

MORGAN
BEARS UP



Donald Dewey

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by Donald Dewey

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Morgan knew he had lost his life somewhere between YOUR WIFE and THE OFFICE. That was good news and bad news. It was good because the route separating YOUR WIFE from THE OFFICE was a direct path to and from a subway ride, so that simply retracing his steps on the train should have enabled him to retrieve himself. It was bad for several reasons: because he'd lost himself in the first place, because his secretary Alex so resented his marriage she refused to write anything but YOUR WIFE on the pink message slips when Felicia called, and because Felicia had become so suspicious of his frequent overnight meetings she refused to tag Alex's calls home as coming from anything but THE OFFICE.

In addition to the good news and the bad news, there was also the middling news that Morgan felt obligated to act on the awareness of having mislaid his life. Certainly, there was nothing neatly good or neatly bad about his compulsion to find clarity, to get down on his knees and blow away all the dust balls that had gathered around his relations with the two most prominent women in his life. A housecleaning of the kind required an emotional effort that logic was powerless to brand either good or bad since the product of his resolve promised to be one part pain and one part relief if he succeeded, one part pain and one part relief if he failed. How more middling could the news be?

Given these gray prospects, Morgan thought as he munched his breakfast CHEERIOS, a more radical man wouldn't bother to bound out on the trail to begin with. But since he had never been a radical, had in fact always been committed to the twilight of the human condition, he knew better than to be taken in by such wistfulness. And so it was that even as he tried to control his resentment toward the challenge that awaited him on the way to THE OFFICE, he stepped out of his cave (the abode of YOUR WIFE) to discover where he had misplaced himself.

Morgan found nothing in the hall over to the elevator. The cats in the building had obviously had another lustful night, and it was labor enough for him to suspend his breathing for the ride down to the lobby without also having to look for fragments of a human being. He wouldn't have liked finding traces of himself in the elevator anyway. The car was a dingy box that, even when it didn't smell of screwing felines, offered

nothing in the way of epiphanies except a reminder that J. HENNING had come by every year for the last four years to be sure the cables worked. Morgan had never approached himself as a piece of machinery requiring maintenance, had always liked to think of himself as part of the animal species, and he had no desire to go back on that now. He felt a distinct relief when the elevator finally landed and the sliding door supported the judgment of J. HENNING that no major repair work was necessary.

In the lobby, Morgan put on his headphones. He didn't see any conflict of interest between his quest and Yuri Temirkanov conducting the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony. On the contrary, it was important to conduct his search under as many of the same conditions in which he had gotten lost, and these had included the lush, melodic sounds of the Temirkanov ensemble. Temirkanov had actually been a witness to his disappearance, maybe the only one, and that struck him as appropriate insofar as Temirkanov had also witnessed the disappearance of the Soviet Union. He needed all his hairs to count the number of CDs he had upstairs of Temirkanov conducting Soviet orchestras before they had become nonexistent and Yuri had been forced to wander from one continent to another seeking new oboes and bassoons until landing with the Royal Philharmonic. Morgan thought it a bracing coincidence.

On the street, he kept his eyes on the asphalt, alert for anything out of the ordinary. He didn't want to step over his missing self --- as, it occurred to him, his father would have urged him to do. "If you see a dime on the street, Morgan," his father had been fond of saying, "keep walking. It's there because it belongs there, and you never take what doesn't belong to you."

"But, Father," he had protested, "the sidewalk can't spend money."

"Who told you that?"

"A sidewalk's not human. It doesn't have expenses."

"Okay, Morgan, you know everything. Just don't go picking up any dimes when you're out walking with me."

Morgan had never understood his father's aversion to picking up money; it had been just one more chasm that had separated them until the old grouch's death. But this morning, he couldn't entertain filial sentimentality as an excuse for not being vigilant for that very special piece of sidewalk effluvium with his name on it.

And then, STICK-TO-ITIVENESS siring GARBAGE, he saw it! He couldn't mistake the personal message glittering out to him from the hedges of Number 347. The

Royal Philharmonic had sensed it, too, because it chose that moment to go into the most exalting crescendo of the symphony's first movement. Morgan was shaking as he extended his hand toward the hedges. He hadn't smoked a cigarette in years, not since Felicia had shamed him into quitting by marching into the kitchen and slamming all the windows shut and turning on the gas jets whenever he lighted up, but he had no doubt the gold foil from the package he now lifted off the hedges had a vital connection to what he was looking for.

For a long moment, Morgan stood studying his find, holding it above his head until the morning sun made it gleam. He realized what the connection was between the tinfoil and what he was looking for: Just as he had stopped smoking, he had quit his life, but neither thing had gone away easily. His life too continued to litter private greens and public thoroughfares, remained entangled in bushes, shone out to him as a unique find. He had mislaid something no other animal on the planet --- past, present, or future --- could have misplaced; he had mislaid the one and only MORGAN. Nobody else could have lost that particular creature and nobody else could retrieve it for him. It was up to him, and solely up to him, to restore the NATURAL BALANCE OF THINGS.

Morgan felt regenerated as he entered the corner store billing itself as HOT MEALS AND TOYS and asked the Pakistani behind the counter for a box of Marlboro. When the Pakistani asked him for \$12.00, he laughed; in his new vigor, he was even up for the sour-looking man's chicanery.

"Not enough," the Pakistani repeated, all but spitting at the five-dollar bill on the counter. "There must be paid seven dollars more."

"Why? They filled with diamonds?"

"I do not ask. But cigarettes now costing twelve dollars."

Something about the man's earnestness and the Philharmonic's glockenspiel persuaded Morgan he wasn't being conned, that he had probably missed a great many dollars of his life since smoking last. "Many customers are to be told this," the counterman said, relieved to grab the other bills from Morgan's paw. "This is my service here --- to tell customers the latest taxes and price rises, yes?"

"You say so."

“My family is happy to be in America. But there are things to be learned about taxes every day. I do not solicit from a customer one penny we do not pay ourselves. Maybe you would like two boxes so you do not have to return this evening?”

“One’s enough.”

The man nodded readily. “More than enough. They are not good for you. They will make you suffer and give you a painful death. I think there are too many people listening to whatever they are offered. My family was offered nothing when we came here. We only took advantage.”

Morgan might have been listening to his mother; she had been a big one for taking advantage, too. She had never missed a sale in the city, so that their home had turned into the MORGAN WAREHOUSE. Dishes depicting the cast of SEVEN BRIDES FOR SEVEN BROTHERS dancing outside a log cabin. Pocket radios in all the closets in case he and his father had ever wanted to tune in every station in the country at the same time. Table-tray sets for when the Chinese army dropped by for a snack. “When something breaks, we always have the replacement right here,” his mother had been fond of saying. “We won’t have to call some overnight operator on those 800 numbers. You know what kind of people THEY are. Never buy an important item in an emergency, Morgan. They’ll cheat you. That’s why they have 800 numbers. Look at the letters that spells out.”

Morgan had looked, but had been stymied. The eight had been the equivalent of TUV and the zeros OPER. He hadn’t discerned any message at all, even when he had doubled the OPER for the zeroes and tried every possible anagram (PERUVOT? VOPERUT? OPREVOPERUT?). But his mother had only given him a knowing nod when he had reported his failure to her. “Just keep in mind what I said,” she had repeated. “The people who associate with 800 numbers are frauds.”

The Pakistani gave him a philosophical nod. “Your mother, she was also a merchant?” he asked.

Morgan smiled and walked out of the store without replying. He felt more HUMAN remembering his mother.

Morgan decided to have a cigarette right away. As he slipped the cellophane off the pack, Jack Roosevelt hurried by, as usual not bothering even to nod. Morgan was used to Roosevelt's paranoia. The ladle-jawed doofus was so wary of saying HI, MORGAN and getting involved in conversation that Morgan had once caught him stalling in front of the shoemaker's so that Morgan would stay comfortably ahead of him up the block. Morgan laughed at the memory of that evening now as he inhaled his first cigarette in six years. To thwart Roosevelt that evening, he had resorted to counter-stalling in front of the tailor's, pretending to be interested in the neighborhood's shoulder pads. By the time Roosevelt had finally given in and approached, Morgan had been disturbed by the possibility that every man and woman in the neighborhood suffered from an advanced case of SCARECROW SHOULDERS. "Hello, Morgan," Roosevelt had muttered that evening, tearing past him.

"Hey, Jack! So what do you make of this Middle East business?"

Roosevelt had been taken aback enough for Morgan to draw abreast of him and see the hatred in the man's eyes. "What do I care about crap like that? That's for the politicians."

"Really? I thought you were a Palestinian man."

"What??!!"

"But I never understood what faction."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, Morgan."

"Palestinians. On the West Bank."

"They better stay there if they know what's good for them."

"Oh, right, *that's* your position!"

"You're a troublemaker, Morgan. And I'm late for dinner."

"All the best, Jack."

"Fuck you."

Morgan smiled at the memory with his second drag. The exquisite nicotine vertigo made him feel creative; he just couldn't think of anything to create. But feeling a new confidence in his body, he waited until Temirkanov silenced the timpani, then crossed the street to the tailor's. He paused before Schlomo's window, in front of the STANDARD PRICE LIST posted in English and Hebrew. He remembered Schlomo's

wife had been the one to recommend he and Felicia go see Happy Cunningham. He was sorry he remembered that. It worked against his nicotine high.

He could still shudder at that Friday morning in the doctor's office. Happy Cunningham had just delivered the tidings that Morgan was as sterile as Felicia had already proven to be infertile, so can those plans for artificial insemination and forget about worrying that the woman picked to bear his sperm might come back to hit them with a BABY M lawsuit. Indeed, Happy Cunningham had proclaimed rocking back and forth in his high leather chair, "the two of you are so barren together you're practically a royal family." Morgan had needed a good five seconds to get the asinine pun --- about twice as long as he had needed to see the satisfaction on Felicia's face that she was merely one of two juiceless apples in the orchard and that she no longer had to view him as MORGAN WHO DESERVED BETTER THAN A WOMAN INCAPABLE OF GIVING HIM CUBS AND WHO WASN'T SUCH A HOT COOK, EITHER. In the few seconds it had taken Happy Cunningham to deliver his finding, Morgan had gone from marital martyr to the flip side of YOUR WIFE --- to MY HUSBAND.

"You're imagining things," Felicia had said, waving gaily for a cab outside Cunningham's office.

"I'm not! You're acting like MISERY LOVES COMPANY!"

He'd been right, of course, but he had been easily diverted that day by the way she had wrapped her legs around him in the back of the cab. "You're my husband," she had purred, not worried about the reaction of YURI KHATURIAN, LICENSE NO. 43561. "We can make it forever and not have to worry about the consequences."

"I thought we WANTED to worry about the consequences."

"That was yesterday, Morgan."

"Right. Before....." The word STERILITY had evaporated on his tongue before YURI KHATURIAN, LICENSE NO. 43561 had overheard it and passed it around the Armenian community. And with his silence at that moment, because he had been intimidated by the possible mockery of some old Armenian refugee he'd never met playing checkers on a boardwalk bench in Brighton Beach, willing himself to feel only the sharp nail of Felicia's big toe climbing under his trousers and getting entangled in his calf hair, Morgan had essentially accepted the role of MY HUSBAND.

Felicia with the landlord: "You better talk to MY HUSBAND about your damn rent increase."

Felicia with a TIME magazine telemarketer: “MY HUSBAND hates your crummy magazine. Call again and I’ll call the cops.”

Felicia with her father: “Morgan is MY HUSBAND, Daddy. I can’t just fly off to Bermuda with you and leave him here.”

And MY HUSBAND? Who was he? The Morgan who had taken over the Morgan he had always been. The Morgan who was only Morgan in the way BODY SNATCHERS were the people they replaced once they came out of their gourd husks. Their fur might have looked the same, but they were the worst kind of imitation.

Morgan shook off his reverie before the sight of Schlomo pointing threateningly at his telephone. He had forgotten the Lubavitcher didn’t tolerate people staring at his STANDARD PRICE LIST too long and was in the habit of calling Lube Mayer’s neighborhood association if he decided the staring had gone on beyond reason. He moved away from the window to avoid more trouble. The last thing he needed was Lube Mayer.

Morgan already had his METROCARD out when he encountered his second clue. It wasn't as blatant as the cigarette foil on the hedges, but he recognized it all the same. It was a notice in the window of the barber shop offering a position to a MANICURIST. How many similar signs had he investigated over the years to get away from his suffocating job of the moment? How many mornings had he bought the paper and turned immediately to the slave opportunities --- DELIVERY BOY FOR HIGHRISE CONSTRUCTION WORKERS, ASBESTOS TESTER, HYPODERMIC RECYCLER? Morning after morning, when the thought of having to spend another day in a mail room or at some market research desk had made him want to staple his past and future together, he had put his feet up, blanketed his crotch with the WANT ADS, and fantasized about all the cryptic worlds that waited merely one telephone call away. CALL WALTER 563-8733. EXCITING OPPORTUNITY, MRS. BARNES AT 489-2310. BORED WITH WHERE YOU ARE? ASK FOR HERB, 345-5467. The mislaid Morgan had been familiar with those worlds. He had run numbers for Ma Grasso before the state lottery had put her out of business. He had hustled tourists for the Victory Hotel before the wrecking ball had reduced the place to hard plastic tables and soft plastic ketchup bottles. He had driven trucks filled with nitroglycerin to Philadelphia and buses filled with illegal

Hondurans across the Canadian border. When had he bargained away his zest for those adventures to sit at a desk calculating prices for an original edition of “Goldilocks” or a Cubs uniform once worn by Sammy Sosa?

The day he had gone to the JOB FAIR, that was when. He had ponied up the eight-dollar ADMISSION PRICE with little on his mind except to size up the varieties of dead-end positions with his name on them, never imagining his life was about to molt. Then, on AISLE 3, TABLE 4, at FIELDS VARIETIES, right between STRING AND YOU and A HARDWARE’S NIGHT, he had come across the nervous little man with more hair on his sideburns than on the top of his head. Bernard Fields, as he introduced himself, had been flabbergasted that somebody had actually stopped to look closely at his SMOKEY THE BEAR posters, key chains shaped like bear claws, and YETI YOGURT.

“How did you get into bears?”, he had asked Bernard Fields.

“My old man.”

“He sold things like this?”

“No. Bull things. You wanted anything to do with Chicago basketball, china shops, or old-time cops, you went to my old man. Was on welfare his whole life, and that meant my mother and me were, too. I vowed to myself never to go into the bull business.”

“Okay, no bulls. But why bears?”

Bernard Fields had taken forever to size him up, to be sure he wasn’t wired for whatever competition the man fantasized having. Finally, he had whispered: “Because one of them pinch-hit for me in a fight.”

It had been one of the strangest stories Morgan had heard up to that time; it still ranked in his TOP TEN STRANGE STORIES. As Bernard Fields had told it, he had gotten into a shouting match with a stevedore and his friends one night in a waterfront bar. Then the stevedore had invited him outside to settle their argument with fists. Bernard Fields had not wanted to go outside, but had seen little alternative with the stevedore’s friends threatening to tear him apart if he didn’t go. His compromise had been to order another shot before going outside to meet his doom, and this the sneering bartender had gladly conceded. Bernard Fields had downed the shot and then walked out the door. Whatever he had been dreading, it hadn’t been the sight of a brown bear tearing apart the stevedore.

“I couldn’t believe it!”, as he had exclaimed to Morgan at the JOB FAIR. “The bear wasn’t even doing your average one-two one-two. It was whack in the face, claw down the guy’s stomach, then a big roaring charge that sent the guy over a car. And then while this slug is getting to his feet, the bear looks over to me and grins. I don’t know how I knew what to do, but I did --- I grinned back. And just like that, the bear vanished into thin air. I was so dumbfounded I wasted a few seconds before I remembered to go over and give the slug a kick in the balls that sent him down for good. All the other longshoremen bought me a drink! Turned out they never liked the guy anyway, said he was a know-it-all.”

Morgan hadn’t known what to say. At that moment it had still been nothing more than the strangest story he had ever heard.

“The guardian bears!” Bernard Fields had explained to his stupor. “They’re all over Scandinavian stories. Sometimes the berserkers, the warriors, slept in when they were supposed to be out fighting, so the bears took their place until the sleepyheads woke up, strapped on their armor, and got down to where the fighting was. Then the bears turned things back over to their humans and disappeared. It was my guardian bear filling in for me! How could I *not* go into the bear business after that?”

Morgan had shaken his head. It had been another reasonable question to which he had had no answer. “So you’ve made a success of yourself.”

Bernard Fields had paled before such a claim; the hand straightening out the Boston Bruins logos had shaken so much he might have had what had once been called the PALSY. “I’ll give you a few items on consignment for now,” he had stuttered to change the subject. “See how you do with them and then you decide if you can make a go of it. And I’ll tell you what. I’ll even throw in a desk in my office.”

That had been before the office had become THE OFFICE, Morgan thought now, shaking his head at Tony DeLuca’s sign for a MANICURIST. And it had sealed his fate as MY HUSBAND, the dealer of bear trinkets, the respectable citizen who would never think of going inside to ask Tony DeLuca if his manicurist was paid by the hour or by the nail.

Morgan stood uncertainly near the turnstile. What should he do in the face of the breakdown? If he swept his METROCARD through the slot and went through the turnstile, he would have been committed to milling around on the platform with the hundreds of other commuters already waiting for service to be restored. On the other hand, if he went back up the steps to the street and walked two blocks over to the No. 2 train, he would have had to put off searching for himself for another day. He might not have known exactly where he had mislaid himself, but he knew it hadn't been anywhere near the No. 2 train.

“And they want to raise the fares! I'll raise their fares for them! I'll raise them right up their.....!”

Morgan turned off Rachmaninoff. Even the Royal Philharmonic was no match for Billy Cowan.

“They want a boost? I'll give 'em a boost! Right up.....!”

It had been years since Billy Cowan had worked as a bartender at the Crystal Palace Lounge, and Morgan hadn't seen him much since he had switched to guidance counseling, but he had clearly never lost his habit of waiting for others to complete his angry oaths for him. “You have to wonder, don't you, Billy?”

“No, Morgan, I don't wonder at all. Wondering's for dreamy heads. Just leave me alone with the people running this system and I'll.....!”

“I know what you mean.”

“I'd.....!”

“Exactly.”

Billy Cowan looked satisfied to be understood. An elderly Korean couple standing near the turnstile looked at the ex-bartender as though he had two heads --- both of which deserved respect.

“So you miss the Crystal Palace Lounge much?” Morgan asked, giving himself another moment to decide what to do.

“You nuts? The only sunlight in that place was on the beer posters.”

“I thought you liked it.”

Billy Cowan glared over at the booth clerk for leaving him exposed to such questions; the clerk continued eating a Danish and reading the scores. “Yeah, I was born

to it. Soon as I came out of my mother's....., my old man handed out cigars telling everyone I'd grow up to be bartender at the Crystal Palace Lounge."

Morgan could have done without the sarcasm, but he understood it. The only thing worse than not getting what you wanted from life was having gotten what you no longer wanted.

"Isn't it about time you took your face out of that paper?" Billy Cowan demanded of the clerk. "Or how about this? You don't stop munching in there, I'll come in and.....!"

The clerk looked up calmly at Billy Cowan as though he had found a score he had overlooked in his paper. Then he gave Billy Cowan the finger.

"You municipal....., you! You think you can get away with that kind of behavior? I'll.....!"

Morgan knew he had no choice but to go on, straight ahead. He couldn't become bottled up rage like Billy Cowan; that would have been making a mockery of himself. He swept his card through the slot, registered the perfect click, then pushed through the turnstile using only his stomach. He took it as a happy omen that at that very moment, the clerk announced a train would pull into the station imminently.

Morgan was barely in the door when it closed, meaning he was going to be pinned to it for a half-hour. He didn't care; he had his music and his quest. Squeezed between the Latino couple in front of him and the uneven surface of the door glass against his spine, he wouldn't have to reach around clumsily to scratch at his back, either. He could just rub.

Pressing the ON button, he landed in the middle of Rachmaninoff's sumptuous second movement. He was instantly enveloped by an exquisite sense of power that came whenever he switched on music in the middle of a chord --- the rapture that a symphony orchestra had awaited his return, its instruments poised in the air until it saw him rumbling down the aisle to take his seat and received his roar to get on with it.

"I don't like that!"

He couldn't mistake Jack Roosevelt's voice. The doofus was midway down the car, towering over the heads around him.

“I don’t like that!” Roosevelt repeated.

Four or five people near Roosevelt moved, but they couldn’t get far. Roosevelt himself kept his eyes glued to an advertisement for the AVALON COMPUTER INSTITUTE, not daring to look back at whoever was pinching his ass or trying to pinch his wallet. Morgan felt a lurch of sympathy for him: All Jack Roosevelt wanted from life was to ignore it --- something Morgan himself had endeavored to do in his own way. But nobody was ready to let Roosevelt get away with it, just as Morgan was hell bent on the morning not to let himself get away with it. He had never realized before how similar he and the big pelican were.

“I’m going to call a cop!”

The train’s sudden turn squeezed the Latin couple into Morgan’s gut. The woman reddened in embarrassment, her boy friend grunted. Morgan thought he flashed them a classy smile. Even as MY HUSBAND, he liked to think of himself as classy. In fact, the only person who had ever accused him of lacking class was Felicia’s father.

“Knock with three. What you got, Morgan?”

“Two. You lose, Father Carlton.”

“Let me see.”

“Think I’d lie?”

“I want to see.”

“Show him your cards, Morgan, or we’ll never have another hand.”

“I told him I have two, Felicia. He should take my word.”

“I take nothing from you,” Harry Carlton had been fond of saying. “Around here you’re the only one who takes. First my daughter.....Ah! What I thought! Four! You're class all the way, Morgan.”

“I didn’t see it too good.”

“What I told you, Felicia. First he can’t give me grandsons, now he cheats at gin.”

“How could you, Morgan?”

“You told me to make him happy. He caught me cheating, so now he’s happy. What more do you want?”

“Get a divorce, Felicia.”

“Daddy!”

“Marry someone who’ll give me grandsons. The only thing this one has is what he doesn't have.”

Morgan loved the diminuendo of the second movement. All good things ended up going down, he thought; only bad things like Harry Carlton resisted successfully. Harry Carlton was going to live forever because he wasn't going to die until he saw his infertile daughter's cubs. Harry Carlton was going to drag himself through the ages, a gray beard down to his knees, a dirty tunic rotting from his skeleton, his skin all blisters and pustules, casting his sightless eyes into the darkest corners of the land to find those non-existent grandchildren. Morgan envied him. The man not only had something to live for, he had something to live for FOREVER.

The train braked back, hiccuped for a few yards, then halted altogether. Jack Roosevelt braved a glance down at the people standing next to his back pockets, then shot his jaw immediately back up to the AVALON COMPUTER INSTITUTE. The Latin woman mumbled something in Spanish. "In English, Marisa," her boyfriend scolded. "It was good for Jesus Christ and it is good for us."

"I don't like that!"

Morgan recognized the curly head closest to Roosevelt. The yellow yarmulke was part of the uniform of Lube Mayer's association hoods. He wondered what Roosevelt had done to annoy them. Had he stared at Schlomo's STANDARD PRICE LIST too long?

The lights in the car went off.

"OH, GREAT!"

"WHAT THE HELL NOW?"

"ISN'T THIS NICE? PARDON MY HINDI, BUT.....! YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN, RIGHT?"

"I DON'T THINK YOU SHOULD DO THAT ANYMORE."

"WILL SOMEBODY P-U-L-E-S-E SHUT THAT GUY UP?"

Morgan snapped off Rachmaninoff and keened his ears for more than Jack Roosevelt's troubles. "You're in my house now," an old black voice at the end of the car said. "So you owe me rent."

"Get lost, pop."

"I'm not askin' no handout, just what's due me. You got your house where you got it, I got mine here. Everybody in this car owes me the rent."

"Bug off, pop. You stink."

"The Lord Jesus will see us through this," the Latin said.

Marisa nodded. "Amen, Carlos."

Morgan felt gratified to be surrounded by so many voices. The fact was, there had been far too much iPOD, ANSWERING MACHINE, and TELEVISION and far too little HUMAN in his ear lately. How could he *not* have begun to lose himself? Even aggressions of the past now seemed like the halcyon days. He could think back fondly, for instance, on the afternoon Alex's father, Martin Schmidt, had burst into his office trying to unload a ton of Berlin bear emblems from the Nazi era.

"It will happen, Morgan," Schmidt had predicted. "Germany will be great again, and you will be first with these rare trinkets."

"Not with this swastika, Schmidt."

"The swastika is an ancient symbol. It has nothing to do with Nazis."

"Okay, it's me."

"You don't know much about Buddhist iconography and Trojan pottery, do you? The symbol's as old as man. Maybe older."

"Not with the words THIRD REICH all over it."

"Like Germany was the only country with a THIRD REICH? Do I really have to remind you of the Thomas Jefferson Administration in this country? What do you think they called *that*?"

"Tell me."

"Exactly."

"We sell bear emblems here, Schmidt, not politics."

"Oh, pardon me! I didn't know bears were apolitical. Where do you think California got its flag from? Or maybe you never heard of the BEAR STATE and its importance for HUMAN FREEDOM."

"You selling HUMAN FREEDOM or Nazi trinkets, Schmidt?"

"To you they're mutually exclusive?"

"The thought's there."

"You know what freedom is, Morgan?"

"Does anybody?"

"I do," Schmidt had said, whacking the desk with his black cane. "And you know where I learned what it was? In an American prisoner-of-war camp in Waco, Texas while I was learning how to say 'Yup' and whacking scorpions with my boots."

"No kidding."

"You find that humorous?"

“No, Schmidt.”

“Good. Because it wasn’t. Those scorpions were lethal. They crossed the border from Mexico, and that already tells you something.”

“How old are you, Schmidt?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“They lock up fetuses in that prisoner-of-war camp?”

“All right, it was my father, not me. But don't get off the point. Since you've shown no interest in my wares, the least you could do is interview my daughter Alex for a position in your company.”

“How does that follow?”

“Well, *one* of us has to earn a living.”

“My company is me, Schmidt. A small operation.....”

“You don't have to apologize. Interview her and you'll see what she can do for you. You're too young to be a loser.”

The emergency lights blinked once, twice, then came on. Morgan couldn't suppress a start before the unholy glares both Carlos and Marisa were training on him.

“ATTENTION.....FFMMM.....YOUR PATIENCE.”

“Do you believe in Jesus?” Carlos asked him angrily.

Marisa looked mortified. “Carlos!”

“Marisa thinks I should not ask if you believe in Jesus. But if I asked where Broadway was, you would tell me.”

“I suppose.”

“Then when I ask if you know the directions to REDEMPTION, you should not object. What is the importance of knowing where Broadway is if you don't know how to get to REDEMPTION?”

Morgan tried to see past the zealot's shoulder to where the old black guy was covering his head and sobbing because nobody wanted to hand over his rent. “I haven't asked you anything, friend.”

“Because you know where Broadway is. But are you so sure you know where REDEMPTION is? Tell me the address.”

Morgan cringed a second before it happened: The old black man removing his hands from around his head, giving off a mighty snuffle, then crouching down like a lineman to catapult himself back into the professional type who was holding his nose against him. Morgan trembled before the terrifying Banshee cry of --- “GIVE ME WHAT YOU OWE ME!”

“Praise Jesus,” Carlos muttered.

Morgan was appalled as the leather-jacketed bruiser next to the professor grabbed the old man by the stained lapels of his suit coat and raised him off the ground. As if part of a circus act, the suddenly suspended old man began swinging his arms and legs out in every direction under the low ceiling, hitting first a plump woman in the forehead, then the arm of a school girl holding books, then finally scattering everyone so that a big hole opened up for the tough to swing his catch around like some human fan.

“You bother people, moocher, I break your head!”

“That’s telling him!” Billy Cowan called. “You have to tell these.....where to get off!”

“Let me down, you goddamn squatter!”

“And listen to the language!”

Everybody was so busy trying to get away from the spinning bum that Jack Roosevelt collapsed in a hole with only Morgan noticing. Even in the gloom of the emergency lighting, Lube Mayer looked smug as he raised his head from the abyss where Roosevelt had disappeared.

“ATTENTION..... PASSENG.....MMFFF.....PATIENCE.”

Morgan was stunned both events had taken place so quickly, almost in unison. One second, Jack Roosevelt had fallen into his hole and the old panhandler had been hoisted into the air; the next second, Jack Roosevelt was getting to his feet and the old man was back on the ground. Morgan had felt an itch to ACT, but had let both opportunities pass.

“You’re not a beaver, are you?” Alex had asked him fondly that first day in the office.

“I sell bears, not beavers.”

“I’m not talking about what you sell, but what you *are*.”

“And what to you is a beaver?”

“Lots of things,” she’d said, tapping her ashes into a plastic bag she toted with her. “It’s what men call snatch to project their problems.”

“What problems?”

“Their BEAVER problems! When they’re cornered up a tree but still want to think they’re clever, you know what they do, don’t you?”

“Who?”

“BEAVERS!”

“No. What do beavers do when they’re cornered up a tree but still want to think they’re clever?”

“Jesus, Morgan! Wake up and smell the zoology. What a trapped beaver does is bite off his balls because he knows that’s what the hunter’s really after, then he escapes. You think that makes beavers smart?”

“I don’t give a goddamn what it makes them. I’m no beaver.”

“I was beginning to wonder.”

“I sell bear emblems, not beaver emblems.”

“Just keep that in mind.”

“*Ja, Kommandant!*”

She had smiled. “My old man charmed you with all that Hitler shit and his Americana, didn’t he?”

“No, Alex, he didn’t charm me.”

“Don’t underrate him. That’s not the only crap he knows everything about. He’s also the last word on bears and sin.”

“Glad to hear he’s so versatile.”

“THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS, if you follow my meaning.”

“I’m sure I don’t, Alex.”

“The bear in the Middle Ages! All those monks without socks and round holes on their head didn’t like the way people were obsessed with bears. Totemism, animism, all that jive. So they made the bear a symbol for everything evil to scare away people. All the deadly sins --- sloth, lust, greed, pride, anger, gluttony, envy.”

“You sure know the starting lineup, don’t you?”

“I’m just pointing this out because if you’re peddling this bear stuff, you got to identify with history. Always be a bear, Morgan.”

“Grrr!”

“That’s really funny. I guess your wife thinks you’re a riot.”

“Sometimes.”

“Even February 29 falls once in awhile. But meanwhile you need me to put some order in this place. How about \$800 a week for the first month? On a trial basis, of course.”

The regular lights came back on in the car. “I don’t like that, either!” Jack Roosevelt shouted, blinking at the AVALON COMPUTER INSTITUTE sign in front of his nose.

Lube Mayer seemed about to reply, but then noticed the woman with the paperback staring at him. “You accusing me of something, *shiksa*? What do YOU know about it?”

“POSITIVE THOUGHTS,” Carlos said in a moan. “They’re just as free as NEGATIVE THOUGHTS, but nobody wants them.”

Morgan knew telling Carlos to shove it wouldn’t satisfy the quota of NON-BEAVER ACTION required of him. So he ignored the Latino to plan out his moves. First, he couldn’t get off the subway without paying his share of the rent to the old guy. Second, he would edge over to Lube Mayer and ACCIDENTALLY throw an elbow into the bastard’s solar plexus. Third, he would take a closer look at the floor around Jack Roosevelt to see if there was any sign of himself still there from where he had lost it. He thought of his plan as something a BEAR would do.

“You pigged out today,” Alex had said their first night of working together, taking in the discarded wrappings from the WHITMAN’S MINTS on his desk. “Morgan feeding his big gut with nice little chocolates again?”

“Gluttony, right?”

“Not bad. What else?”

“Greed. I want those numbers you’re about to hand me doubled.”

“Not necessarily,” she said, flipping the edges of the printouts in her arms. “That could just be profit.”

“I mean I want them doubled even if it means doubling prices on every teddy bear sold to a sick kid in the hospital.”

“That’s good, Morgan. Much better.”

“And I’m going to make you work it all out because I’m feeling too lazy to work it all out myself.”

Alex had raised her eyebrows in admiration. “So far so good. Gluttony, greed, and sloth. Still not halfway, though.”

“Don’t you think I’m being vain just trying to win at this game?”

“Point taken. I’ve humiliated you into pride.”

“And you never noticed how I envy the way you respect that tin soldier father of yours?”

She had tapped her lips with her finger. “Is that envy or jealousy? I always get them confused. You want to be in his pants while I’m admiring him or you want to be in my pants so I’ll admire you? Never mind. Either way, from what I hear on the phone, I have a healthier relationship with Schmidt than you do with little Felicia’s father.”

“Fuck you, Alex! You really piss me off sometimes!”

“And there goes number six,” she had smiled. And then she had dropped her printouts on the floor, sat down in the chair in front of the desk, spread her legs, and hiked her skirt up past where her panties should have been to her BEAVER. “That just leaves one. Come here, Morgan.”

Morgan used the shuffling around at the stop to slide past Carlos and Marisa and close enough to the bum to stick a dollar in his handkerchief pocket. He was still withdrawing his hand when he saw the professor’s glare. He wasn’t sure what he was being accused of --- TRYING TO PICKPOCKET A HOMELESS WRETCH? PATRONIZING THE POOR DARKIE? “You got a problem, fella?” he growled.

The professor was unruffled. “Me, no. But you’re going to have one with that thing over your ears all the time. Take my card. When you start noticing little suction patches in your hearing, call my assistant and she’ll set up an appointment. Provided you can still HEAR what she tells you.”

The card said ELI LEE, OTORHINOLARYNGOLOGIST. Morgan had never seen that word before for ears and throat specialist, and was proud of himself for knowing the meaning of something he really didn’t know. “It doesn’t mean I take care of birds,” Lee sneered. “Birds don’t go around with headphones 24 hours a day.”

“Either do I.”

Lee kept the curl on his lip as he turned his attention to the ad for buying METROCARDS a dozen at a time. Morgan knew then and there that, even if he ever had hearing problems, he would not be going to ELI LEE, OTORHINOLARYNGOLIST for dealing with them. But he also had a new premonition that he WOULD have hearing problems some day. It would be part of the decline Alex had already noticed in him.

“I think there are too many teddy bears in this office,” she had said to him just a few days earlier.

Morgan had taken in the shelves around him. BUSTER and BUZZY and BEATRICE and URSULA had stared back at him in expectation of a stout defense. “A grocery store has string beans and peas all over the place. We sell bears so there’re bears around.”

“Grocers don’t give names to their string beans and peas.”

“What’s your point, Alex?”

“Maybe you’ve gotten a little too close to these things. Maybe you’re starting to think they’re as real as you are.”

“You were the one who told me to be a bear.”

“I’m talking about stuffed animals, Morgan.”

“I know that.”

“That’s a good start.”

“What’s this really about, Alex?”

“What the hell do you think? Our RELATIONSHIP!”

“And getting rid of these animals will make it clearer?”

“They’re symptomatic.”

“Of what?”

“Of the closed little world you live in.”

“You don’t say.”

“I’ve been watching you, Morgan. The more profitable this company’s gotten, the more you’ve become committed to it. You prefer the stuffed unreality of these animals to more vibrant commitments in the world around you. Including all that’s vibrant in me.”

“You don’t say.”

“How many times a day is it, ‘So what am I going to do now, Buzzy?’ or ‘Is she kidding or what, Beatrice?’. You can’t deny you say things like that all the time.”

“You say so.”

“We’re never ALONE, Morgan! It’s like you’re afraid of being with me without Buster or Buzzy.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Really? Like at THE GOLDEN DOOR the other night? Was Ursula really there with us?”

“Of course not. She was here on the shelf.”

“Then why did you keep asking her opinion of the veal? Every waiter in the place thought you were crazy.”

“You mean they thought YOU were crazy for being with me.”

“My point is, Ursula wasn’t with us at THE GOLDEN DOOR.”

“I’m glad we got that settled.”

“What she thinks of the veal is what you think of it.”

“Ursula doesn’t THINK anything --- good or bad --- about the veal, Alex. She’s a stuffed animal.”

“Then why does she keep having opinions?”

“Because I give the opinions to her.”

“And you give them to her and the others because you don’t really want to be alone with me.”

“But they AREN’T with us outside the office.”

“Like hell they’re not. You won’t commit to me, so it’s safer to bring along the whole gang. Even in bed, Morgan. Sometimes I get the feeling it’s not you, but Buzzy and Ursula who want to see my ass.”

“Hold that thought.”

“Get away from them, Morgan. Get away from them before it’s too late. You’re already falling apart in front of my eyes. Don’t expect me to keep watching you turn into them.”

When he thought about it, it was one of the most affectionate things Alex had ever said to him. And he couldn’t help the sudden heat around his eyes in playing the words back to himself. Had an old Norseman named Sven or Erik ever been as complimented for having a bear guardian? He was overcome just thinking about what she had said. The professor, the leather-jacketed hood, and Jack Roosevelt were all blurs. He remembered just in time to rub his eyes before they got any idea about dripping. They should have considered themselves lucky he didn’t want to rip out their throats.

Morgan didn't know why Lube Mayer was still hanging around; usually, he was content to drop someone like Jack Roosevelt, then move on to other assignments. But separated from him now only by a honey blonde with her nose in a paperback entitled THE BROKEN TOWER OF LOVE, Morgan sensed Mayer was baiting him into making a SCENE. Which was all right with Morgan. He owed Lube Mayer a SCENE for the little episode with Felicia two months ago that she had finally gotten around to telling him about over dinner only last night.

"How's it going, Lube?" he growled, trying to pace his anger.

The blonde glanced around at him, saw nothing she liked, and went back to THE BROKEN TOWER OF LOVE. Jack Roosevelt kept staring at the application forms for the AVALON COMPUTER INSTITUTE. Lube Mayer himself seemed to swivel his hairy neck around on a creaky wheel to take in the person who had made the mistake of addressing him. "I am not thinking of you now, Morganski," he finally glowered. "You are not in my thoughts. You do not exist."

"Well, I'm thinking about you. I bet Jack here is, too."

"I don't like this, Morgan," Roosevelt said.

"You hear, Morganski? Nobody is thinking of you. You are not existing. Go back to your cave."

"My wife mentioned you yesterday, Lube," he growled. "She says you don't like people changing their minds in GRAND UNION and leaving stuff they're not going to buy at the checkout counter."

"I could care less about what your wife buys and don't buy."

"That's not the way she tells it."

Lube Mayer shrugged. "Your wife's second thoughts about FIG NEWTONS are a plague to civilized people, Morganski. Bernie Katz has a store to manage and he don't need dizzy housewives who change their minds like last week's underwear."

Morgan finally got the blonde and THE BROKEN TOWER OF LOVE out of his way. He was glad the anger boiling in his stomach had become visible enough for Mayer to be thinking of the maneuvering options he had left. "That why you threatened her?"

“I threaten nobody. I just insist on the rights of people who have their livelihoods mocked by *schnooks* and *schnoorers*. SOMEBODY has to do it, Morganski. Obviously, you haven’t controlled the situation at home.”

Morgan knew he hadn’t, and hoped he didn’t betray that to Mayer. “It took you TWO MONTHS to tell me about this?” as he had asked Felicia in disbelief at supper.

“It didn’t seem important.”

“This slug threatens you and you put it out of your mind like it’s some kind of normal conversation?”

“Two things, Morgan. One, I can take care of myself with Lube Mayer. Two, I haven’t had the impression lately you cared one way or the other about what happened to me.”

“Swell. And what else haven’t you told me?”

“It’s not what you haven’t been told, it’s what we don’t find natural to tell each other anymore.”

“Fine. I took some Missouri state seals on consignment today. The ones with the silvertip bears. Your turn.”

“Okay. I’m thinking of quitting my job.”

“What job’s that, Felicia?”

“Don’t be funny.”

“Who can keep score? The bookstore? The paralegal? That summer camp thing in the mountains?”

“The camp, and you know it damn well.”

“It’s not even summer yet! How can you quit? Too many names to go over on the reservation list?”

“As a matter of fact. They never change. It’s the same names day after day. I don’t know about you, but I don’t find that especially challenging. If I wanted to be a clerk, I would’ve been born with a visor.”

“They haven’t used them in ages.”

“You’re not focusing on the substance here, Morgan.”

“According to you, anyway. You know what else I did today? I found a first edition of THE REYNARD CYCLE. Match that.”

“I’m sorry, but I can. The main reason I’m going to quit is I think I’M IN LOVE WITH STAN.”

Lube Mayer beamed before the sight of Jack Roosevelt's shoulder blades. As the train pulled into the next stop, he lifted his hand for a karate chop. Morgan got there first, catching the chop in mid-swing and flicking it back into the creep. Lube Mayer was still looking bewildered at having hit himself when Morgan followed up with his elbow into the hollow of the slug's chest. It wasn't as neat a shot as it might have been, but it did the job. Lube Mayer looked crestfallen, then just pale as he toppled up against Jack Roosevelt, tried reaching for a seat brace to keep his balance, then slid down on the floor with a groan.

"I don't like this," Jack Roosevelt said.

"You're dead, Morganski," Lube Mayer gasped from the floor.

Morgan knew that wasn't true, in the strictest clinical sense anyway. But he also had to concede that STAN, as Felicia had identified him, had carried off some of his vital organs.

"How are you in love with him?" he had demanded of her.

"What do you mean how? The way people are in love with each other. The way we used to be in love."

"Physically?"

"How predictable! Do you really think that's the end-all?"

"It has its place. You can't deny that."

"Okay. Physically. Two or three times."

"You don't know if it was two or three? What happened? Somebody didn't get his underpants off in time?"

"If you want to be exact, it was two-and-a-half times. You know how first times are. I really had to work at a blowjob to get him off. I think he was intimidated I was married."

"I didn't ask for that information."

"Yes, you did."

"All right, so there's a physical aspect. What else?"

"What, what else? Spiritually, metaphysically."

"All that on a two-and-a-half times?"

“The spiritual and the metaphysical were already in the air, Morgan. They were there when.....I don’t know, when we were interviewing the parents and the kids for the camp.”

“So this STAN works for the summer camp?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You don’t mean he was one of the parents!”

“There’s nothing wrong with being a parent, Morgan. It doesn’t disqualify you from other things. Of course, I couldn’t expect you to realize that. You’re not a father.”

“Thanks to you and Happy Cunningham.”

“Oh, it’s our fault, is it?”

“Well, you’re not exactly passersby. If Cunningham hadn’t opened his mouth, we could still have hope.”

“Your kind of hope --- the false kind.”

“It’s better than none.”

“You won’t get me into a fight, Morgan. I love STAN.”

“I want to meet him.”

“What the hell for?”

As with all his bravado utterances, Morgan had immediately wondered what imp had seized his vocal chords. His desire to meet STAN had actually been as ardent as his desire to meet the BLACK PLAGUE. He had been saved only by Felicia’s sudden second thoughts. “Maybe it’s not STAN *per se*,” she decided. “Maybe he’s just an occasion for love.”

“What the hell does THAT mean??!!”

“It means I’m so desperate for love, Morgan, I’m willing to be desperate for it!”

Morgan felt a hand on his shoulder --- a huge hand, more like a paw as big as his. The thought occurred that it was a den brother come to settle accounts for all the money he had made off him. It wasn’t a den brother, though. It was the conductor looking like he had just jumped out of a wrestling ring --- THE SHOULDER CRUSHER --- to grab him. “You boys had your fun now?”

Lube Mayer couldn't collect the spittle around his lips fast enough as he took in the man. "Go back to your little box and call out another station, *schmuk*. Maybe you'll get one right today."

Morgan sensed the imbalance immediately: The conductor wanted to wrap a holding pole around Lube Mayer's neck, but the only shoulder under his grip was HIS. The pain was so excruciating he could feel blessed numbness coming. Which in itself wouldn't have been so bad, but which also brought the thought that perhaps the life he was looking for was merely another form of numbness. For sure, he had been in *some* kind of trance when he had charged downstairs after the STAN scene with Felicia to smoke out STANLEY JACKIW in 2A.

"I know it's you, Jackiw!" he had screamed without cunning as soon as the big Polish artist had opened his door. "When she's not working, you and her are the only two in the building all afternoon. Deny it!"

He could have done without the masturbatory fantasies that flitted past Jackiw's blue eyes. "What do you talk about, Morgan?", he finally said. "Me and your wife? She is not my vision."

"But I bet if I go into your studio right now, I'll find some canvas or sculpture with her tits."

It had been a stupid challenge, and for more than one reason. Bad enough that Jackiw had simply opened his door wider and bowed him inside with a mocking smile. Far worse, as Morgan had entered the square room reeking of varnish and filled with canvasses of clouds and winds and currents, was the realization that he wouldn't have been able to identify any tits as definitely Felicia's even if there had been any.

"Aeolus is my model," Jackiw had smirked. "The winds inspire me, not your wife."

Morgan had taken the fire stairs back up to his apartment chastised several times over. Stanley Jackiw had not been Felicia's STAN, he himself had probably put her in the Pole's wet dreams, and the artist had no daily overhead with wind gods like Aeolus as his models. The treasonous thought that he envied a business without even the nominal costs of a Buzzy or Beatrice weighed down his haunches every step back upstairs.

"You satisfied?" Felicia had barked as soon as he had closed the front door. "Now that you've made a fool of yourself? Satisfied?"

“Well, no, not at all,” he had said, baffled she couldn’t see the answer all over his face.

The TRANSIT POLICE had not been part of Morgan's plan. He could not possibly find traces of himself in the subway station house because he had never been in the place before. Where he had ended up, thanks to Lube Mayer and Jack Roosevelt, was in a BLIND. It was a miracle he hadn’t been cuffed to a chair the way he had seen another BAD GUY being held as he had followed OFFICER MANCINI to a back office.

“You can’t just start slugging people in the subway, Morgan,” OFFICER MANCINI said in a strange cross between a whine and a grunt as they entered a small box of metal desks and walls painted institutional gray. “You may just be aiming at one person, but there’s no way you don’t get collateral casualties among other passengers.”

Morgan was sorry Felicia wasn't standing next to him. Every time a cop had been on the Evening News using phrases like “collateral casualties,” she had insisted he spoke that way only because of the TV cameras, that he never used such bureaucratese when alone with another human being. He, on the other hand, had always maintained that a public servant like OFFICER MANCINI was too exposed to the bureaucratese virus day in and day to turn it off at will, that he had become one with his job. He needed every ounce of self-restraint left to him not to thank OFFICER MANCINI for proving his case. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am,” he said, hoping he wasn’t looking too triumphant. “I saw what I thought was an assault.....”

OFFICER MANCINI waved his hand wearily. “You don’t have to tell me,” he said, his voice suddenly sympathetic as he closed the door behind them. “I was beginning to wonder if Lube had lost his touch. We haven’t hauled anybody in here because of him in almost two months.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Maybe Lube believes in the curse more than I thought,” OFFICER MANCINI said, tossing his notebook on a desk that held only a carton of PAL brochures. “I was wondering if that was the reason.”

“What curse?”

OFFICER MANCINI looked momentarily sorry he had opened his mouth, but then wheeled over a chair and wedged himself down between the brochures and the bumpy, flaking wall. Even talking to Morgan for a couple of minutes, he seemed to decide, was better than having to resume his patrol on the train. “Two months ago, Sadie, the bag lady on the D line, put a CURSE on Mayer,” he said, raising his stumpy legs to the edge of the desk with loud effort. “Sadie said he’d keep falling on his ass every time he tried to beat up somebody. Of course, Lube being Lube, the first thing he did was try to dropkick her off the platform down onto the tracks. But, wouldn’t you know it, he loses his footing and almost goes over the side himself! Sadie gives him one of her cackles and goes off.”

“That was the CURSE?”

“The beginning of it. Next day, Lube goes looking for her to make up for his little embarrassment. He finds her in the back of a D train where she’s going through her usual give-me-a-quarter-or-go-fuck-yourself pitch and tries to push her between the cars. But just then the conductor opens his little booth door and whacks Lube in the mouth. Pure accident. The conductor didn’t know anyone was behind the door. But down Lube goes again. That was too much for him, especially with Sadie cackling like a fiend. So he disappeared. Until today, anyway. Know why?”

“How would I?”

OFFICER MANCINI looked stumped. “I don’t know. But maybe it’s no great coincidence Sadie died Monday.”

Morgan didn’t know what to say. There were so many reasons to remain speechless. One was because he was sad to hear about Sadie’s demise. He had never really spoken to the woman, but he had seen her often enough, always meandering along the platforms and through the subway cars with her dirty green kerchief tied under her chin, pushing her supermarket wagon filled with paper bags and an old METS knapsack. Two was because he didn’t know what Sadie’s death or her CURSE had to do with him.

OFFICER MANCINI saw his puzzlement. “You know what I think, Morgan? It occurred to me as soon as I heard about you decking Lube. Down he went again. I think Sadie’s passed it along to you. I think you’re now the KEEPER OF SADIE’S CURSE.”

“Against Mayer?”

OFFICER MANCINI nodded sagely. “Yup.”

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

“I’m just saying. You’ve got the look for it. Like you’ve been living in a cave all your life. LET NO ONE ENTER HERE. You know.”

Morgan found it a ridiculous notion, and made the mistake of showing it. OFFICER MANCINI immediately returned to an official expression. “But here’s the thing, Morgan,” he said. “I can’t have that shit happening in my trains. We got paid fares to worry about. We can’t have them falling all over each other just because you want to floor Lube Mayer. It’s not fair to them. The people of this city put up with a lot when they buy their METROCARDS. They don’t get a seat. They have to listen to moron teenagers talking about the classmate they want to screw. You got all your paranoid stockbrokers talking on their cell phones to nobody on the other end. Stop at Penn Station and the rubes get on with more suitcases than you’ll find in a luggage store. There’s always some clown holding the doors while he asks if it’s an E train with the sign right next to him saying it’s an E train. The trains themselves go through the tunnels slow enough to build another station along the way. Do I have to go on and mention the homeless selling their newspapers and the slam dancers and the drummers from Trinidad? I don’t think so. You look bright enough to get my drift. Bottom line? Even the GREAT UNWASHED can do without you bouncing Lube Mayer on their laps.”

“I understand that.”

“See that you do.....And if you drop Lube again, make sure it’s on the tracks when a train is coming.”

Morgan wasn’t flattered by his new charge as KEEPER OF SADIE’S CURSE. Although OFFICER MANCINI was impressed by it enough to let him go with a FORMAL WARNING, he saw it only adding unnecessary complications to the priority of finding himself. Then, as if he needed another incentive for not gloating about having beaten the LAW, he ran into Jack Roosevelt at the glass-door entrance to the underground precinct. Roosevelt had just signed his complaint, making it clear immediately that it had been against only an UNIDENTIFIED ASSAILANT. “Who’s to say it was Lube Mayer?” he asked, as they stepped out from the air conditioning of the police station back into the gaseous subway air. “Was he the only one behind me? There was room for a lot of people. You can’t blame all the world’s problems on Lube Mayer.”

Since they were both headed back to the subway platform, Morgan had no choice but to hop alongside the trembling pelican and listen to his terrified rationalizations. But that didn't mean he couldn't interrupt the man, point out how the two of them had certain attitudes toward life in common. "I was just thinking of your problems, Jack....."

"Well, don't. There are plenty of people who'd like to hurt me besides Lube Mayer. Some of your Palestinian friends, for starters. They're always looking for a propaganda edge. And put it out of your head you were a great help to me. Whoever punched me in the back had already punched me before you came along. I was already in pain. Nothing you did prevented me from feeling lousy. Go ahead. Tell me it did."

Morgan suddenly didn't feel like telling him anything. He had meant well, had wanted to admit the common ground between them toward life. Now he just felt like clamping the doofus's throat between his teeth.

"And I'd appreciate not waking up tomorrow to see your name splashed all over the front page of the *News* claiming you were the HERO who decked the guy who decked me. You decked Lube Mayer, and I already told you I'm not sure it was him. As far as I'm concerned, you're as much of an ASSAILANT as the guy who hit me. If Lube Mayer wants to sue you, I'm telling you right now I'll have to be a witness for him."

"That's great, Beaver. Have a good day."

Morgan didn't care if Jack Roosevelt understood what he had meant by calling him a beaver or even if he had a GOOD DAY. The important thing was to lose him on the platform and calm down. He took comfort from a rat scurrying along next to the third rail. The rodent hadn't missed a meal since before the city train lines had been designed and was oblivious to the lethal charges fractions of centimeters away from its tail. It seemed to have not only taken underground tunnel life in stride, but gorged itself on it. The rat made him think of his last meeting with Bernard Fields, the one who had gotten him into his career mess in the first place.

He had gone to the zoo to check on the latest developments in animal containment. It wasn't his favorite task, but he had a responsibility to his clients to have his products mirror as faithfully as possible the smallest physical evolutions, indiscernible as they might have been to the untrained eye. Even a caged beast could be informative in responses to its captivity, reveal new levels of sadness and frustration, and exploiting that kind of detail, as Alex was fond of reminding him, could profit the company. As usual, he had prepared himself for the anthropomorphic glop of the other visitors to the bear pits:

The adults who went AAW, HOW CUTE! and the children who screeched down to the bears HEY, BEAR! IT'S ME, BOBBY! I DARE YOU TO COME UP AND EAT ME! On that particular day, though, Morgan had felt himself slipping into some of the same sentimental dialogue, at least in his own mind. He didn't think the bears were cute and certainly didn't want them climbing up out of their pit to eat him, but he could imagine having a very fruitful conversation with them about all kinds of world problems. His impulse had been especially strong when his attention had landed on a mangy brown bear sitting far apart from the others, appearing to study his fellow inmates with the same distant curiosity as Morgan was directing to him.

And then the mangy brown bear had looked up at the ring of visitors, and Morgan had recognized him. It had been none other than the man who had given him his start in the business at the JOB FAIR, Bernard Fields!

Except he hadn't been a man in the human sense.

“Surprised?” Bernard Fields had shouted up.

Morgan had thought his speechlessness enough of a response, so he had left it at that as Bernard Fields had shaken himself off and shambled closer to the edge of the pit.

“Bound to happen sooner or later,” Bernard Fields had chuckled. “Giving you my stuff hurried it along. You know what they say about Nature. It WHORES A VACUUM.”

Morgan had been too stunned by the man's appearance to correct his cliché. He had also felt awkward having Bernard Fields shouting up at him before the attention of the other visitors to the pit. None of that had bothered Bernard Fields, though. He had gone on and on about his gradual acceptance of the occupational hazards of his career and how, all things being equal, he had come to prefer being outdoors every day with his peers to being shuttered inside the remnants of a china shop the way his bull of a father had been in his final years. “Got all the meat I need and.....” WINK WINK. “.....A little roll in the cave up there on the ledge every once in awhile. Know what I mean?”

Morgan had known what he had meant. He had wished himself capable of WINK WINK where Felicia was concerned, but that had been impossible since she had confessed to him about STAN. Even with STAN out of the picture and him back in it, he hadn't really felt any desire to drag her up for a little roll in his own cave. He had preferred dwelling on the other routines Bernard Fields said he had become accustomed to: the feedings and hosings and separations when new litters were due. He had done a lot

of nodding to what Bernard Fields had been shouting up at him (and of also wishing one of the other bears nearby would trundle over to him and give him a whack to shut him up). Finally, with the other visitors beginning to whisper among themselves about him, including one distinct phrase about CALLING A GUARD TO GRAB THIS GUY, he had decided to end the nonsense, simply to walk away and chalk up his meeting with Bernard Fields to an especially informative session for inspiring the company's next sales brochure. But then Bernard Fields, as though anticipating his intention of fleeing, had bellowed out his loudest instruction of all: "Don't fight it, Morgan! Life's too short. It is what it is. You can only live twice. That's life. Drink life to the lees....."

And on and on Bernard Fields had gone some more until Morgan had felt an unprecedented shallowness in his soul, the growing guilt that up to then he had been content to attribute his failings to his father, to Felicia and her father, to Alex Schmidt and her father, to George Washington, to just about anybody else who had been plodding across the planet before he had been born. But his nature, he had realized that day as one of the gawkers had indeed started off in search of ZOO SECURITY, had always been more than that. It had been all the things Bernard Field was, only younger. He had found what the Chinese had always called his TAO.

On the subway platform now, Morgan shook his head at his belated maturity. He was even able to laugh fondly at how he had shouted down to Bernard Fields in thanks for his TAO and how Bernard Fields had replied happily, "And CIAO to you too, Morgan." He had made his escape that day before ZOO SECURITY had shown up, pulled along by the prospect of a revolutionary brochure to be worked on as soon as he got back to THE OFFICE. He had been HAPPY that day.

Was he happy now? He wasn't sure. There were some elements of happiness, but maybe not dominant ones. He thought it a good compromise to continue watching the rat until the train came in and cut off his view of the third rail. At least he didn't hear any horrible squealing.

Morgan was amazed at how just a few minutes in the underground station house with OFFICER MANCINI had thinned out the rush hour crowd, leaving unoccupied seats in the car he boarded.

“How many more stops, Daddy?” an impatient seven- or eight-year-old whined, looking up at his father as they stood near the door.

The father, a black weightlifter with the kind of resonant baritone voice that sang things like THE LUSH LIFE, aimed his eyes at an ad for WILD AFRICA IN THE BRONX. “Two hundred and twenty-five,” he said.

“Two hundred and twenty-five!!!???”

Morgan was there for the father’s ironic glance, and felt better for it. It was one of those quiet moments of PLANETARY SOLIDARITY AMONG HUMANS that had once seemed important to him.

“Jesus Christ! Two hundred and twenty-five??!”

“You shouldn’t use language like that, Ernie.”

“But, shit, we’ll never get there!”

Morgan tuned out. He knew the father would have to tell the truth to shut up Ernie, and that was too bad: One, because it ruined the HUMAN SPELL; two, because there should have been a stricter way of dealing with Ernie’s gutter mouth than conceding the truth to him. Happy Cunningham or not, there were times he was glad he wasn’t a parent.

A fat teenager in blond dreadlocks and baggy black jeans hadn’t heard Ernie’s lip because he was too busy yanking his earplugs out, displeased with the cut on his IPOD. Morgan remembered the warning from ELI LEE, OTORHINOLARYNGOLOGIST: The teenager would soon go deaf. He wished he could feel for the kid, but he couldn’t. The odds were he would never see the kid again as soon as one of them got off the train, let alone when the idiot was forty or fifty and yelling at everybody, “What? What did you say?”

He took a seat across from the conductor’s compartment. He felt sorry he couldn’t feel sorry for the blond kid who was going to go deaf, but he had never been good at feeling sorry for people he really wasn’t sorry for. He had accepted that limitation at Jimmy Wilhelm’s wake, a couple of weeks after getting the STERILITY word from Happy Cunningham. He hadn’t seen much of Jimmy since they had graduated from ARTS AND SCIENCES PREP, but his mother had kept in touch with the Wilhelm family, so it had been impossible to avoid a condolences call on the funeral home. Entering the place, he had already been irritated at Felicia’s whining about why she had to come to see a corpse she had never known in life. Then the Wilhelms had put the final

touches on everything with their malice.

“Jimmy had so much to live for,” Mrs. Wilhelm had said, seizing both his elbows with steel fingers as they stood before the closed casket. “You were the useless one, Morgan. You were the one that building should have fallen on, not my Jimmy.”

“I know how you feel, Mrs. Wilhelm.”

“How would you know that?” Mr. Wilhelm had demanded. “Ever lose a son before 30 because a building fell on him?”

“No, sir.”

“Ever imagine losing one that way?”

“No, sir.”

“Not even in passing --- like when you’re on a bus or something?”

“Not really.”

“Well, this is VERY really, Morgan, so don’t waste any more time just daydreaming about it on a bus.”

“It should have been you,” Mrs. Wilhelm had nodded again. “But it wasn’t, and I suppose wishing won’t make it so. So let me thank you and YOUR WIFE for your thoughtfulness in coming.”

Felicia had tugged at him to get away from the Wilhelms, but he hadn’t wanted to leave. He had wanted to stay in the middle of the brown-lighted parlor, smelling the sweet flowers, feeling Mrs. Wilhelm’s fingers cutting toward one of his arteries, seeing Mr. Wilhelm’s fury that he wasn’t in the casket in place of Jimmy. As long as he remained in that center, as within the eye of a hurricane, he had thought, he didn’t owe apologies to anybody for not feeling sorry that the building had collapsed on Jimmy Wilhelm as he had cycled past making slave wages for a messenger service. Only after Felicia had taken a swing at Mr. Wilhelm and screamed “MY HUSBAND IS TAKING ME OUT OF HERE RIGHT NOW, YOU TWO LUNATICS!” had Morgan budged --- MY HUSBAND accepting who he was, MY HUSBAND moving back out to the howling fringes of the hurricane and wondering to whom he owed an apology for not feeling sorry enough about something. It just wasn’t in his ANIMAL NATURE.

The metal door to the cabin with all the lighted control buttons swung back and forth as the train hurtled along, reminding Morgan of the story OFFICER MANCINI had told about how SADIE'S CURSE had deployed just such a door as a weapon to flatten Lube Mayer. The heavy-bearded conductor with the Sikh wrap on his head inside the compartment sighed as the train began its long run through the tunnel, then stared out at him with an eerie laugh. "I bet you're wondering why I do this job," he said.

Morgan shook his head. "Not really."

"No, seriously," the man said.

"Seriously."

"I'll tell you: What this job gives me is SECURITY."

Morgan recognized the sound of being IN FOR IT, and told himself it was better not to resist. The last thing he needed was to get up and have SADIE'S CURSE slam the door against HIM. "I thought you guys were threatening to go on strike over your pension plan," he said.

"Fuck the pension plan," came the angry answer from the dark compartment. "Fuck the salary, too. You can get screwed on those things anywhere. You think that's what I mean by SECURITY? You're not very bright, are you? My idea of SECURITY is more important than those things. I got the protection of what's OUT THERE, what's UNDER US, what we pass in BOTH DIRECTIONS every single day. You know what that is?"

Morgan was relieved to feel the train slowing down. "No, I don't."

The turban jumped out at him from the booth so abruptly he couldn't stop his flinch. "I got MY TRACK," the man with the fierce black eyes and a JUICY FRUIT breath said. "When I come to work, I know I will not end up in the Grand Canyon. I will not even be on the East Side because MY TRACK doesn't go there. I will go only where MY TRACK goes. In both directions, that much I will grant you, but no surprise stations along the way. *That* is SECURITY."

The man couldn't ignore the lights from the station they were sliding into, so he took his JUICY FRUIT breath back inside his cabin. Morgan made a pass at feeling good about the Sikh's sense of security, but couldn't manage it. As the doors opened at the station and the conductor stuck his head out his small window to check the platform, he

scrambled up from his seat and hurried to the other end of the car. He didn't need any more exulting about being ON TRACK, not on this morning of all mornings.

And then Morgan saw him.

At first he wasn't sure. The grime on the subway windows made seeing through them unreliable at the best of times, and this morning was hardly the best of times. But the longer he stared, the more certain he was. It was a bear, but, underneath all the fur and the snout, with the right face and build. Was his doubt because he wasn't used to seeing himself moving around so independently? He *wasn't* used to it. A hundred stories from Bernard Fields about knocking around longshoremen in waterfront dives wouldn't have made him used to it. And more than not used to it, he thought he should have disliked it, if only on anatomical grounds.

Then THE REPLACEMENT MORGAN spotted him and gave him a nod. He did the only thing that felt instinctive: He nodded back. And with that THE REPLACEMENT MORGAN knew his task was done and he vanished right from the car. No SWISH or PING or WHOOSH, just stopped occupying the seat where he had been and went invisible.

Morgan was so dumbfounded he almost missed his stop. He was back together again, he had found the life he had been missing, and that was all to the good. But as he started up the stairs to the street, he couldn't deny a ravenous curiosity; more than that, an aching envy. THE REPLACEMENT MORGAN had been left to substitute for him all night just as other ursine surrogates had once stood in for berserkers in combat and Bernard Fields in ratty saloons, having adventures that he himself, even with all his years on the subway, was barely able to imagine. What adventures? What went on in the subway outside the hours he was commuting on it back and forth?

He wanted to believe the adventures were of the heroic kind --- the way the bears of Norse myth stood in for their human charges and flailed away with their swords and maces until they were no longer needed. But he also didn't want to believe that because it would tempt him into laziness, make him irresponsible, leaving THE REPLACEMENT MORGAN to fight his battles for him with the overnight travelers and commuters. He wanted to envision THE REPLACEMENT MORGAN encountering the peculiar and the

exotic in every passenger. But he also didn't want to envision that because it meant being cheated out of some of his own life.

The bottom line? He wanted to be INDIGNANT. He hadn't asked THE REPLACEMENT MORGAN to fill in for him, had he? When had his guardian bear gotten it into his head that it was the one deciding when it was and wasn't needed? He had to reassert control.

Morgan felt spouted up from a sewer into a dry world as he obeyed the ESCALATOR and EXIT signs and regained the street. The usual throngs were trying to look civil about marching toward their offices, the delivery men were already clogging the sidewalks with cartons marked FRAGILE and THIS SIDE UP. He wondered as he did every morning why the bruisers had to hurl the FRAGILE boxes from their trucks and why it was so often necessary to read THIS SIDE UP upsidedown. But he couldn't invest as much worry into those reflections as he usually did. The brutal fact was that THE REPLACEMENT MORGAN had come to usurp more of his life even than YOUR HUSBAND.

Blind Tom reminded him that nobody else cared. As soon as Tom heard the order for the paper, he tightened the hungry vulture expression he showed arriving customers, funneled up a paper from the stack in front of him, and thrust it at Morgan with the cup of his hand already expecting money. "No money, no paper," as he was fond of rasping every morning to every customer, no mercy for out-of-town tourists.

"One of these mornings I'm going to grab the paper and run off without paying you," Morgan kidded him.

"Do that, you fuck, and every cop in the precinct will be after you," Blind Tom said fondly.

Morgan had his doubts about Blind Tom's sense of humor, but he could have also just been misreading the man's sightless eyes. He thought it better to give the HANDICAPPED the benefit of the doubt.

Morgan hesitated with his key in front of his office door. He heard voices inside, but knew none of them belonged to Alex because she had an allergy to touching wall switches in the morning and waited for him to arrive first to turn on the lights. He

assumed the voices were of Buzzy, Ursula, and the rest of the gang. One day he was going to figure out whether they had been gabbing away all night or if they had waited for his arrival, when he had completed another odyssey from YOUR WIFE to THE OFFICE.

One way or the other, he reminded himself as he put his key in the lock, he had real news for them this morning. With the YOUR WIFE side of the journey about to collapse because of STAN, how long did they think they could go on so smugly by themselves without anything to hold them up? He couldn't wait to see their faces as they mulled over the prospect of being without THE OFFICE, as well.

Donald Dewey has published 37 books of fiction, nonfiction, and drama for such houses as Little, Brown, HarperCollins, St. Martin's Press, and Carroll & Graf. He has also had some 30 plays staged in the United States and Europe. His latest books, both published in 2014, are the biography "Lee J. Cobb: Characters of an Actor" and the novel "The Bolivian Sailor."