network that no one had bothered to update.

"You changing your mind and wanting to help me, of course."

"Help you? I thought this was about doing the right thing."

"It is, but you're helping me too. I want to get those people for firing me unfairly."

"Gloria, helping you is not why I'm here, just so you know."

Felix was not enjoying his clandestine meeting with Gloria, but it was his choice to be there. For several days after the New Year he had resisted the temptation of calling her. Finally, in mid-January, he yielded. By then his resentment towards his bosses had reached the point of seething. He could barely stop himself from letting loose in meetings with Steven, or even Billy. He knew it was only a matter of time before his true emotions would surface, most likely leaving him without a job round about the time the baby was due. If he could act against them another

way, he reasoned, in a way that meant he would not hurt himself, then the situation would be more equitable. It was true his actions could lead to the closure of the company. But in time he would get a new job, without being hampered by the stigma of a dismissal from his previous position. He was confident one would come his way quickly, now that he had acquired additional experience. And those Wilhelms deserved what was coming to them. More and more those secretive meetings they were having, and their unwillingness to invest in new equipment for the export contract, not to mention their renewed micromanagement of his projects, proved to Felix that they had something to hide.

He had not told Sarah his intentions. This was not the time. Later he would tell her. What he was doing now would help him live with himself, although dealing with Gloria again made his skin crawl. He hoped it would be a very temporary engagement.

Gloria did not appear very offended by Felix's last comment. "Did you bring that document?"

Gloria was talking about the document she had begged him to get months before. She had directed Felix to its location on the network, buried deep beneath several layers of sub-folders and among hundreds of other files. It was unlikely anyone would have found it, unless they were looking for it. Felix took the folded printout from his pocket. It was an email sent from Sandra to Gloria, saved as a text file, exported from the company's email application. It retained the routing information that emails normally have. It was sent the day Gloria had said, the day before she was let go. The Wilhelms may have believed they had erased all traces of it when they emptied Gloria's mailbox. The message in the body of the email was simple:

"Gloria:

We need to review that \$200 payment entry, reference # 201401000, that we spoke about earlier. I have to leave the office early tomorrow so I'm getting started early. How about a meeting at 7:15 a.m. ?

Sandra"

Felix left the page on the table between them. "Not exactly damning evidence, is it?"

"It proves that they were up to something and I had caught on to it!" Gloria exclaimed.

"True."

Gloria picked up the page and read it to herself. Her scarred eyebrows rose above the upper rim of her glasses and her mouth gnarled into an expression of disgust. "I toiled night and day for those Wilhelms. They are slick, Felix, let me tell you."

"I know that now."

"It's like they were born with the nature of a scorpion or something, they know what they need to do to come out on top, and whoever they walk on to get there doesn't bother them one bit. But not this time."

"I think Steven is in on it now," Felix said.

"Why do you think that?"

"Oh, just the way he's going to all these meetings now, the kind that he didn't go to before."

"What kind of meetings?" There was a sudden tension in her voice. She stubbed out her half-finished cigarette.

"I think it's with the bank."

Gloria's eyes widened. "All the more reason we have to act fast! I bet the bank is on to something and the Wilhelms are spending a lot of time trying to sweep stuff under the carpet."

"Well, what do you have in mind?" Felix said enthusiastically.



"Here's what you need to do, Felix. It's simple. Make a copy of some files, I'll tell you which ones, and delete them from the network. And be sure to erase them from any back-up tapes also."

"What's so important about these documents?"

"They contain lists of phony general ledger accounts where they have been sheltering income. With that information the authorities can seize their files and perform an investigation which will surely nail them, with my help of course."

"So why can't I just give you a copy of the files and not delete them, Gloria, so they don't suspect anything?"

"Those numbers are their key to their own wrong-doings. If they lose that information they won't be able to cover anything up. That's why we need to act fast!"

"OK, OK, I understand. Write down the names of the files and where they are stored."

Gloria took the page that was on the table, the printout of the text message, and wrote on the back of it.

"Here," she said. "This is everything you'll need."

The next morning Felix deleted the files from the company network as Gloria had specified. Before that he made sure he copied them to a diskette. He planned to hand that diskette over to Gloria that evening. He also made a second copy to diskette for himself, because it was his nature to hoard everything, and tucked both diskettes into his shirt pocket. He had opened each file from each diskette to make sure they had copied successfully. They were as he had been told, long lists of nine digit numbers and nothing else. Crafty lot, those Wilhelms, Felix thought to himself. Once the documents were completely erased from the network he went to the room with the company's server equipment. He was a frequent visitor to the room so his presence there aroused no suspicion. He selected five tapes from the back-up library mounted in a steel case, bolted to the floor. Each tape was a back-up of the company's entire system for varying periods of time; daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly and yearly. He located the files on each tape and erased them. To the best of his knowledge all copies of the files were now gone from the Wilhelms' possession, and those on the two diskettes were all that remained. He then went down to the street outside, telling people he had a brief errand to run, and phoned Gloria on his cellphone. They arranged to meet at their usual rendezvous. He would tell Sarah again that he was working late.

Gloria was already there when he got to the diner after work that evening. He had expected as much. She was sitting at the same table as before. She had gotten to know the wait staff by name by now, which was ironic since Felix had been the one that first suggested it as their meeting place. She was smoking, as usual.

"Felix!" Her face lit up when she saw him.

Felix sat down across from her.

"So.. hand it over then!"

He handed her the diskette

"Come on, Felix, lighten up. You've just helped stick it to those arrogant Wilhelms."

Felix knew he should be feeling satisfied, but there was something that didn't quite sit right with him. He did not enjoy acting dishonestly. The waitress came by and he ordered a cup of coffee. He faked a smile.

"So what are you going to do now, Gloria?"

"Like I said, I'll contact the authorities and get this ball rolling."

"How long do you think before they come knocking on the company's door?"

"That's hard to say, could be tomorrow, could be months. They may not want to act until they know the can get a conviction. Plus, Felix, they'll need some kind of search warrant and

they'll need my testimony for that, because those files don't say very much on their own." She chuckled.

The waitress arrived with Felix's coffee. Gloria continued smoking.

"So, how's your job search going?" Felix asked after drinking a mouthful.

"What job search?" Gloria answered, with an air of resignation.

"I assume you've been looking for work. I mean, it's been months already"

"I've been looking, Felix, a little, but how can I get another job with this on my record? And I've been living on my savings, money is getting tight." Felix saw tears well up in her eyes. He began to feel some compassion for her, for the first time.

"Well, this will clear your name. And then you can move on."

Gloria said nothing.

"So where did they put you?" Felix asked.

"St. Michael's," she said, quietly. "Almost my whole childhood. A nasty place. I moved around a little when it got closer to my coming-of-age, but St. Michael's was pretty much it." She looked very sad.

"I used to pray I would never end up in St. Michael's," Felix said. "I heard so many bad things about it."

"I'm sorry, Felix, I really don't care to talk about it."

They were both silent now. Soon a look of happiness came back into Gloria's face.

"You know, Felix, I just knew you would come through for me."

"Why so?"

"I just knew it. There's something about you, like you're on a path with me or something."

"I hope not."

Gloria looked hurt. She had none of her normal air of supremacy about her these past couple of days. Felix had gone too far. He tried to make amends for what he had just said.

"I have to say, Gloria, that I'm glad I've seen this side of you. You know I used to despise you when I worked under you. But if you were my boss now, somehow, I think I could live with that, because I've seen you in a different light."

Gloria smiled. "Thanks Felix."

"I'm going to head off to take my train home now. I suppose the next time we speak will be when they drag those while-collar criminal Wilhelms into court. Let's hope it's soon!"

He left some money on the table and went to the subway. When he got home he put the spare diskette in a safe place.

The strange heat continued unabated. It was now in the latter half of January. The cold winter of years before, with snow for the children, had not showed up. Felix made only passing reference to the phenomenon, in a tone of ridicule normally reserved for comments about the government. He never questioned it directly any more. The last time he did so Sarah, calm Sarah, almost raised her voice, telling him not to mention it again. The looks he received when he questioned it elsewhere also served to deter him from doing so away from his home.

He tried to accept it as normal. The heat itself did not cause him discomfort. He enjoyed it, in fact. In some ways he found it comforting. But the conflict between how it was and how it should be weighed on his subconscious to the point where he sometimes became irritable with Sarah. In his more grounded moments he resolved to be more disciplined, since it was Sarah who needed his support in the weeks ahead, not the other way around.

Meanwhile, at work things took on a shape that no longer troubled him. Each time, when dealing with Steven or Billy, anything which he would have formerly perceived as a slight had lost its sting. They would all be rotting in their own corruption, sooner or later, he told himself. He did his job, and didn't look to do anything beyond that, and certainly did not worry whether he impressed them.

And those voices. Every so often he would hear them. The loudest was the woman, who sang her lullaby with even greater frequency as time went on, followed by that of a man, and a young child, probably a boy.

It was a Saturday morning when the phone rang. Felix and Sarah were sitting together, enjoying the peace that surrounded them, looking forward to the start of a whole new life. Sarah was quite large now and would only take the elevator when venturing out, avoiding the stairs. Felix answered.

"Hello?"

"Yes, hello, I wish to speak to Felix." It was a woman's voice.

"This is Felix. Who's this?"

"Felix, this is Sr. Joan from St. Myrtle's."

"Oh." Felix paused and then asked, "What can I do for you, Sr. Joan?"

"Well, as you probably know I'm the head administrator here now since Sr. Concetta retired."

"I knew she had retired, I just didn't know who had taken her place," Felix replied. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Thank you, Felix." And, with some hesitation, she continued "I, ah, have a peculiar matter to discuss with you, if you have a minute."

"Yes, I do," he answered. The curious expression on Felix's face caught Sarah's attention.

"What is it?" Sarah asked, in a whisper.

Felix pointed at the phone and shrugged his shoulders. Sr. Joan continued.

"Well, Felix, it seems that documents have inexplicably surfaced here which clearly show that your birth date is not as you believe it to be, May 25th."

"You're kidding..."

"No, you were actually born over three months earlier than that, on February 5th. We are obliged by law to bring this to your attention so that your retirement benefits become available to you at the correct time, and not later. You'll be getting a formal letter about this from us soon."

"I see," said Felix, mustering up the only words he could right then.

"Of course, you won't be thinking about retirement for a long time yet," Sr. Joan went on, with a little nervous laugh, "but it's always good to be proactive on these things, you know."

"Yes, it is, I suppose."

"And I hope we'll be seeing you here for our annual pantomime later in the spring. I'm told you always help out, and it is very much appreciated."

"Ah.. yes. Well, thank you for the information, Sister."

"Goodbye now."

The nun hung up the phone. Felix looked at Sarah. "As if life wasn't weird enough," he said.

"Why? Who was that? What's going on?" Sarah was concerned.

"It was St. Myrtle's. They have a nun there now called Sr. Joan, running the place. She tells me that I've been celebrating the wrong birthday all these years."

"What?"

"Yes, it's not May 25th, it's February 5th. That's just around the corner."

"We'll have to have a party!" Sarah laughed.

"Wait a minute, this isn't funny!"

"We get to celebrate sooner than expected. That's fun!" Sarah clapped her hands together.

"And what about in May? I always liked having my birthday in May, in the spring, now it's in the winter, but it isn't really winter anymore it seems. This is all getting to be too much."

Sarah caressed the back of his head. "We can have another party for you in May too. That's it, we'll have two birthday parties for you every year!"

Felix laughed. "OK!" he shouted.

Then he sat back on the sofa again with Sarah.

"So what are you feeling about this news?" she asked him.

"Can't say," he told her. "I'm still in shock, actually. But part of me doesn't care. Is that wrong? Should I care?"

"That's up to you."

"Why have I never cared about where I came from, Sarah?"

Sarah didn't answer.

"I mean, I never bothered to find out who my real parents were," Felix continued. "I never wanted to. Some of the other kids nearly went crazy over it, but me, I never even thought about it. What does that make me?"

"What does that mean, 'what does that make me'?" Sarah asked.

"Am I heartless?"

"You have the biggest heart of anyone I know. And you're so sensitive."

"I never cared about not being adopted either, which is why I probably never was. I must have given the wrong signal to any couple that inquired about me."

"It's just the way you are, Felix. There's no reason to beat yourself up about it. Now you have a new birthday. It doesn't bother me, or anyone else I'm sure, so you don't have to dwell on it."

They both sat in silence. Then Felix spoke.

"It's like I don't care about the past, like it's not real. I only care about the present and the future, and I'm starting to have my doubts about those too."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

One Friday morning, soon after he discovered he had to revise his age, Felix arrived at work to find Steven walking out of his office in a heightened state of agitation.

"Where's Colleen?" Steven demanded of the closest person to him, who happened to be a clerk in the accounting department.

"She told me she was taking a personal day today," came the reply.

"A personal day, damn!" He paced around, talking to himself out loud. "I need to get my hands on a proposal she's been working on for me. I can't find where she left the file."

"Maybe it's in her desk," said the clerk meekly, trying to be as helpful as possible.

Steven rushed over to Colleen's desk.

"I already looked in here. It's not here!" Nevertheless he started tugging out the drawers and rifling through the hanging folders in each. "Nope, not here."

"You can call her at home," someone else suggested.

"Yes, that's what we'll have to do. Can you get her on the phone for me?" He directed his request to the person that had made the suggestion. "Put it through to my office, thanks."

He went in and closed his door. Soon thereafter Colleen was patched through to him.

Sometime later that morning Felix received a call from Colleen.

"Felix, I sent a fax to the machine by our desks there. Can you check to see it went through?"

"But of course, dear. Give me a second."

Felix walked to the fax machine and picked up a bunch of pages that were sitting on it. He had heard the long transmission coming in several minutes before. He sat down again and got back on the phone with Colleen.

"Yes, looks like it came through," he told her. "The cover sheet says it has thirty pages."

"Yes, thirty pages. Can you check to see they all came through?"

"Sure, let me count." He began counting the pages. "This isn't confidential information, is it?"

"No, don't worry about it. It's just Steven. He drives me crazy. You know, I took this home so I could work on it over the weekend. I shouldn't have bothered. I had to run out to the local mall here so I could fax this in to him. I can't even take a day off without him calling!"

"I hear you," Felix told her. But he didn't. He was only half-listening as he tried not to lose count. And then something on the fax caught his eye. It jumped out at him as he went from page to page. The sender's number, printed on each, looked familiar. After a few more pages he stopped counting. He reached into his own desk and pulled out the copy of the fax from the day he had been pulverized by Charlie at the port. They had both been sent from the same number.

"Felix, how's that count going?"

"Huh? Fine, fine." He had not finished. "They...they're all here, don't worry."

"Can you drop them in to Steven then?"

Felix was still comparing the numbers, just in case his eyes were deceiving him.

"Felix! Are you there?"

"Yes, yes, Colleen, I can drop them in to him." And then he asked her "You sent this from near your house, you say?"

"Yes, why?"

"Oh, nothing."

"You know, Felix, you're a wacko!" Colleen said with a laugh. "Just make sure our Stevie gets that fax. I gotta run. I'm off to do a little shopping! Bye, bye."

"OK, I will. Take care."

He walked the pages in to Steven, who was on the phone. Felix put them on the desk in front of him. Steven looked up with a smile when he read the cover page. He gave Felix a 'thumbs up' gesture.

Felix could not imagine that Colleen had anything to do with passing information to Charlie. It was not something she would do. It had to be someone else that used that fax machine. He went on his computer and opened up the same file on the network that he had used before when he dug up Gloria's home phone number. The file also contained addresses. He noted where Colleen lived and began checking all the other addresses. Sure enough, she lived about ten blocks from Gloria.

The dreaded Monday morning managers' meeting had not been held with any great regularity in the most recent months. This was largely because the elder Wilhelms were not coming in as often as they had, at least not before noon, and they were the ones most concerned with having it. On days they didn't show up it was common for Steven to send an email canceling it, under the pretext of a scheduling conflict. The news was always greeted with smiles.

But this particular Monday morning the entire Wilhelm entourage was on site and the meeting was to get started on time and would everyone please make sure to get to the conference room beforehand so as not to delay anything. Steven also mentioned in his rallying email that he and his parents had to leave the office right after the meeting.

It was typical of Morgan to go through with the charade of the managers' meeting, despite being pressed for time. He had to be assured he was getting his bang for his buck as always. Fortunately, the hurried pace of the meeting kept it short. As everyone singled out of the conference room Felix took the opportunity to tap Marty Ostler on the shoulder.

"Marty, what's up?"

"Oh nothing much, Felix, how about you?"

"Same here. Listen, I need to discuss some freight issues with you?"

Marty was mildly surprised by this. His work and that of Felix rarely intersected.

"Oh, OK, you want to do this now, Felix?"

"Yeah, that would be great. Why not just do it here now?"

They both remained in the now empty conference room and sat.

"So what's going on?" asked Marty.

"Well, Marty, I've been thinking... there must be some way we can get a better handle on our freight charges."

"I don't understand," Marty said. "We do have a handle on them. I keep a log of the freight dollars we are eating for every shipment."

Felix sat looking at Marty, not speaking. Marty, expecting further input from Felix, looked puzzled. "Well, Felix?" he asked.

"Marty," Felix began slowly, "I didn't ask for this meeting so we could talk about freight issues." He paused before he went on. "Why did you give the copy of the cancelled purchase order to Gloria?"

It took a second for Marty to register the question he had just been asked. Then he turned pale.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's a simple question, Marty. Why did you give the copy of the cancelled purchase order to Gloria?"

"How did you find out? Did she tell you?"

"No, and it doesn't matter how I found out."

"Do the Wilhelms know?" Marty's fear was obvious.

"No, and they're not going to know."

"Why not? Why won't you tell them?"

"I have my reasons." Felix said. "Now, answer my question. Why did you do it?"

Marty's shoulders hunched and he looked down shamefully into his hands. He was a man in his mid-fifties, out of shape and tired looking. "I felt bad for her," he admitted. "Plus, there was some money in it for me."

"How much?"

"Five hundred bucks." He looked up at Felix. "It seemed like such a harmless thing to give to her. And she kept asking for it once I told her about it. She wouldn't lay off."

"Well, Marty, I can assure you it wasn't harmless. I almost got killed because of it."

"How so?" Marty asked, frowning.

"Let's just say the information fell into the wrong hands in the end. And what do you mean by 'once I told her about it'?"

"She called up one day asking if there was any business going with a particular agent called Charlie. I knew we had started down that road, because you had made a trip to the port in my car, so once I started talking about it, one thing led to another, and then I was telling her about the scrapped plans to increase production. Once I said that, she was begging me for some proof, so I made a photocopy of the darn purchase order from the filing cabinet. And I gave it to her one night after work."

In a diner across town I bet, thought Felix. She must have had dealings with Charlie in the past, too. Otherwise, how could he have known how to contact her at home? Felix wondered how much Charlie paid her.

"I just did it to get her off my back," Marty went on. "She was already driving me crazy with other stuff."

"What other stuff?"

"She kept asking me to delete some files from the network here. I told her that I couldn't even get into the files because I didn't have the correct authorization."

"Did she tell you why she wanted them deleted, Marty?"

"No, I have no idea. And I didn't like the idea of doing it at all." He looked again at Felix. His eyes were moist with tears. "I'm just not like that, Felix. Doing dishonest things. I wanted to get her off my back, I tell you. Felix, I'm really sorry about what happened with Charlie. I felt really bad when you told me the deal had fallen through. I knew what I did had something to do with it."

"It's OK, Marty, just forget about it. It may have been for the best"

He left Marty alone at the conference room table.

It was February 4th, the night before Felix's new birthday. They both were in the habit now of going to bed early, Sarah needing as much rest as she could get. Felix lingered awake for a while after Sarah had fallen asleep. There was to be a celebration the next day, a small one, with just the two of them. There was a cake in the fridge.

It was an odd feeling, he admitted to himself, having the date of one's birth altered. His birthdays were not the highlight of his year, by any measure, when he was growing up but it was a day when the people at St. Myrtle's made that little extra effort to make him feel special. Times

like that were rare in his childhood. Since Sarah came into his life that had changed. There was never a day when he wasn't made to feel special, and it was shocking to him how quickly he had come to take it for granted, such was the deep love that flowed from her to him. He fell asleep and began to dream.

He found himself in a large board room, with a beautiful long oak table and walls with wood panels to match. Portraits of gentlemen hung all around the room. There were many people seated at the table. He recognized several. All three Wilhelms were there, and Billy Stokes. He also knew some of the other faces. They had been to the office for those meetings that no one else was invited to. There were heaps of papers in front of everyone. There was a lot of chatting going on, and laughter. Then Felix realized that he wasn't there himself, or at least they couldn't see or hear him. He was witnessing but not participating. A man at the head of the table started talking.

"OK, let's see if we can get started," he announced above the noise of the group.

Some people, most likely his staff, paid heed immediately and stopped talking. Others took a few seconds longer. Soon everyone was silent and listening attentively.

"We are here today," the man began, "to close out a deal that a lot of people in this room have spent long hours working on."

"Hear, hear." someone said.

"Yes," the man went on, "today is the day that our bank can help two wonderful people, Morgan and Sandra Wilhelm, get started on a retirement they so fully deserve. And, just as importantly, help a young entrepreneur, a special talent by any reckoning, get started on what we predict will be a meteoric rise in the business world. I refer, of course, to Steven Wilhelm."

The room burst into applause, lasting almost a minute. The Wilhelms sat smiling, with more than a hint of embarrassment. Morgan squeezed his son's shoulder tightly. The man raised his hand for quiet.

"Our bank has always worked to help people realize their dreams. And so we are delighted today to finance the sale of Morgan Wilhelm's company from father to son. Morgan, would you like to say a few words before we begin?" He turned the floor over to Morgan Wilhelm.

"Most certainly I would like to do so, Mr. Kelly, Don. I may call you Don, I'm sure."

Don Kelly, bank president, smiled and nodded.

"Sandra and I," Morgan began, "started our little company so many years ago, yet it is time that has gone by as quickly as a summer shower. Believe me when I tell you we started with nothing and it is in such situations that you have everything to lose. What if we had failed, and instead of profits had ended up with debt? But we didn't fail, we succeeded. We succeeded because we worked hard and ran our business with integrity. Relationships were key for us, with our customers, our suppliers and our staff. Yes, without some great people working for us through the years we would not be having this happy meeting today. And I plan to divert some of our nest egg back to them through stock ownership in the new company. It is the least I can do. And we succeeded beyond our wildest expectations in recent years due to Steven's genius. Words fail me when I try to express how truly proud I am of my son."

Morgan was overcome with emotion. He turned to Steven. His eyes were sparkling. "Steven, my boy, well done. I think the time has come for you to lead. Stand up and speak to us."

The room exploded with applause. Steven stood up. He shook his father's hand. His height gave him the stature he needed then.

"Thanks Dad, I may call you 'Dad', correct?" The meeting burst into laughter, and then was silent again.

"I've been blessed," Steven began, "to say the least, to have been born into this family. My parents have been an inspiration to me my whole life, and I am filled with happiness to know that I can help them enjoy many years ahead without worry. Morgan and Sandra let me blossom as a businessman. I do not take lightly the opportunity I was given, when so many other talented people do not get such a forum in which to grow. Their support has been invaluable, and I thank



them for that." He turned to his parents and the clapping resumed. A moment later Steven continued.

"Now we must look to the future, and that future is bright. We have a company well-positioned to grow in market share, and also to push the growth of the market overall. I promise you my commitment is to all the company's stakeholders; its shareholders, its customers, its staff, its lenders, its vendors, and the public. I will continue to reinforce our guiding principles, as laid down by our founders at the very start, as we grow to be a major international force." More applause. People rose to their feet. Steven smiled broadly. Don Kelly called the meeting to order again after he allowed the swell of celebration to subside.

"Eloquent words, young man." he said. "You inspire great confidence, especially in me, and that's important!" More laughter. "So, let's get on with it then, shall we?"

Papers were passed back and forth. A lot of people were signing documents, especially the Wilhelms. Felix imagined how cramped their hands must feel from so much writing. Every so often Don Kelly, or his designee, would explain sections from various documents.

Felix gathered from his dream that Steven was buying the company from his father, with the bank financing the deal. It was a considerable risk on Steven's part, but he had the drive and ambition for it, Felix thought. It wouldn't be wise to bet against him.

Then the meeting took a different course. It was Sandra who brought up the matter of the investigation of the theft.

"I just want to assure everyone that the matter of the dishonest employees is being dealt with," she said, when the meeting had reached a period of general discussion. "Most likely, we will not be able to recover much of the stolen money, and it's a considerable amount, all told. But we intend to prosecute the matter to the furthest extent allowed by law." And she added, on the verge of weeping, "Such things can happen to anyone, I guess. We trusted someone and we were betrayed."

"Yes, Mrs. Wilhelm," added Don Kelly, sympathetically. "It is unfortunate that this matter arose, causing a delay in the sale of your company to your son, but we are fully satisfied that the matter is being dealt with and the former employee in question poses no further risk to the company's assets."

Another voice interjected. It was Billy Stokes, CFO. "Mr. Kelly, I still would like to provide some additional background to the matter and speak to where it currently stands, for the sake of complete disclosure to all parties."

"Sure, Mr. Stokes, by all means, go ahead."

"The matter concerns a former employee named Gloria Silvestri. Over the course of this past summer, prior to me joining the company of course, it was discovered that this employee, a person entrusted with considerable fiscal responsibility, was involved in fraudulent activity."

Some eyebrows around the table were raised.

"She was immediately dismissed. Originally it was found that she had created a purchase order to a fictitious company in the amount of two hundred dollars, and cashed the check herself. Since she herself reviewed all cancelled checks sent back to the company she was well-placed to make sure her nefarious activities remained hidden. At the time she was fired it was not clear how deeply involved she was in such dishonest transactions, but an ongoing investigation has revealed that the amount of swindling she did could be, as Mrs. Wilhelm alluded to, in the region of one hundred thousand dollars."

There was an audible gasp from those assembled.

"On the up-side the rot has stopped. And we are gathering information to press charges. We are close to notifying the authorities."

"Do you think Silvestri is a flight risk?" It was one of the many attorneys present who asked.

"Actually, no. We have reason to believe she thinks she has covered her tracks."

"In what way?"

"Some files went missing recently from our computer network which provided an audit trail of her activities. Files containing lists of check numbers. To anyone not familiar with the situation they appear as a meaningless list of numbers, but we knew what we were looking for. And then they went missing. But we had already copied the files off site before they disappeared, luckily. The check amounts were typically quite small, so as not to arouse suspicion I assume, which logically means there was a huge number of these false payments. Without those check numbers we may never have had the resources to unearth all she did. And I know that was an important component to laying this matter to rest so we could proceed with the sale of the company."

"Mr. Stokes, I have a question." It was one of Don Kelly's assistants that spoke.

"Yes, of course, please."

"Mrs. Wilhelm mentioned 'dishonest employees', and from what you were saying also, I assume that there is an accomplice."

"Yes, indeed. And we have reason to believe that same person was also instrumental in the scuttling of an overseas contract we had negotiated recently. But, we are close to identifying that person also, and will move against both of them at the earliest opportunity. We understand only too well how important this is to the reputation of our business, and to the confidence of our investors."

The shock woke Felix from this dream. It was like one of those dreams where he would think he was falling off a cliff and would wake up just as he hit the ground. The sheets were drenched in his sweat. He looked at his bedside clock. It was 4:11 a.m. This can't be, he said to himself. It was a nightmare. This can't be happening.

He got up and walked to the room where he had his home computer. Sarah slept on, peacefully. He booted up the machine. He had remote access to the company network. While the computer was cycling through its start up, he pulled out the diskette from his desk drawer. He was praying fearfully now. When the computer was fully booted he logged on to the network through his Internet connection. He opened one of the files on the diskette. He copied one of the numbers in the file to the clipboard. He opened up the enterprise financial package for his company. Please, God, let this not be a check number, he pleaded feverishly. He opened one of the Accounts Payable screens, the one for querying check numbers. He pasted the number into the query field and clicked 'GO'. He closed his eyes. Then he opened them. Before him on the computer monitor was a screen with details of a check, made out to a company he had never heard of. He buried his face in his hands. The snake, he whimpered, the lying snake! She really played me!

There was one last shred of hope. He opened another screen to query numbers of accounts in the general ledger. Maybe, by some fluke, the number just happened to be the same as a check number. He pasted the number from the clipboard in the query field and clicked 'GO'. No match found.

He closed the financial package. He copied the three files from the diskette back to the directory on the company network from where he had erased them. He went back to his bed. Maybe the dream was just a warning. And now I've set things right again, he thought. He tried to sleep again, but couldn't.

The light of morning came. Felix watched the dawn creep into their room from around the curtains on the window. Eventually Sarah's nightlight was drowned in daylight. Birds were singing just as on any summer morning, except it was the 5th of February. Happy birthday, Felix, he said to himself. He got up, showered and dressed. He went back in to their bedroom to say goodbye to Sarah before he left.

"Happy Birthday," she told him, sleepily. She giggled. "When you get home we'll have our little party."

"Yes, my love," he said, "When I get home."

The commute to work was like any other morning. First the car ride to the subway, then spending ten minutes looking for a parking spot, then walking the last few blocks to the station, and then riding the train to the city. He got to his job a little earlier than usual. Some people were there already, including Steven. He sat at his desk, ready to begin another day.

About an hour later, after everyone had come in, including the elder Wilhelms, Steven opened his door and called out to Felix.

"Felix! Come on in, I want to have a word with you."

Felix smiled, to hide his fear. Let this not be it, he thought. He went in and sat with Steven, looking up as usual. He glanced around Steven's office.

"Felix," Steven began, "I want to share some good news with you. I'll be sharing the news with everyone else here as the day progresses."

Felix was reassured by Steven's words. He was beginning to relax when Steven's phone rang.

"Oh, I've been expecting this. Just a moment, Felix." Steven picked up the phone. "Yes, yes, that's OK. Yes." He hung up.

"OK, where was I?"

"You were about to share some good news with me, Steven."

"Of course, of course. Well, here's the thing. My parents are retiring and I'm buying them out. I'll be the new CEO!"

"Well, Steven, that's just great news!" Felix was thanking God he had not been identified as Gloria's accomplice. Steven wouldn't have been telling him this otherwise. "Congratulations to you and your parents. They deserve it!" He almost meant what he was saying. On the train to work he had prayed so hard for it to be just a normal day that he told God he would be happy, no delighted, to go back to being just Felix the down-trodden employee. Compared to being arrested that would be a wonderful life.

"And," Steven continued, with a bright smile, "Morgan is giving stock in the new company to all employees, and some past employees also."

"How generous!" Felix said.

Steven sat back. After a moment he looked down from his vantage point and said "Well, Felix, I just wanted to share the news with you. Now you'll have something to talk about with the police officer waiting outside the door, to take you downtown, as they say on TV."

Oh no, it was all over. Felix's heart sank.

"You know, you showed such promise, Felix. I wish things were different."

Tears had begun to roll down Felix's cheeks. "I'm sorry, Steven. I got caught up in something. I couldn't stop myself."

Steven got up, walked around Felix, who had slumped forward, his head in his hands, and opened his office door. A uniformed police officer stood there. Felix had not moved. He continued to sit with his back to them both. He was starting to feel the grip of panic overcome him. The baby was coming and he was going to jail. It was all wrong. The police officer came and stood beside him.

"Sir," he said, "You need to come with me. Please stand up so I can put on your handcuffs and read you your rights."

Felix looked up at the police officer, a young man, perhaps in his early twenties. Then Felix jumped up and started running. He ran across the floor of the Wilhelms' company, past his desk where he had sat for long hours, missing his Sarah, past all the other workers, all looking up at him in amazement, past Marty Ostler, past the receptionist and onto the emergency stairs by the elevator. Behind him he could hear the police officer call out and then give chase.

Felix was outside the building in seconds, running on the street to the subway station. I've got to get to Sarah, he kept telling himself, I'll be safe there. If I get to her I'll be safe. Everything will be fine. All my mistakes will wash away.

He pushed his way through the pedestrians on the sidewalks and darted dangerously through the traffic. He could hear people in his wake curse at him. Cars honked at him. He

reached the train station and ran down into it, jumping the turnstile. He had outrun the police officer. He couldn't understand how. The man was so much younger. Felix had run faster than he had ever run in his life. His train was pulling into the station. He jumped on it when it came to a halt. As the doors closed and the train began to move he saw the young police officer coming down the steps into the station.

He looked around. The car was empty. He sat. He was panting, out of breath from running. He prayed every inch of track on the way home to get to Sarah safely. He cursed the train each time it stopped at a station. Soon the car in which he was riding was full of people, many standing. At each of the many stations on his way home a police officer stood on duty, watching.

The train reached the stop before his and then moved on again. He stood up. He tried to make his way to the door of the train, but it was too crowded to do so. The train arrived at his station. He waited while those in front of him got off, moving along closely behind them, almost tapping their heels with the toes of his shoes. He stepped onto the platform. A uniformed police officer was standing close by. The officer surveyed the crowd. Felix walked with a slouch, trying to avert his face from the policeman's gaze. He glanced sideways as he passed him. The officer noticed Felix and continued to look at him from behind. Felix saw this when he glanced back quickly over his shoulder. Another train was coming into the station from the opposite direction, across the platform on the other track. Felix wanted to run but he couldn't. He wanted to get to Sarah. There were too many people between him and the stairs down to the street. He looked back again over his shoulder. He saw the police officer still looking at him. There were two old ladies in front of Felix, talking to each other, moving at a pace even slower than the rest of the crowd. They're blocking me, Felix thought to himself, enraged, stupid old bags! He was furious at these two strangers. Adrenaline was rushing around in his body. The other train was coming down the opposite track. Its noise was beginning to overpower everything. Felix couldn't hold back. He had to get to Sarah. She would make everything alright again. She would protect him. He tried to brush past the two women, pushing one to the ground as he did, but he stumbled on her as she fell and lost his balance. He stumbled over the edge of the platform and into the path of the incoming train. There was no time to cry out to God for help as he came in contact with a train which, had it arrived a minute before or a minute later, would not have been there to harm him.

**IMPORTANT:** For final chapter, return to [www.muffledsounds.com](http://www.muffledsounds.com) .