

Danny Rablo is a small-time con artist in the guise of a literary agent. Everything is tooling along fine until a real writer shows up. Danny clueless about how to deal with the real thing.

The Onion Man

By Will Richan

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The Onion Man

WILL RICHAN

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Chapter 1.

Art knew the minute he walked into the place he shouldn't have come. Midday, but it was so dark he had trouble making out the figures standing silently against the opposite wall. Gradually, his eyes became adjusted to the half-light. Soup kitchen. This was like the end of the road. The lowest point one could travel to and still be considered a human being. He was standing at the end of a long line that ran the total circumference of the room. Rows of dingy brown tables and benches ran the length of the place. At the end was a counter and a gaping window behind which several older women were clattering around. The smell of paint, disinfectant, sweat, meat, and coffee mingled.

Not bad for an opener. The guy had talent, maybe. What the hell do you do with a guy with talent? Must get Angus Boardman working on this with his English 101 students.

Every once in a while, we'd get one of these, like Clara from Maine and her *Mealtime in Meddybemps*. That one made it to a publisher.

Not easy with cookbooks a dime a dozen. But you could almost hear Clara dropping her Rs at the end of words. Real folksy style. Never made it past the first printing, but it made her happy. That's what being an agent is all about, of course. Make 'em happy.

It was a royal pain with the contract, royalties, tax returns, and stuff. Much better getting the junk and stringing authors along. The more straightforward way to make a buck. But what the hell? It was a living. Well, then was then, and now is now. Got to move on.

O.K., send this along with the rest of the junk to Angus. *Danny!* I should have listened to my first impulse. Instead, I let Marie talk me into taking the thing seriously. What did she know? Two-year dropout from College of New Rochelle, a little secretarial experience. But gorgeous. *Danny? You, O.K.?* Gorgeous redhead. How many gorgeous redheads are there in the world? Redheads stay red into their old age. As long as she keeps that body of hers. She could have been in movies, I swear. Went out every morning and ran in Riverside Park. *Danny, I'm talking to you!*

Suddenly, I'm getting shaken, as if my arms will come off. Marie was powerful when she wanted to be.

“What?”

“Danny, I've been yelling at you for ten minutes.”

“Oh, sorry, kiddo. What's up?”

Marie's up close, staring down into my face. Quick mood change. “So, how'd you like it?”

“Like what?”

“The manuscript.”

“Oh, yeah, I've been reading it. A little stupid if you ask me...” She grabbed the thing out of my hand. “You're still on page one!”

. “You know I'm a slow reader,” I said.

“You gotta read on. I think the guy has something.”

Now, Marie was not hired to think. She was hired to edit copy, pick up the mail, and answer the phone. The cooking and sex and stuff were part of living together. But I'd learned not to cross Marie. More than once, she'd picked up and moved back to her folks' place in Queens. It never lasted, but it was a significant pain in the butt.

But one thing about Marie: She'd get on something and never let go. A friggin' pit bull with lipstick, as that dame in Alaska used to say.

"Marie, honey," I said, "I appreciate your ideas about authors, but - (ugh)..." Marie was also heavier than she looked; right now, heavy was sitting in the middle of my tummy.

"Read it," she said. She gave a little bounce with each word (ugh...ugh...ugh...). Then the words stopped, but the bouncing kept on, and pretty soon, I'm bouncing back, and before you know it, we're down on the floor, getting our clothes off. She didn't like to do it until everything was off - shoes, socks, earrings, wristwatch. Said it didn't feel romantic otherwise.

I was on the bottom, conscious that the rug was right next to a tough wood floor, parqueted no less, which sounded like a nice deal when we took the place but was a very - ugh - firm mattress. But by now, we were into it, and the hardwood didn't matter, and I felt her coming, and I was coming, and bam!

Marie didn't hang around after sex. Bam and that's it. Up and off to the bathroom. She would

have made one hell of a whore. O.K., next? Bam. O.K., next? Bam, etc.

On the way to the john, she yelled, “Read it!” Read it. Yes, Marie. Read the stupid thing. Let’s see, Art is in a soup kitchen.

“Gentlemen...aha, and ladies, too...our pastor will say a few words before we eat. You, there, remove your hat!” The large, light-skinned woman with the white hair stood glowering while the offending cap came off. She let her gaze linger on the man a few seconds longer.

The minister, a small, wizened man with chocolate-colored skin, adjusted his clerical collar and stepped forward, seeming not to notice the minor interruption.

“Father God, we ask your blessing on us this day. And, Father God, we ask you to smile on everyone gathered here, for, Father, even the lowliest of your creatures is divine in your eyes....”

There were several grunts of agreement and nods from the line.

“Father, we especially want you to bless Sister Hally in her hour of deep sadness, and we know you have taken Randy to your home. And,

Father, we pray for all our youth. They have fallen in evil ways. You must help us rid our community of drug violence and wasted lives. And, Father God, we pray for our leaders downtown. And, Father, we pray that you bring the spirit of the Living Christ among us this day. Father, we ask all this in the name of Jesus Christ, Our Savior, Amen.”

A scattering of “Amens” ran through the hall. The white-haired woman then took over. “All right, take one cup and one piece of bread, and you can have coffee or tea. Sir, please wait for the woman to give the signal. No, don't try to use the drinking fountain. Somebody broke it several months ago. Whoever broke the fountain is keeping all of us from having fresh water. “

She was still scolding, though the guilty party was probably long gone. “If you want water, finish your coffee or tea first and return the empty cup.”

Art inched his way forward with the line. Some people around him were friendly; others stood aside for the white stranger. But nobody spoke to him. He noticed another white man a few yards ahead. The man's matted hair stood out under a blue woolen cap, slouched in a greasy

jacket with "Chicago Bulls" across the back. He was chatting with a couple of people next to him. Somehow, he fit in.

Just ahead of Art were a skinny woman and a boy who kept staring back at him. When she reached the counter, he heard one of the servers say, "No, ma'am, he only got a half cup. Children under twelve get half a cup."

"But he ten. You ever try to keep a ten-year-old in food?"

"Look, ma'am, I don't make the rules. Kids get only half a cup."

The mother gestured toward the cup and turned away from the window, muttering. The boy, who looked more like seven than ten, picked up his half ration and followed her in silence.

When Art got to the window, a woman he judged to be in her seventies asked, "Tea or coffee?" He motioned toward the row of coffee cups. "Cream?" He nodded, and she poured a little from a pitcher. He nodded again, then took the Styrofoam cup in one hand and a Kaiser roll in the other. The woman held out a cup of soup and motioned toward a pan filled with frosted cake. He tried to juggle the other items while he reached for the cake. The woman offered him a

paper napkin. He took it from her, wrapped it around a piece of cake, and placed that on top of the cup of soup. He could see that the napkin was sucking up soup and getting it on the cake.

“What's going on up there?” asked a voice behind him. Art sidled out of the way and went to find a place at a table, hoping everything wouldn't come tumbling out of his hands. Many of the diners stared straight ahead as they ate. In a school chair with a writing arm next to one wall, a man chattered endlessly into the air. Three men he judged to be in their fifties sat at one of the tables, talking and laughing. Art set his food down at the other end of the table, clambered over the bench, and sat down.

One of the men nodded at him with a slight smile and continued talking. Art began on the food and realized he was hungry. The soup was starting to cool, so he hurried to finish it. To his surprise, it was perfect, full of meat and vegetables. When he sipped the coffee, he knew why they had not offered sugar or cream. The sickish sweetness made him shiver.

One of the men noticed. “You O.K., man?” he asked.

“No problem. It's just that this coffee is kind of sweet.”

“Yeh,” he chuckled, “The boys likes their sugar,” and the other two guffawed. Art smiled, though he didn't get the joke.

He took the opening. “What happened to Randy?” he asked.

“Who?”

“He mean Hally's boy,” said the one across from him. He catches AIDS. Nasty stuff, AIDS.”

Art felt the tears well up in his eyes, though it had been years since Scott's death. “I lost a son to AIDS.” It stopped them in their tracks.

After a pause, the first man reached over and touched Art's sleeve. “I'm sorry, brother.”

“We prayin' for you, man,” said one of the others. Art thanked them.

The three talked among themselves some more, then the first one who had spoken said, “The brothers wondering about something.”

“Shoot,” said Art, glad to be connected.

“What you doin'...I mean, you are educated, man. Bet you got a degree or two.”

Art wondered how he knew. He was tempted to lie, but their openness was disarming. “You

mean, what's a guy like me doing in a place like this?"

"Yeah," and his face broke into a grin.

"I spent some time in Philadelphia State," said Art quietly.

"Oh, they are mean places," said the other. "My aunt was at Haverford State for six months a few years ago. They put those things on her head...you know, those electric...."

"You mean electrodes? Shock treatment."

"Yeah, that's it. They messed her up good. Her memory went to pieces after that. She's been in a nursin' home in Chester ever since."

They fell silent. He'd expected many questions, but they seemed to have placed him, and that was enough. After a few minutes, they got up. The man who had spoken first came over and held out his hand. Art shook it. The grip was firm. "See you around," said the man.

"O.K.," said Art, "Take care."

The other two came over and also shook hands. As they filed out, one turned and waved to him. For the first time in years, maybe ever, he felt total acceptance. He began eating again. The coffee was cold, but he downed it with the roll. He nibbled at the part of the cake that had not gotten

soggy in the soup. In the end, he took the whole thing.

The guy certainly knew how to use words. It reminded me of when I was a student at Kent State. Professors said I had talent. So, after college, I decided to become an author. I kept sending query letters and first chapters to publishers, and they kept returning. No explanation. “Sorry, but we don’t think this fits our current needs but keep writing. You have talent, and we’re sure you will.”

Then somebody said, you need an agent. So, I started sending query letters and first chapters to agents and kept getting them back. Except for the ones that told me I was Pulitzer material and offered editorial advice for a fat fee. It finally dawned on me that I would never get a Pulitzer, a PEN/Faulkner, a royalty dime, or even a contract. That’s when I decided to join ‘em rather than fight ‘em. And so was born D.H. Rablo Associates, Literary Agency.

PUBLICATION GUARANTEED! D.H. Rablo Literary Service. We guarantee to place

your work with a first-class publisher within six months or your money back...

It ran year-round as a classified in a couple of writers' magazines. The ad didn't mention that the first-class publisher was a first-class vanity house that would happily churn the stuff out for a fee.

Every October was what the Christmas season is to merchants: the big sales push that would carry us through the next twelve months. It would start with a full-page ad for A- ONCE-IN-A-LIFE-TIME OPPORTUNITY for would-be writers. It was "the contest" to other people in the trade—enormous prizes for the winning novel. Nobody ever won, so we never had to shell out with the enormous prizes.

There was a picture of Marie and me on one side and a lucky winner on the other. The lucky winner was always Clara Fulham from Meddybemps, Maine. "Thanks, Mr. Rablo, for giving me my start." Each year, it was the same winner with the exact quote. By now, the lady's dead, for all I know.

For a few months after that, the entries would pour in. I'd check them over to make sure they were legit, then pack them off to my friend Angus

Boardman, who taught English 101 to a ton of students at a university that will remain nameless so I don't get frigging sued. Angus got a small fee for each comment he sent back, and his students got some practice editing the so-called works of art. It was the same with manuscripts that would come in from people already on the hook.

But here was one Marie insisted I read before sending off to Angus. O.K., keep the bitch happy. Let's see where old Art is now.

Gradually, the hall was clearing out. Art fled the soup kitchen, his stomach churning. He walked the six blocks to the rooming house where he was staying, let himself in with the key the landlady had given him, and climbed the gloomy three flights to his room. The smell of garbage and frying food hit him as he mounted the stairs. The same key unlocked the room door. He closed the door, turned the deadbolt, threw himself down on the lumpy bed, and broke out sobbing.

Exhausted, he rolled over on his back and began tracing with his eyes the faded floral pattern that ran along the top edge of the wall. If only Betty could see him now. She'd get a laugh.

Arthur Merion Finley, Dartmouth graduate, U. Mass. Ph.D., college professor, architect of a brave new world.

Mustn't let the depression take over again. Need to get medication, he thought. It had been dumb to let the supply of pills run out without getting a refill. Damn! The yellow card! He'd left it at a Rite Aid, and when he'd gone back for it, nobody knew where it was. That yellow card was his ticket to survival. Without it, he couldn't get a refill. They knew him at the hospital. He had to find a way to get there. Twenty blocks away. He'd just have to leg it. He looked down at the ugly white scars across the insides of his wrists. They would never leave him as long as he lived.

Art stared blankly at the crisp white bandages wrapped tightly around his wrists. He knew they had him thoroughly doped up. His gaze swept the room—that green. The color scheme would work if you weren't sick when you came in. Through the wire-latticed row of windows, the white light of a winter afternoon. Bare branches were waving in the wind a short distance away.

Several patients sat in red plastic lounge chairs, looking fixedly at the fluttering image on

the TV screen. Others hunched down on the benches that lined the walls. The ping-pong table sat waiting for players who rarely came to use it. In the corner, an attendant yawned, stretched, and returned to his magazine.

Everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours was vivid in Art's mind. Boss, the custodian, just happened to be checking the first-floor men's room and found Art on the floor, his lifeblood flowing out of long slits in his wrists. Boss reacted quickly, wrapped the wrists in paper towels, kept his hands clamped around them as the red stain spread outward, and yelled at the top of his lungs. Harriet came running, said, "Oh my God!" and dashed for the phone. The minutes ticked away until the wail of a siren could finally be heard in the distance. Harriet said they were trying to reach Gerry and Betty. All this Art heard and understood, but he couldn't react. He just lay there and let things happen.

Now, sitting in the day room at the mental hospital, he was sorry he'd caused all the commotion. Why couldn't they have just let him die? He'd waited 'til after the kids were all out of the center. The boss usually cleaned first thing in

the morning. This time, for some reason, he was making his rounds at the end of the day.

The door at the other end of the day room opened, and a tall, angular woman in street clothes walked in, followed by Harriet. The woman had a clipboard, and Art guessed she was a social worker.

“Hi, Mr. Finley, I’m Sue Cort. I’m with social service,” and she extended her hand. Art shook it limply. “I guess you know this lady,” she said, gesturing toward Harriet.

Harriet wrapped her arms around Art’s shoulders and leaned against his. “We’ve been worried about you, pal,” she whispered. He nodded and tried to smile, but it wouldn’t come.

“He’s pretty heavily medicated,” said Ms. Cort. Then, raising her voice a few decibels, “Mr. Finley, Ms. Jackson has been telling me about you. Sounds like you’ve had a pretty rough year.”

“Rough few years,” interjected Harriet. “The agency’s money running out was the last straw. Art was our grantsman. He wrote all the funding requests. In the last few months, it’s been one rejection after another. He was putting it on himself.”

Ms. Cort watched Art for a reaction. He stared straight ahead and shrugged his shoulders.

“Takes the weight of the world on his shoulders. I keep telling him, 'Relax,' and he keeps telling me he hates to have people tell him to relax. You know this guy used to be a professor.”

“Really!” said Ms. Cort, smiling at Art as if to seize the opening.

“But he hasn't been himself since his son died a few years ago. AIDS. Guess he blamed himself for that, too,” said Harriet.

“Would you like to talk about that, Mr. Finley...or is it Dr. Finley?” asked Ms. Cort, swinging the clipboard into position.

All Art could do was shake his head slowly. The tears were coming again. He didn't have the energy to try to stop them.

Ms. Cort waited, then straightened up. “All right, there's plenty of time to talk later. Dr. Weller is going to get you set up on some medication. We'll wait for those wrists to heal, and then you can go home.”

Home. There was no home anymore. But it was too much of an effort to think about that. The women left, and he sank into a stupor.

The rest of the day was a blur. He welcomed the numbing routine. It allowed him to space out and let others do the driving. Take medicine, line up for lunch, eat lunch, go back to the day room, sit, take medicine, line up for supper, eat supper, go back to the day room, somebody coming through with a checkerboard, shake the head, no thanks, bingo, no thanks, magazine, no thanks, take medicine, get bathed, go to bed. People left him alone most of the time, but he knew they were always there, checking up, making sure he didn't try to hurt himself.

The following day, somebody woke him up to take his temperature. "Easy, just keep your leg flexed, O.K., easy now...there. We'll hold it for a few minutes. Nice day, Arthur. Sunny and breezy. No, don't move. There," and he felt the thermometer slide out of his rectum. What was the point of taking his temperature? Probably, a patient had died of undetected flu a few years before, and they were afraid of getting sued.

Art felt a little more like himself and wondered if they'd reached Gerry. Betty? There was no

telling. Somebody said she was back in Virginia. For the first time since arriving at the hospital, he took an interest in eating. Whatever they had him on wasn't interfering with his appetite.

In mid-afternoon, he was sitting in the day room, browsing through the National Geographic on his lap, realizing he had no idea what he'd read. He began to doze off when the day room door opened, and he glimpsed Gerry. She wore a black body suit and a wide skirt with a dazzling striped pattern. Her skin was tanned almost to a deep bronze. Better watch out for that Arizona sun, Gerry. Skin cancer, you know. But Gerry still had that youthful belief in her immortality. Scott once had that, too, he thought. Dangling from each ear was a large copper and turquoise earring. He recognized her work. Where she got the artistic talent was a mystery, certainly not from his side of the family, and he doubted it was from Betty's. Gerry's almost-black hair was shorter than he remembered.

She rushed in and threw her arms around him, "Oh, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy. I got here as soon as I could." He could feel her wet cheek up against his. She pulled back and looked into his

face. All he could do was nod and say, "I'm sorry. I couldn't...."

"It's O.K. It's all right. You'll be all right." She was crying and fishing around for a Kleenex in the leather pouch at her side. He reached out and patted her hand. "I'm... medication... I can't...."

"Yes, that's O.K. They told me they'd given you medication." She clung to him for several minutes without saying anything. He wanted to be able to respond, but it was as if something were tying him down and not letting him move.

"How's... your guy?" Damn, he couldn't even remember her boyfriend's name.

"Mark? He's fine, but he's not allowed to leave Nogales."

"Still on probation?"

"Yes. I.N.S. has decided we're public enemy numero uno. But we're OK. Some churches provide sanctuary for the refugees. They're the ones that are taking chances. They could lose their property if the I.N.S. decided to get nasty. Us, we don't have that much to lose."

Art struggled to respond, "Keep up...."

"Keep up what, Dad?"

“Keep up...keep up the good work,” said Art, and he managed a little salute. He envied their gutsy attitude.

“I talked to Mom last night,” said Gerry. “She’s very worried about you.”

“I... Virginia?”

“Yes, she’s back near where she grew up. Still nursing, of course. Oh, and you’d be impressed. She’s running for a state senate seat and has a real shot at it.”

“I... uh...that’s nice,” he smiled slightly. “Always knew...knew she’d be good at....”

“Politics?”

“Yes. Could hold her own in... in... arguments.”

“Of course, she’s in the wrong party,” said Gerry, “but she’s pushing for a decent health care system for the state. That’s something she understands. But enough of that. How’s it going here?”

“Can’t...can’t...complain,” and he gave a little wave of his hand. Gerry reached out and grasped it in both of hers and just held on for a few minutes. She was weeping silently.

An attendant came in and lined them up to go to dinner.

“I'm due back in Tucson tomorrow night,” said Gerry, “Got a show I've been working on for months.” That same apologetic expression he'd known over the years. No question where she gets the guilt, he thought. What a gift to bequeath to your favorite child.

“It's wonderful, Gerry.” Then, with effort, “I'm proud... proud of my girl.” After a long pause, “Will I see you again before you go?”

“Yes, I'll come back this evening,” and she was gone.

Gerry came back in the evening. Art was more his old self. They reminisced about the old times when she and Scott were growing up when the family was together, and everybody assumed they were the perfect family. All too soon, the attendant came to usher her out. They held each other tightly without saying a word until the attendant moved in to end it. As Gerry swished out the door, he knew it was the last time he would ever see her. Next time, he'd do it where there was no Boss around to rescue him.

“Well?” She was standing over me—clothes all on and looking like there'd been no roll in the hay.

“Well, what?”

“You know, the manuscript.”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, not bad.” Who knew? It all looked good or bad. Literary criticism, shit, who knew?

She kept at it. “I’ll say not bad. Has possibilities, maybe?”

“Sure, sure. You know, it depends on the market. Depends on what they’re buyin’ now. We been a little out of touch with the market lately.”

Marie bent down and was in my face with a big smirk. “Rather good, yes? Rather good for a beginner, yes?”

“Sure, sure.”

“More than sure, sure?”

“Yeah, right.” I hated to be played with.

Marie wouldn’t quit. “Very good, maybe?”

“All right, for Christ’s sake, yes, yes, yes! O.K.? Frigging women can be a pain in the ass sometimes.”

“Say ‘very good.’ Come on, say it.”

“I say, ‘What’s for dinner?’” First things first, I always say.

Marie muttered, “Shit,” and sulked off to the kitchen. Good. The conversation is over for a while, at least. But I knew it wouldn’t last. She’d

be back at me right after she finished the dishes—friggin’ pit bull. The only thing that would end this stupid stuff was to finish reading the stupid Chapter 1 and agree to send the letter without waiting for Angus to turn it over to his class.

Onions. I could smell them as I picked up where I left off with the adventures of Art the Fart. Marie was cooking up her Friday night special, French onion soup. Man, that’s what attracted me to the girl in the first place. Me? I like onions in any form. Just boil them with cream and butter, salt and pepper, and I’m in heaven. So, let’s say I’m on death row. Warden asks me what I want before I go to the gallows. “Boiled onions,” say I.

Warden: What, no steak? We have a chef who makes steak you wouldn’t believe.

Me: Boiled onions.

Warden: You gotta be kidding, Rablo. Come on, anything you want. Cheese steak? Ice cream sundae?

Me: Boiled onions.

Warden: Hey Freddy, you know that guy in Cell #10? I asked him what he wanted for his last meal on earth. Guess what he says. Go on, guess.

Freddie: Roast pheasant under glass.

Warden: No, seriously.

Freddie: I give up.

Warden: Onions.

Freddie: Oh, O.K. How does he want them?

End of story.

Wardens have no appreciation for onions. According to my Grandma Horvath, who was back in Cleveland, onions kept the family alive during the Great Depression. She planted the whole backyard in onions. Folks said she should have planted potatoes instead. “You crazy?” she said. “Look what potatoes did for the Irish back in the 19th century. Did you ever hear of an onion famine?”

End of conversation. Grandma Horvath was great at getting in the last word.

I learned at an early age how to drive my dear mother, God rest her soul, right up the wall. Now, Mom was all business. She had an alarm clock in her head, and it was always going off. Sleep time, you sleep. Mealtime, you eat. School time, get out of this door before I throw you out. Eat your onions. Oh yes, eat your onions. Absolutely. One layer at a time. It’s amazing how many layers a good-sized onion has in there. My sister Eunice

fought Mom tooth and nail. Many a time, I'd hide in the closet so as not to hear the yelling and the whacks. Me, I was a good child. I did everything Mom told me to. It just took a million years to do it.

So, I decided to peel a boiled onion from here to next week. It was even worth a few hits in the head now and then when good old Mom reached her limit. I still eat onions that way. Marie took it as a compliment. Oh, baby, these onions were great. How did she do it?

Onions. Nobody appreciates them—least of all Paula Bonsall. One time, she insulted me and onions in one fell swoop.

We were at a reading at Borders by a young broad who'd turned a bunch of short stories into a novel. I always wondered how that felt, actually getting something in print. We'd drop in on such bashes on the chance of meeting a Vonnegut wannabe desperate enough to buy our services. The wine and cheese were usually awful, but Marie didn't mind. She always complained I didn't take her out enough. Shit, she had some nerve complaining. I treated her O.K.

Paula, the kid's agent, hosted this particular event. She was handling the kid and about forty

other writers. She'd organized the bash. When we bumped into each other at the hors d'oeuvre table, she stage-whispered to Julia Meyerson, her aide, "How'd this onion get in here?"

I should have known better, but I guess the wine was getting to me, and I did what lawyers know you never do: I asked a question without knowing the answer. Marie tried to drag me away, but I'd have none of it.

"I heard that. What's this onion bit?" I said. Marie tried to step between us, but it was too late. "No, she's got to tell me why I'm an onion."

"O.K., I'll tell you, dear," said Paula, who could never resist a good fight. "The onions like you stink up the garden patch for the honest ones in this business. They should call you the onion man."

"Well, Paula, dear, in the first place, you should have more respect for onions. In the second place, I work with people who haven't already made it. They're the ones you send the form letter to saying you're sorry, but you're all booked up without looking at their stuff so much. I don't sit around collecting a piece of the royalties from famous writers without moving a finger. So, if that makes me an onion, fine."

She turned and whirled off in another direction while I was still talking to her. Marie had to drag me out of the place, literally. Unfortunately, a few people had heard all this, so now I was the onion man. One time, when a writer dropped us for another agent, he sent me a picture of an onion. As I say, onions don't get enough respect.

When we got back to the apartment, I was still pissed. "The difference between Paula and me is she picks a few stars who've already made it. I help the beginners."

"That woman who was reading tonight," said Marie, "What's her name, Doe something? She's a beginner. This is her first novel."

"It's all the same. A year from now, she'll be history," I told her. "So, they get their jollies for a while, then...gone," I told her, slitting my throat with my hand.

"How can you say that?" she says. "She had a nice review in the Times, and some movie companies are talking with them about the rights to the manuscript. You're just mad 'cause Paula insulted you."

“That broad? You have to be kidding. No, it's like last year's Pulitzer for Fiction; remember that one?”

“No,” said Marie, “What was his name...or her name?”

“You just made my point, kiddo. One year out and a goddam Pulitzer is history. It's like your cousin Jerry and his rock band. One CD and a blurb in Billboard, and he's headed for the top of the charts. Now he's working for his old man putting up vinyl siding.”

Sometimes, Marie just doesn't get it.

“Mr. Cynic. So, what's the point of doing anything?” Marie was getting a little steamed.

“The point is, Paula helps authors get their jollies, but it's not going to last. Me? I help authors get their jollies, even if they're going nowhere. People who never believed in themselves get some positive feedback from us. They get their money's worth. It's like onions.”

She couldn't resist. “Like onions, how?”

“Like it's in the eating. Look, you take a nice boiled onion like my mom used to boil them. You start working on each layer. I used to drive her up the wall. Everybody'd be through eating, waiting for dessert, and there I was, peeling each layer off

the onion, eating it, then taking the next layer, and so on. Mom would say, 'Oh, Danny, always looking for the gold inside the onion.' The thing was, you got to the end, and there was no gold. It was all in the eating."

"Oh, I see," said Marie. It was apparent she didn't. She just turned around and headed for the kitchen. Women can be dense sometimes.

We're well into the onion soup when Marie says, "So what do you think?"

"Fantastic, kid," I say. "You could market this stuff. I'm not kidding; this could be on the shelves of every Gristedes...."

"You know what I'm talking about, Danny," says Marie. "I think that guy has talent. This could be a real breakthrough for us."

'Think' was what got to me. "Marie," I said, putting a hand on her arm, "You know the rules around here. You do great at the copy editing and keepin' the books. I do the thinking."

She yanked her arm back quickly, so my hand almost went into her onion soup. Uh-oh, I thought, here we go again. Another trip to Queens and that frigging Doberman they keep chained up in their front yard.

Not a word, which is always a bad sign. She shoved her chair back, stood quietly, and stomped into the bedroom. That's all right, cry on daddy's shoulder. You'll be back. I didn't even look up when she went out, suitcase in hand, and the door banged shut after her.

Good riddance. I pulled her soup plate over and finished the onion soup—no point in letting good French onion soup go to waste. I watched an old Law and Order while I ate. Of course, I came in late, so I had no clue what was happening. Same old: witness sweating in the witness box while Sam Spade or something bores in for the kill. When you think you're catching up, they switch to commercials, and the final verdict vindicates our friend Sam. After that, I surfed briefly and then turned the thing off while the onion soup on the soup plates worsened. I heaved it into the trash—paper plates from now on.

Screw her. Screw him, too, this Earl Whatshisname and his stupid manuscript. I had a couple of shots of bourbon and toddled off to bed.

At first, it was great not having the bitch underfoot. No more organic health food. No more snoring, which I hated worse than the earplugs. I'd get a decent night's sleep. Looking down on

the cabs on 86th Street, I thought about all the suckers racing to their offices to make a buck or home to the wife and kids from their girlfriends' flats—nothing like owning your own business. Hey, bachelor's life's not so bad, either. Could sit and have a drink or two in front of the tube without anybody tut-tutting and reeling off the statistics about men in their fifties. I'd go to the Broadway bar and talk to Al if it got lonely. Now, there's a guy who understands. He could make a mint as a goddam shrink instead of standing on his feet all day selling drinks.

"Al," I said one night, "you ought to hang out a license. Call yourself a psychiatrist."

"Danny," he says, "you got to know your part of the floor." Al played basketball before he got thrown out for taking money on the side. "Move into another player's territory, and you screw up the whole game." Then he starts playing some famous game on the bar with his fingers.

I just said, "Yeah, you're right, Al." I learned a long time ago that you don't argue with Al. He keeps driving until you cry "Uncle!" like he used to kill off Patriots on the court. O.K., Al, thanks for the drinks and the chit-chat.

I took off for the apartment just as it started snowing. When I returned, I yelled, “I’m home,” before remembering Marie was off in Queens. Damn!

One week. Two weeks. Not a peep from her. This was not the usual Marie. Meanwhile, stuff kept piling up. I put off doing anything with the customers’ stuff. I left the queries and chapter ones in a pile. I let the voicemail handle the few phone calls we got from writers. I kept a record and erased them. It’s the same with the other stuff they emailed. Angus Boardman’s class began, and he’d ask me for manuscripts in a few weeks. Shit.

I thought a couple of times of writing to Mr. Earl Magnus, who had caused all this trouble in the first place, and telling him off: “Dear Earl, your writing stinks. Maybe you should think of going into something like Walmart. I hear you get to wear real nice uniforms.” But common sense took over. At this point, I couldn’t afford to write off any customers.

By the beginning of week three, I couldn’t take it anymore. Maybe it was the Chick-fil-A and the pizzas and the other junk. One thing Marie could do was cook. I did something I’d

never done before: I called her folks' house in Queens. Yeah, folks, Dracula is calling. The evil Hungarian about to bite your daughter's pretty neck. I wrote it more like.

Looking back, it was probably the worst decision I ever made. Oh well, that's water over the dam or under the bridge or whatever.

“Hello.” Kid's voice.

“Hi, is Marie around?” I tried to keep it friendly.

“Wait a minute.” Down goes the phone with a bang and then silence. Another voice comes on. It's her mom.

“Hello. Do you want Marie? Who is this?”

Should I, or shouldn't I? At least she's not as bad as the old man.

“Uh, this is Danny.”

Long pause. “Yeah?”

“Hi, Mrs. Foley. It's Danny. Danny Rablo. I wonder if I could speak to Marie.”

Another long pause. “She's at work.”

“Oh, right. I wonder if I could....”

“I'll tell her you called.” Slam.

And a hearty hello to you, too, bitch. I'd wait and try in the evening. Working? What about fast food?

About an hour later, the phone rang.

"Hi, Danny?" She sounded good. Oh man, did she sound good?

"Who else, kiddo? You've been O.K.?"

"O.K., how about yourself?"

"I miss you, babe." I'd planned to be calm and laid back, but I couldn't help it.

"Uh, yeah, well, I wondered if you were OK. That's all."

"I hear you're working."

"Yeah, I'm calling from work. I got to get back to work."

"Sure, kid. So, what's the job?"

"Insurance office. They got me answering the phone. I direct calls mainly."

"Do you have to use an Indian accent?" I said. Try to jolly her along a little.

Long silence. "I got to go, Danny."

"Hey, can you give me a little something? You still use the same email address?"

"I'm not supposed to take calls here." Mechanical. It's like she's talking to one of those people with an insurance complaint. Then,

another long wait. I knew enough not to say anything.

“Call me at home. Evenings.” The phone clicked off.

So, she was going to put me through my paces. That’s O.K., bitch, I can wait. Like hell, I could wait, but I had no choice. So, I let two days go by. On the third night, about midevening, I figured she’d have enough time to be home, watching TV with the folks.

As soon as the phone rang, she picked it up. “Hello.”

She must have been sitting right on top of the thing.

“Hi.” I tried to keep it friendly and straightforward. I could hear the TV in the background and what sounded like dishes.

“Hi,” she said back, more like the old Marie.

“How you doing, ki... How’s it going?” No ‘kiddo.’ Don’t give her an excuse to hang up.

“I’m O.K. Busy with work and everything.” I could feel her closing down again.

“Yeah, how’d you land the job with the insurance outfit?”

“What, you surprised I could do it?” Wow. Potholes all over the place.

“No. No, no, no. I thought it was great that you landed something that fast.” I could feel myself racing. Slow down, for Christ's sake.

“Yeah. My father has a friend in the business. It's not bad.” Silence. I waited her out.

“Gets a little boring sometimes,” she says—just a hint of a snicker under her breath. Somebody's yelling at her.

“Yeah, I'm on the phone,” she yells back.

“Marie....”

“Yeah.”

“I need you, babe.” It just came out in a blurt. Shit.

“Yeah, well, Danny, I need a little time.”

“Sure, sure, take all the time you need, kid. Only you gotta know I'm going crazy not seeing you. We've been through too much together.”

“I know. I'm just....” I could hear the tears coming on.

“Look, can I come out there and talk with you at least?”

Another long pause and a little sigh. “O.K.”

“I can come out right now.”

“No, it's too late.”

“Tomorrow night?”

“O.K.”

“When you get home from work, babe?”

“We’re finished dinner by 7:30, in time for their TV.”

“I’ll be there at 7:30.”

“O.K.” Then off the phone, “I’m coming.” Then, “Danny, I got to go. Bye.” Click.

I never could figure Queens out—miles of two-story row houses as far as the eye could see. Built them after World War II to let returning GIs escape the streets of Manhattan: that and the colored. You expected to see Archie Bunker walk out of one of them any minute. I once met an old guy in the army in Queens right after the war. He and his war bride from Germany had an apartment in a Quonset hut near LaGuardia. He returned a few years later and had trouble figuring out where the Quonset hut had been. Everything was row houses.

I finally got to Marie’s folks’ house around seven. Of course, the first one to greet me was Tricksy, barking her fool head off and jumping up against the chain link fence around the place. She had murder in her eye.

One time, I was delivering pizzas in a neighborhood like this, and two pit bulls were in the yard two doors down. I swear, one jumped the fence and started up the street in my direction. Luckily, I was behind the chain link, so I slammed the gate shut, and the pit bull kept going past me with the owner charging after him, yelling. I kept imagining what if I'd been out on the sidewalk. I don't trust those pit bulls. Turn on you in a second.

Dobermans are bad enough. That's what Tricksy was. They just stayed inside and let her bark. It was Marie's old man's idea. Colored had started moving a few blocks away, and he was pulling up the drawbridge and keeping them on the other side of the moat. I never did figure out how Marie didn't have that same mentality. Maybe the College of New Rochelle did it. Who knows?

Finally, the door opened, and the old man himself stuck his head out and yelled a couple of times at Tricksy. The dog slunk off around the side of the house.

The old man finally looked my way. "Oh, you," he muttered. I had to admit, he looked in top shape. He'd been a boxer in his day. I found

out later he wanted to make Marie into one. Underneath, that lady was tough as nails.

The old man turned without another word and walked in with the door still open. When I got inside, nobody was in sight. They must be hiding in the castle. Then I heard somebody coming from the kitchen. It was Marie. Man, did she look terrific? I went in for the clinch, but she put her hand up.

“Hi, Danny.” She had a miserable expression on her face.

“Hi, kid.” I waited for something else to happen.

“Come on,” she said, threw on a jacket, and led me out the door. We started walking up the street. She kept a few inches between us. I waited some more. Weird, just walking and nobody saying anything. We went a few blocks over to Roosevelt Avenue. She nodded at a coffee shop, and we went in.

“Sit anywhere,” says the counterman, “We’re open till nine.”

So, in a few minutes, we’re sitting with our coffee and not saying anything.

She mumbled something low. I leaned forward.

“What? I didn’t hear what you said?”

“I said things have changed. With us, I mean.”

“How so?” I didn’t have a clue.

“I don’t feel respected,” she says. She looked like she was ready to break down bawling.

“Kiddo, how can you say that? I respect you. I respect you a lot.”

“No, you don’t. I don’t think you respect anybody. Writers, editors, even your buddy Angus. Maybe it’s ‘cause you don’t respect yourself.”

Enough with the psychobabble. But I was determined to keep the lid on. I just gave a little nod and let her go on.

“You said in the beginning we were partners, even split on anything.”

“And that’s what it’s been. Every dime we clear goes fifty-fifty.” I was damned if I was going to let her get away with saying I was cheating. I knew my voice was getting loud, so I quieted back down. She was even keel, like an iceberg.

“It’s not the money. It’s like you don’t think I have a brain in my head.” Her eyes came up off the coffee mug and planted themselves on my kisser. I finally had to look away.

“I swear, Marie, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m sure you don’t, Danny,” she says. Now, what did that mean? I waited for the next punch. She took her time in delivering it.

“I’m not your kiddo anymore, Danny.”

I looked over at the counterman, who was busy looking at other places with a little smirk. I started to reach for my wallet. Marie wasn’t through yet.

“I’ll come back, but it’s going to be different. I want to be treated differently.”

Says who, babe? Who needs this shit? But I didn’t say a word. I just picked up the check and started to get up.

“You need me, Danny,” she says.

“Says who? Go screw yourself.” The decibels were going up again.

“In the first place, you couldn’t edit your way out of a paper bag.”

“That’s a frigging lie,” I yelled. I was ready to smack her. She wasn’t through.

“In the second place, I know the kind of operation you been runnin’.” It sounded rehearsed, like she’d been practicing in front of the mirror. She flinched a little as she said it, and

her lower lip quivered. Underneath there somewhere was the old Marie.

“You threatening me or something?”

Then she caved. Out came the hanky from her handbag, and she was in tears. “I... I...”

I reached out and grabbed her arm. Real soothing, I said, “That’s O.K., babe. Truce. Let’s go home.”

I helped her up and put my arm around her. She was shaking to beat the band. I tossed a five and the check on the counter. “Keep it,” I said to the counterman, and we headed out the door.

Nobody said anything on the way back to her house. Tricksy growled a little when we started her front walk, wagged her tail, and whined. Screw you too, mutt.

I waited on the front stoop while she went inside. In a few minutes, she came out, suitcase in hand. She must have had it all packed and ready to go. I took it from her. Shit. Weighed a ton.

Still, there was no talk walking back to Roosevelt Avenue. It was a good thing because I was puffing.

I had to stop halfway up the stairs to the train for a minute. She tried to take the suitcase back, but I was damned if I was going to quit now. On

the platform, I sat down on the bench, feeling like I was going to have a heart attack. Hardly anybody in the el station. Some people got off as we got on.

“You’re a little out of shape,” she said with a snicker. At least that broke the ice.

When I finally caught I breath, I said, “What about the insurance job?”

“Huh? Oh. Yeah, the job. I have to give them a couple of weeks' notice.”

“So, where’s the office?”

“Forest Hills.”

“You going to commute out there every day?”

“That’s O.K. I did it to New Rochelle when I was in college. Anyway, it’s just for a couple of weeks.”

It sounded loony, but who was I to second-guess her? She might feel disrespected. Shit. Women.

So, she got up at dawn for two weeks, went to her job, and got home at close to six. I ordered dinner mainly, which was a pain but beat trying to do it myself. I mean, women love that stuff. I say, stay out of the kitchen and let ‘em do it.

It meant we didn't see much of each other, which was maybe a good thing. We tried sex once or twice, but neither one of us was really into it. On her final Friday with the insurance company, we went to the Broadway deli and had a real meal for a change.

But the fun had gone out of it. It was like a party balloon the following day: sagging and dragging, but the air was still in it.

So after that, things pretty much went back to normal. I just watched my language around her a little. I was damned if I was going to give her an excuse to run back to Queens.

Meanwhile, there was a backlog of work to do. We were both knocking ourselves out getting the letters and emails out.

Old Earl's query and Chapter 1 sat there like a ticking time bomb. I finally broke the ice. "We got to do something with this one," I said one morning, tossing the envelope on her desk.

"Oh, right," she says. "What do you want to do with it?" Everybody's dancing around the edges.

"Send him the follow-up letter." Then I had a second thought. "No, I'll do it. As you say, this one may have possibilities."

Marie hung there for half a second, then nodded and returned to what she was doing. I picked up Chapter 1 and reread a little bit of it. Up to the part where he says

He looked down at the ugly white scars across the insides of his wrists. They would never leave him as long as he lived...

O.K., Got the drift. I kicked up my computer and double-clicked the letters folder. Let's see: 'promising new writer.' Once I had it open, I plugged in the date and Earl's address, did a little more tweaking, and cranked it out of the printer.

Dear Earl:

Congratulations! After reviewing your sample chapter, the staff asked me to review it personally. In all honesty, in my 25 years of guiding writers through the process, I have never encountered anyone who so readily zeroes in on the reader and holds his attention the way you do. You clearly have something to say; you are not just in this for the money. In short, you have a remarkable talent that deserves to be shared with the world.

Enclosed are two copies of a contract. If you are satisfied with the terms, please sign one copy and return it in the enclosed envelope. The other copy is for your records. The contract is for your protection as well as ours. Unfortunately, many unscrupulous organizations exploit new writers.

One further note: You will see on the contract our standard \$500 fee for reading your manuscript. Because of my confidence that your book will succeed, I am charging you half of that amount. Please cross out the \$250 and insert \$250. That is payable with your signed contract. The regular editing and handling charges listed on the contract are due as they accrue. That way, if you wish to cancel the contract at any time, you can do so without further obligation.

But I have no question about whether we can turn your book into a winner. I look forward to working with you.

Warm regards,
D.H. Rablo, President.

Marie came over and glanced at it. “Same old boilerplate, I see.”

“That boilerplate is what pays the rent, kiddo.”

“Yeah,” she said with a sour expression, “I know.”

She shrugged and went back to what she was doing. Good. Still on track. We’d see what old Earl was good for. The first hurdle was the contract. Once in a while, a writer would smell a scam and drop things there. But I had a feeling this guy would stay on the hook. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. I’d cleared the whole thing with attorneys, but nobody could do anything; totally on the up and up.

It took a week to get the junk we’d already been through off to Angus. Man, ain’t computers great? Can you imagine what we’d be paying for postage? It’s bad enough having to use snail mail with some of these authors. Angus emailed me back, thanking me, and said he’d let me know when it was ready. Angus and I were calm. Everything is like clockwork. That was how I liked it. Nice and predictable.

After that, there wasn’t a hell of a lot to do.

Meanwhile, not a peep out of our friend Earl alias Art. Marie kept bugging me.

“Hear anything yet?” she asked a couple of weeks after we sent the letter. I knew she meant Earl. Christ, get off me already.

I looked through the envelopes that had just arrived. Earl was a snail mail type. “Nope.”

“Damn,” she said. Damn was a big thing for Marie. It was not something the nuns taught her in high school.

She added, “Maybe we should call him and ensure he got it.”

“No way,” I said. “Sound too eager; they smell a rat.”

She knew I was right. What was the big deal with this one, anyway?

“Hey, Marie,” I said, “You know this guy?”

“No,” she shot back like she was getting ready for a bout in the ring. “I never heard of the guy. Why would you think I knew him?”

“No reason.” I let it sit there and returned to looking at the stuff that had just arrived. The pile looked a little thin. There was nothing in the email, either. Oh well, this business has its ups and downs.

After that, there were lots of funny looks. She never said anything, but we weren’t as tight as

before. O.K., we'd let things take their course. I could still dump her if I had to.

Coming into week four, we finally got something from Earl. She'd already opened it on the way back from the post office. She plunked it down on my desk with a grin on her face.

The contract was signed, and the check for \$250 was inside. I let out a sigh. I wanted to get this fish worse than any I ever had. Take the bastard for as much as we can. Free country. If he was buying in, that was his decision. *Cave Canem*, as they say, "Caveman, watch your butt." With the \$250, we'd already covered expenses and then some.

Marie was gung-ho, too, but she clearly had a different agenda. She was sure we could get a publisher for him, and I don't mean Vantage Press. O.K., string them both along.

I noticed something else in the envelope. A handwritten note was tucked in next to the contract. It's not unusual for a new writer to do that. I finally made out the scribble.

Dear Mr. Rablo -

I am sorry it took so long to get this back to you. I hope you haven't given up on me. I must

confess I am still working on the manuscript. I hope that is acceptable. I apologize for any inconvenience.

-Earl Magnus.

At times like this, you had to choose: come on like the marine sergeant or be Mr. Magnanimous? My read on the guy was that he would do better with number two. Also, Marie would have a fit if I picked on him. But in any event, I'd let it sit for a week to allow the anxiety to build up a little. Marie almost blew it when she was going to bank the check with the others. Fortunately, I grabbed it in time. Earl might think we were playing him if that check came through.

Dear Earl:

Thanks so much for getting the contract back to us. Again, my congratulations. You have made a wise choice.

We are now ready to proceed. You say you are still working on the manuscript. Please send us the part you have completed. Needless to say, it is essential to keep your copy. That will make the editing much more manageable.

You did not include an email address. It would help if you would send that as soon as possible. Our email address and secure website are on the letterhead above. You may also find the enclosed brochure helpful.

Many of our writers send material as email attachments. If you decide to do that, please send it as a PDF to ensure we can open it.

Please send anything to my attention. I work personally with a few of our authors.

Thank you again for deciding to work with D.H. Rablo Associates. You will not be disappointed.

Best regards,
D.H. Rablo, President

It couldn't have been more than a week later that Marie picked up Earl's packet at the post office along with a few other items. She always carried the mail in a plastic bag. She dumped the contents on the living room table, and we pawed through it. Finally, just Earl's packet was there. Neither one of us made a move to open it.

"Go ahead," I said.

“No. You take the first look,” she says, “By the way, it doesn’t look big enough for a whole manuscript.”

“Yeah, Earl said he hadn’t written the whole thing yet.”

Her head came up fast. “Oh, you talked with him?”

“No, he put a note in with the contract.” I knew she’d be buzzed because I didn’t show it to her. Screw her.

“What else did he say?” District attorney getting into the cross-exam.

“Nothing. That was it. Honest. It was something he scribbled on a little piece of paper. Don’t look at me that way.” The witness wriggles in front of Sam Spade.

“Where’s the note now?” Sam zeroes in on the witness. No defense attorney to object, damn it.

“I don’t know. I probably heaved it. I don’t know.

Marie went to my desk and started riffling through the papers on it until she found the envelope. The note was still there. She gave it a quick look. “Oh.” The witness was discharged.

Marie tucked the note back into the envelope. What was this paper trail? I started to say

something but let it pass and picked up Earl's packet. Still on my good behavior. For now.

I had to go back to where the thing had left off. Let's see, Art is depressed, and he's got to get his meds, but he lost his yellow card. Then we're into a flashback to when he was in the nut house.

Gerry came back in the evening. Art was more his old self. They reminisced about the old times when she and Scott were growing up and the family was together, and everybody assumed they were the perfect family. All too soon, the attendant came to usher her out. They held each other tightly without saying a word until the attendant moved in to end it. As Gerry swished out the door, he knew it was the last time he would ever see her. Next time, he'd do it where there was no Boss around to rescue him.

Friday afternoon, the October sun was casting long shadows across Broad Street. Art hunched into his sweatshirt as a chill breeze cut in at him. His mind kept switching back and forth between the lost yellow card and images of Scott. None of this would have happened if he'd just picked it up off the counter. Stupid jerk. Or was he losing it?

Names were more complicated to remember now. Maybe his depression wasn't the real problem. There was no prediction of Alzheimer's. No family history of it, but that was because nobody had lived that long.

Scott. He could have had it all. Bright kid. Jesus, nobody even thought about these problems thirty years ago. I just wiped out. What made a kid gay, anyway? Art returned to berating himself the way he had during countless sleepless nights. It never went anywhere, and he'd run through the same dialogues in an unending loop. He wondered what kind of a kid Randy was. Probably drugs in his case. No, we don't know that. Just because he's Black. Maybe not a kid, they hadn't said. Art wanted to meet Ms. Hally sometime.

"Hey, watch where you're goin'!" Art swerved just in time to miss the woman with the stroller. He was at Allegheny—just a few more blocks to go. At the next corner, he veered around a cluster of dealers, gave a mechanical nod, and said, "Hi, how you doing?" as he went. It constantly interrupted the imperious stares. One returned the greeting. Art wondered if they ever thought about the Randy's'. He was sure not. It

was different from the bootleggers in the old days. They took care of their people. To these guys, they were customers, period.

The shadows were deepening. He hadn't thought much about how he'd get back. He felt so naked without a ready supply of money. Well, he'd deal with that when the time came. He walked around to the emergency entrance. As he entered, the security guard eyed him closely.

The woman sitting at the computer took her eyes off the screen.

"Is Dr. Meyers in?" asked Art.

"No, Dr. Meyers doesn't come in on Friday. Your name, please?" She pecked away at the keyboard while he recited the same information, he'd been giving them since he'd started coming here. He wondered when they would run out of bytes and have to stop asking. "Finley. Arthur M. Finley... No, I'm not living there anymore. It's 1930 Cecil B. Moore, third floor rear.... It's 19121... No, there are no numbers on the rooms... No phone... Next of kin? My daughter, Ger... O.K., you have that... Yes, in Arizona.... Yes, same address...."

She finally got around to ask what the problem was. "I need more medication," said

Art. "...Yes, depression... No. I've been stable for several months."

"Please sit, sir; the doctor will see you shortly."

He knew that shortly could run to a couple of hours. If you weren't raving and threatening people, they were in no rush to help you. He took his seat in one of the plastic chairs. Only two other people were waiting. Things wound down on Friday afternoon. He held the mangled copy of Sports Illustrated before him and tried to read, but his mind wandered everywhere. His eyes ran down the first few paragraphs under the picture of the woman in a soccer outfit...

"Mr. Finley? Doctor Sudry will see you now." Art realized he'd been dozing. He had no idea how long. Dr. Sudry was a small, sharp-featured man with a neatly trimmed mustache and skin the color of an olive. Art recognized his file spread out on the desk. Dr. Sudry scanned it briefly and then turned to him. "Yes, what can we do for you today, Mr. Finley."

"I ran out of medicine. I get...."

"Yes, of course. It says here you are on Desyrel. Does that sound right?"

"Yes, that's it."

“Hmm. You know, there are several more effective antidepressants available now. They've found....”

“I'll stay with Desyrel. That works fine.” He was not about to start on a new regimen with a guy he'd probably never see again.

“Yes, of course.” Dr. Sudry seemed just a little put off by the response. He scribbled a prescription on the pad. “There, that should do it. You know where the pharmacy is, I believe.” On to the next patient.

“Thanks. Say, I have a problem. I misplaced my medical assistance card, and the pharmacy won't fill this without it. I've sent to Harrisburg for a new one, but that could take weeks.”

The doctor's eyes narrowed slightly. “Yes. Mmm. I see. I will call over there and let them know you are coming. That way, they may be able to help you.”

Art followed the familiar path to the pharmacy. Several people were lined up at the three stalls waiting to be served. Half a dozen people in lab coats seemed to be constantly conferring inside the work area. The woman behind the cashier's window sat staring into space. Art was tempted to go over and sit, but he

didn't want to lose his place in line. Eventually, he reached the counter. A skinny Black kid with horn-rimmed glasses came over to him. Art handed him the prescription.

He studied it for a moment. "Oh, yeah, you're the one Dr. Sudry called over about. We have a problem. We cannot give you medications if we don't have a yellow card."

Art stood looking at him for a moment, then turned to go, the old feeling of desolation beginning to creep over him. No, he mustn't let go. The woman behind him had moved up and handed the Black kid a slip. Art desperately reached past her and grabbed the kid's lab coat. The woman backed up and muttered something under her breath.

"Sorry," said Art. The kid stared at the white scars across Art's wrist and nodded slightly. He glanced at his colleagues, then came close and whispered, "Look, you got ID or something? My ass could be hanging out on this. The boss is a retired army officer, and everything is strictly according to the code. Do you know what I mean?"

Art nodded, pulled out his old driver's license, and gave it to him. The kid looked at it for a long

time, then began writing something in a ledger and asked, "Is the address still Germantown Avenue?"

"No, it's 1930 Cecil B. Moore Avenue." There is a pause, then more writing.

"What's the zip on that, 122?"

"No, 19121. The other side of Broad is 122."

"O.K., be a minute." Art went over and sat in a chair along the far wall and watched the kid go to a bank of shelves lined with small bottles, retrieve one, and go to work at the rear counter. Art was staring ahead, not seeing anything. It felt like his mind had shut down.

"O.K. All set. You must sign this form that says you got the medicine."

The kid called over to the cashier, "I've got this one, Mim," and she nodded. Art usually checked over anything he signed, but it didn't matter right now. With the package in hand, he started to leave. The kid asked, "You O.K., Mr.? How are you getting home?"

"I don't know, walk, I guess."

"Walk to the 1900 block of Cecil B. Moore? At night? You must be kidding. Look, I get off in twenty minutes. I'll give you a lift."

“Well, if it doesn't take you out of your way. You live around there?”

“No, I'm over in West Philly, but I'm taking a course on Temple's main campus. It meets tonight.”

“Friday night?”

“Yeah. This is to work around folks' work schedules. Meets Friday night and Saturday morning.”

“Sure, you can drop me at Broad and Cecil B. Moore if you want.”

“Man, I'm not dropping you at Broad and Cecil B. Moore. I'm taking you home. You're not walking nine or ten blocks on Cecil B. Moore on a Friday night.”

Later, as they sped south in his battered '93 Chevy, the kid talked about himself. His name was Aaron Fisher, and he had graduated from the Temple School of Pharmacy and was now working on a bachelor's degree in economics at night. After that, I went on to an MBA. He was going to open his pharmacy. “Not around Philly, man, out in Delaware County, maybe the Main Line. I'm out of here. I will put it together as soon as I can.” Art started to say he knew people in Delaware County but thought better of it.

The man was a lot older than he looked. Twenty-six, it turned out. Art winced inwardly. Scott had been a year older than that when he died. Once upon a time, Aaron had wanted to go into medicine. He came out of high school with a 3.95 grade point average. That made him an oddball. He got beaten up regularly for daring to be different. Then he hit Community College and discovered that an A in Olney High School differed from an A at Community. He'd managed to make it through pharmacy school with a C+ average. There'd been problems with math and chemistry in his first year; otherwise, he'd have been 3.0. So, the goal had changed, but not the dream of making it. "Give up" had dropped out of his vocabulary somewhere along the line. It struck Art that the conversation kept coming back to Aaron. There seemed to be no curiosity about the white stranger. Art preferred it that way.

"That's it up ahead," he said, pointing toward the three-story brick structure with the wrought iron railing. Aaron executed a screeching U-turn and drew up in front of the crumbling brick edifice. As they rolled to a stop, Art said, "Thanks a lot," grasping his hand tightly. "I hope everything works out with the drugstore."

“Thanks. Take care of yourself. And don't go walkin' around this area at night. There are some mean cats out there.”

When Art got to the door and was fishing around for the key, he saw that Aaron was still sitting there. Just like seeing a woman in before you drive off, he thought. He was tempted to blink the lights like the babysitters used to but resisted the impulse. Once inside the door, he heard Aaron gun the car and roar off toward the Temple campus like a missile homing in on its prey. Art turned and went up the stairs, the top of the paper bag beginning to feel soggy in his clenched hand.

My eyes were beginning to play tricks on me, so I had to put it down. Marie kept saying I had cataracts, and I said she was crazy because people with cataracts wore thick glasses and were much older than me. I remember this one guy at a publishing house. His eyes were like saucers staring at you through those thick lenses. When they operated on one of his eyes, they detached the retina, and he practically went blind. Marie said they do it with lasers now, and you no longer have to wear those thick glasses.

Crap, no way was I going to let a surgeon mess with my eyes. They could amputate a leg. No problem. But mess with the eyes? Yuck. Next to cutting off my dick, an eye operation would be the worst. It was bad enough even getting them checked. They'd put in these drops, and everything would get super bright and blurry, and then they'd bring this thing right up against your freaking eyeball. I felt nothing, but it still drove me up the wall.

When Marie wanted to bug me, she'd tell me about this video she saw in a biology class. It showed them sucking the lens out of your eyeball and putting a plastic one in its place. Jesus. Anyway, the only problem was I'd look up the street and see three traffic lights close together in kind of a triangle, and by the time I got there, the three traffic lights were just one traffic light. But I don't drive much, so what the hell? I'm not a menace to society.

I knew Marie would be after me once she read the thing. I told her I had to stop by the end of Chapter 1 to give my eyes a rest. She said that was O.K.; she'd just read to the end of the chapter, and then we could talk.

“And besides,” she said, “You should have your eyes checked.” For the millionth time. No way was I going to let any eye doctor near me. She just did that to bug me.

I waited for her to say something about Earl’s manuscript. I knew she was dying to read it. For some reason, she was holding back. I couldn’t figure out why, like that business of wanting me to read it first. Maybe she was afraid old Earl didn’t have the stuff after all. My problem was it was too good. Not like the crap we usually get. It meant we couldn’t just blow it off but might have to look for a publisher. Trying to make an honest man out of me, Earl baby.

Finally, I said, “O.K., you want to read it?”

“I will as soon as I get through some of these things Angus sent over,” she said. O.K. babe, take your time. Can you wait? I can wait.

The following day, my stomach told me it was time for breakfast. I entered the kitchen, and she was sitting and reading there.

“What’s for breakfast?” I said. It was as if she didn’t hear me. Didn’t even look up. I don’t know whether it was the Earl business or her latest trip to Queens, but this was not the old Marie. She’s

suddenly too busy to get me something to eat? Jesus, breakfast, for Christ's sake. A six-year-old child could do that.

“These kids don’t know beans about boxing,” she says like she’s talking to herself. “They should check their facts. Doesn’t Angus teach them anything? The lady says Ali beat Frazier in 1975 in the Philippines. The kid crosses out ‘beat’ and scribbles in ‘knocked out.’ In the margin, he says, ‘Punchier.’ Real cute: ‘punchier.’”

“Sounds good to me,” I say, being helpful.

“Problem is, it’s wrong,” says the boxing expert. “Happens, the lady is right. Ali won on a technical, not a KO.”

“Oh,” I say. Then I say, “How the hell do you know so much about boxing?”

“You forget, my daddy was the welterweight champ of East Elmhurst when he was in high school. I grew up in boxing. That’s all I ever knew as a kid.”

“You mean that time he told me to get out of his front yard, and I challenged him to a fight...? I could have got killed.”

“Oh, yes. I guess you didn’t see me and Mom hanging onto his shirt for dear life.”

“So why didn’t you go into boxing?”

“Karate. Those days, women didn’t box. At least nice girls from Woodside didn’t. Daddy was ahead of his time. Or rather, what Daddy wanted was a little boy instead of a little girl. So, no boxing? Karate, he says. Girls did karate for self-defense. Pop was determined I would be a black belt before I was fifteen. He missed it by a couple of years.”

“Yeah, well... Hey, where's breakfast?” First things first.

“I'm behind on getting something back to Helene from Pullman. Just help yourself with anything, OK?” She made one of her dippy smiles without looking up.

It had been like this for more than a week now. Used to be during her period, she'd let me starve. But this was getting to be a habit. I'd picked up a jar of instant at the grocer so she wouldn't play games with me. I opened the cupboard door. Where the hell did, she keep it? After I slammed a few doors, she looked up with that frigging little smile of hers and nodded at the fridge. It only took forever to find the jar inside.

“It hasn’t been opened. Why do you have it in the fridge?” I was getting pissed.

“That way, you’ll know where to look next time.” So, I was right. She was going to make me get my own coffee.

She returned to the page in front of her, talking to herself. “Helene should be good for a few more months, but she’s been slowing down. No more rapid response team. It took her four months after we sent back the first draft. Boy, is she a lousy writer? Half the time, the kids in Angus’s comp class don’t even catch the goofs. We should get a bonus for teaching grammar. Is she keeping up with her payments?”

“Huh?” I was busy with the stupid teakettle.

“Helene, the lady from Pullman, Washington. Is she sending her checks?”

“Yeah, yeah.” I took a swig of coffee and practically gagged. Worst tasting stuff I’d ever had, but I was damned if I was going to let her know. They had gourmet instant at the deli on the corner of Broadway. I’d have to give it a try.

I finally found a sweet roll in the fridge and began eating it, trying to down the putrid stuff in the coffee mug.

“So, when will you read the latest from Earl?” I asked between mouthfuls.

“Oh, yeah, I need to get at that.” Nervous like. O.K., babe, no rush.

It was another week before she mentioned it again.

“Wow,” she said.

“Wow?” Deadpan.

“That guy is good.”

“What guy?” I said, knowing perfectly well who she meant.

“Earl.”

“Oh, Earl. Yeah, Earl. I think it has possibilities,” If she could bug me about breakfast, I could bug her about the manuscript.

“I’ve made a lot of notes,” she says, not bothering to rise to the bait.

“O.K., I’ll take a look at them. Just leave them on my desk.”

Leaving them on the desk was not what she wanted to hear. “I want to talk about the chapter?” she asked (translate: now!).

“Oh, sure, kiddo.” I stretched out on the couch with my eyes closed and waited for the discourse to begin.

“In the first place... Danny, are you listening to me?”

“Sure, babe, fire away.” My eyes were still closed.

The next thing I knew, I was sprawled on the rug, and she glared at me—freaking black belt.

“Hey, hey, I was only kidding.” I put my hands up in front of my face. “All right, now I’m listening, O.K.? Jesus.”

“In the first place, he needs a title. It gets a little out of focus in places, and a title would help him keep it on track.”

“Right, I agree; yeah, the title is good.” What did I know about good? It all sounded good to me.

The pit bull went on: “The opening is dynamite. It grabs your attention.”

I didn’t understand what she was talking about, but it sounded terrific. I tried to make an intelligent comment. “O.K., that makes sense. So that’s just paragraph one. Then what?”

She rattled on. I shut my eyes once or twice but popped them open fast. I didn’t want her practicing her karate, especially with me just making it up off the floor.

“Each episode is great, but I got lost between them. He’s trying to use flashbacks, and it doesn’t work. We start in a soup kitchen. We get the

flashback to the mental hospital and the daughter later. Sounds like a neat kid.”

“Yeah,” I said, “need to signal that it’s not still the main narrative.”

“The other thing,” says Marie, ignoring me, “there’s just the tiniest hint of preachy.”

“Yeah, not good to preach to the reader,” I said.

“Right. You know what I bet? I bet this is autobiographical. Those episodes are too real to be just made up.”

I finally had to put something in. “That’s just the mark of a good author, kiddo.”

She ignored the comment and plowed ahead. “Yeah, the guy is talking about himself. Earl is Art. I’m convinced.”

You know, I should listen to the kid sometimes. What she was saying finally dawned on me. I always wanted to know my authors, like how far I could go with them. Do they smell a rat in the haystack? Maybe she was onto something. Art, the guy with the head problems, tried suicide once; he was not very assertive, too much into himself, guilty, and taking on the ills of the world. It fits Earl to a T: He always apologizes like I will

turn him down. Let her edit, and I'll deal with the nitty gritty. It was sort of the way we divided up the territory. But let her take over. She could spend full-time on the jerk. If the thing was worth publishing, let her handle that, too. I would even take the job of keeping the books off her hands.

Meanwhile, she drove on, me nodding occasionally so she'd think I was listening. Finally, she said, "So what do you feel about that as an approach?"

What approach? Shit. "Hey, I think you're right on the money. When do you think we should get something off to him?"

"I just asked you that." She was looking at me kind of closely.

"Well, yeah, I'm just repeating your question. It's the right question to ask. I agree with everything you have been saying."

She was too far into it to notice I had no clue what we were discussing. "I'll draft something up, and we should get it right off to Earl."

I never saw her so excited in my life. Man, this was going to be a sweet setup. Among other things, get her off my case. Keep the kiddo busy.

"I want you to read the manuscript, too," she says. "I don't trust my judgment on everything."

I nodded. I'd skim over it enough so she'd think I knew what it was all about. But this was her baby as far as I was concerned.

The next afternoon, she tossed a copy of the letter before me.

Dear Earl:

I have been reading your material with great interest. Although I am only a tiny part of the way through it now, I wanted to get back to you with some initial suggestions.

I think this has potential, but there is some work to do. Enclosed are two sheets. The first is a form we have our clients fill out. It gives biographical information on the author. Second, I will provide more detailed comments on specific parts of the manuscript. I want to give you a few more general suggestions in the letter.

The title. So far, you don't have one. A title helps focus your work, even if you change it later. You have something important to say to your reader. It's easy to wander off a message without a title.

The flashbacks. In general, it's a good idea to stay away from them if possible. There are usually other ways to reveal something about a

character. Flashbacks can get very confusing and disrupt the flow of the narrative. You've caught me and are pulling me along (with some excellent stuff, by the way), and then, suddenly, time out for the commercial. I don't know about you, but I resent those interruptions on TV. We remember flashbacks we've seen in movies and think we can use them in a novel. But there's a vast difference between the two media. You'll notice, incidentally, that in the movies, they tend to be quick flashes, not lengthy side trips like the one you have on that trip to the mental hospital.

Okay, some novelists have used flashbacks, and you may be trying to imitate one of them. But it's like seeing a professional actor do a scene on the stage and thinking, gee, that looks easy; I could do that. But you couldn't because you don't know the territory. You may have a reason for using flashbacks. If so, I'd like to know what it is. And you will have to label them so we don't get confused. You gave a little introduction to the scene we returned to in the mental hospital, but it wasn't enough of a transition.

Telling a story vs. making a point. You have caught me up in a compelling tale. Just tell your tale. I sense that you have strong values and

things you want to say about the world. I can't knock that. I want more people to feel that way. But you need to avoid using the book to preach a sermon.

O.K., that's enough for starters. I'll let you know when I have more to share. I would say we don't do any revising now. Wait until I've had a chance to see what you have written. You have my email address. You can send any comments that way.

Thanks again for deciding to work with us. I look forward to a long and fruitful relationship.
Best regards,
Danny Rablo

Bingo. She's walking right into it.

"Where's the bill?" I ask.

"Oh, yeah," she says, "Gee, I totally forgot it. I'll add that to the letter and tuck it in. It's about an hour's work."

Let's watch that, kiddo. This guy's a customer. We treat all customers alike, right? But on to more serious stuff.

"Marie, honey," I said, "I have been thinking."

She looks a little guarded, but she's ready to hear what I have to say.

"That's a great letter, incidentally. Do that little fix-up with the bill, and I'll shoot it to Earl. But you got me thinking. We both agree this guy has real talent. This could be the thing that turns us into a real literary agency. You know, legit."

She's all ears by now.

"Instead of wasting your time on other stuff, you could focus on this."

She's still on track but obviously wants to hear more.

"I was thinking I could handle the stuff Angus sends back instead of you having to do it. I'm not as good as you at editing, but what the hell? So, I miss a couple of commas and a misspell or two. Most of these so-called authors will be happy if we return anything to them."

She likes it. "Yeah, that makes sense, Danny."

"On the other hand, money never was your cup of tea. It's like forgetting to put the bill in Earl's letter. It's a small detail, but remember details pay the rent. I'll put the hours and stuff on my computer and keep the books. Make sense?"

She's so into editing the Earl thing that she skims right along. "You still want to read Earl's manuscript?"

"Oh sure, honey. Who knows, I might even have a thought or two about it. Besides, it's an interesting read, as you say."

So then and there, D.H. Rablo Associates had a new division of labor. I especially liked the part where I kept track of the money end. Meanwhile, let her get her jollies with Art the Fart.

The biggest problem now was that the routine was boring as hell. I'd check over any stuff Marie brought from the post office in half an hour. The bookkeeping went fast. Then I'd spend the rest of the day watching the tube. Jesus, daytime TV was pretty bad. How many reruns of old movies could you watch in a row? Otherwise, the stupid soaps.

Meanwhile, her nibs was working her tail off. It looked like her big obsession was the Art epic. Now, what was so engrossing that she could spend hours on it? I'd been skimming the stuff, but now I decided to dig in and read the frigging thing. Earl had sent some corrections, like dating

his flashbacks. That helped, but it still got confusing as hell.

Chapter 2.

Saturday morning. Art was usually out of bed early on weekends, but today, he rolled over and went back to sleep. It was quarter to eleven before he got up, threw on his pants and sweatshirt, and went down the hall to the bathroom. The walls crumbled around the bathtub, but at least she kept the place clean. He threw off his clothes and waited while the water trickled slowly into the tub. While it was still running, he stepped in and gently lowered himself onto the bottom. The water was only lukewarm, and he could feel it cooling off as he washed. Better than nothing. It felt good, and he hummed to himself while he walked through the dim corridor to his room. Inside, he quickly disrobed, put on the one remaining pair of clean underpants, and put the trousers and sweatshirt back on. No clean socks? Damn! There was a stain on the ankle of one he had worn yesterday. He turned them inside out, slipped them on, and wriggled into his shoes.

He hated returning to the Covenant soup kitchen, but the soup was hearty and would help stretch his dwindling money supply. There was a slight nip in the air as he trudged toward the

Church of the Covenant, and his breath made little white puffs in front of him. Nobody is out on the street at this hour. He'd have to wait for the soup kitchen to open.

As he approached the church, he noticed a line of cars with tiny pennants parked at the length of the block. Two long black limousines and a hearse were at the head of the procession. The big red doors at the front of the church usually bolted shut, stood slightly ajar, and he could hear singing inside. He made his way around to the soup kitchen entrance. The gate in the chain link fence with the razor wire on top was held together with a heavy chain and a padlock.

A heavysset woman shuffled by, holding a plastic bag with food packages inside. She chuckled as she went past. "Ain't no soup on weekends, reverend." It hadn't occurred to him that the place was ever closed. They had told him about the Jewish seminary students coming in to serve on Christmas Day, so he assumed it was open 365 days a year.

Art turned and started to walk in the direction of Broad Street. There were pizza joints in the neighborhood. He'd have to be careful with the

money this weekend. The S.S.I. check should be in the mail on Monday. As he passed the open door of the church, he paused. Inside, a man was talking over a loudspeaker. It was the pastor who had presided at the soup kitchen. Art thought he heard the name Randy. That must be it: Randy, the kid who had AIDS. At frequent intervals, a chorus of "amens" rattled throughout the cavernous auditorium. Art stepped in. Every seat appeared occupied, and people were standing jammed together at the rear and along the sides. As far as he could tell, he was the only white person in the place. He wondered where Ms. Hally was sitting.

The conversation stopped, and people started to move in a slow line past a casket overflowing with flowers at the front. There was a commotion next to it. A thin young woman shrieked at the top of her voice, "No, darlin', no, no, Jesus!" and tried to claw her way to the casket. She was gyrating out of control as a few people held her back. Her head shook violently, then she collapsed sobbing and was carried to the front row of pews. A woman in a white suit and broad-brimmed hat gave her a wad of Kleenex from a box she held and began fanning her with a card.

Through it all, the organ softly played gospel hymns.

Art turned to a man standing next to him. "That's his mom," said the man. "She one messed up lady. Crack, you know."

"Oh," said Art softly, "That's Hally?"

"Ms. Hally, his grandmom. She raised Randy from a young age. She the lady sittin' in the center there," and he gestured toward a tall, gray-haired woman sitting motionless in the front row. Amid the wild scene around her, she was like a rock.

The procession resumed, winding slowly around the room. It reminded him of the line in the soup kitchen; there were a lot of people waiting in lines in this community.

About twenty large young men in yellow T-shirts with some green inscriptions walked together. Art finally made out the words on one of the shirts. "We love you, Randy." The process seemed to last for hours. On a signal from the woman in the white suit, each row got up and joined the line to the front. When it got to the people standing at the back, Art stepped back to let people pass. A woman nodded to him to go

ahead, but he found himself inching ahead with the rest.

When he got to the front, Randy's mother was leaning up against another woman and sobbing softly. A few people stared at Art stonily, but most of them seemed too consumed to notice him. Ms. Hally sat erect, tears streaming down her face in silence. He reached out and grasped her hand. "I'm so sorry," he whispered. "My son died of AIDS." As she nodded, there was a momentary hint of a smile.

Art came to the coffin and stared at the gaunt, still face, so peaceful now. The gray pinstriped suit, shirt, and red silk tie were immaculate. A snapshot was taped to the quilted white velvet on the cover standing above the body. The photo showed a grinning child of perhaps ten or eleven. They wanted to remember a happier time. Art struggled to picture Scott, but it was blank.

He realized they were waiting for him to move on and stepped past the casket. As he looked out over the throng, it seemed all eyes were on him. He noticed three white women sitting toward the back. On the way down the side aisle, one looked over and smiled when he reached their row. The

others chatted with each other and seemed not to see him.

The procession finally ended as he stood, shifting from one aching leg to another. The music stopped, and the congregation gradually became quiet. "Father," the pastor's voice rang out, "Father, we pray for Randy Harrison; we pray that he is in your loving care, Father God...."

Voices responded from around the hall. "Amen!" "Yes, say it!" "Thank you, Jesus!"

The pastor said, "We pray for Randy's soul and his dear sweet family, Father God...." The voices became louder and more numerous. The words over the loudspeaker and the echoing cries from around the room picked up a mesmerizing cadence that was building toward a crescendo.

Art was beginning to feel giddy and looked around for a place to sit down before he passed out. He wasn't sure whether it was the lack of food or the rising fervor around him. A woman noticed him and came closer. "Here, sir, just sit down on the floor." He thanked her and slowly slid down, leaning against the wall behind him until he was hunched on the floor. He could feel sweat all over his body. He was past being embarrassed. As the

prayer ended in a booming shout, he gradually relaxed. People didn't seem to notice.

“Are you O.K., sir?” It was the woman who had urged him to sit down.

Art struggled to his feet. “Yes, thanks, I'm O.K. now. Thanks a lot. I was getting a little woozy there.” She watched him for a moment, then turned her attention elsewhere.

The casket was closed now. After an eternity, the minister strolled up the aisle, followed by six teenagers in the yellow T-shirts surrounding the casket. Then came the family. Ms. Hally was the central presence; everybody seemed to be leaning on her. She was stoical, ramrod straight. An older woman supported Randy's mother on her arm as she sidled along.

Once the procession had moved on, the rest of the congregation began moving toward the vestibule and on out to the sidewalk. Art went with them. At the door, the pastor stood smiling and greeting individuals by name. He shook Art's hand mechanically, turning to the next person in line.

Out on the sidewalk, the sun seemed almost harsh in its brightness, and white clothing gave off an eerie brilliance that blurred the edges. It

was the same experience as when they put drops in his eyes before an eye examination. He guessed his pupils were as big as saucers. The large crowd spilled out over the curb and into the street. Before long, people began walking off. Art didn't want to hang around to see them load the coffin into the hearse. Several young men in yellow T-shirts, wearing identical black jackets now, were standing around smoking. As Art passed, one said, "Thanks for coming, man." Art worked his way toward the end of the block and, nodding to people as he went, started toward Broad Street.

The hunger pangs were kicking up in earnest now. A few women, sitting on marble steps at the entrance of an aging brownstone, chatted among themselves while several small children raced after a boy riding a battered tricycle. Two men worked on a car while conversing in Spanish a little further up the street. Other people were striding by without looking up. It seemed to Art that he was invisible.

At the corner of Broad, he looked for some sign of a place to eat. He passed up the MacDonald's and went a few blocks beyond to a pizza parlor. It was deserted, except for a woman

at the counter and a very dark-skinned man loading a large pizza into the yawning oven. Deep in conversation, the woman took his order without missing a beat.

“So, he said, 'I don't have to take this,' and just walked out. They're not about to take that brother back, you can bet. You want peppercorns on that, mister?”

Art shook his head and slumped into a metal chair beside a small round table.

“You kiddin'?” said the man, chuckling. “Sheesh, he better start looking for somethin' else.”

“Bright boy and all, that, Charlie, you know? He got himself a scholarship to Penn 'cause of the basketball and all. But that boy got one gigantic attitude, you know?”

Their voices faded out of Art's consciousness. He was still trying to digest the funeral and Randy and Ms. Hally and Scott.

“I say, Mr., your pizza is ready.” Art snapped back in and realized she had been trying to get his attention. He ambled to the meat case, fished in his pocket, and pulled out three dollars. The woman rang up the sale, gave him his change, said thank you, and went on talking about

Charlie. Back at the table, he devoured the slice quickly. He wanted another but decided against it. That would hold him 'til tonight.

Where had they gone off track with Scott? And how had they missed what was going on? In retrospect, it all seemed so obvious. Damned fool kid! He felt the anger welling up in him. His mind was racing over those final days. The phone call had come as no surprise...

"Dr. Finley?" Art recognized Brad Murray's voice.

"Hi, Brad, everything O.K.?"

"Scott's back in HUP. He's been admitted to intensive care. Ms. Finley's on her way. Gerry's here from Arizona." There was a slight tremor in his voice. God, that meant they'd known this was coming, and nobody had thought to tell him. He was really out of the loop as far as the family was concerned.

"O.K.," said Art, "I'll head right over."

He had rehearsed this moment so many times, but it was still unreal. It would be a relief if this were finally it, after so many months of despair, sharpened by the occasional false hopes. At three A.M., traffic through West Philly was thin. Art

was on automatic pilot as he took the parking ticket and maneuvered into a space.

When he got off the elevator, Gerry was there to meet him.

“Mark, come with you?” he asked.

“No, he can’t travel with all the restrictions. INS is really on his tail.”

He gave her a long, tight hug, then she took him by the hand and led him along the corridor. “This way, Pop,” she said. Neither one talked as they approached the half-open door. Art’s eyes immediately went to the emaciated figure under the sheet. Scott’s skin was taut around his cheekbones, and the eyes glazed unseeing at the ceiling. Betty sat on one side of the bed and stroked the limp hand. Brad was on the other side, his arm draped around Scott’s head. From time to time, Brad drew a damp washcloth slowly across the forehead. “It’s O.K., Scott, it’s O.K.,” he whispered close to his ear. “Oh good,” said Betty when she saw Art. “I was afraid Brad wouldn’t reach you in time.” Her eyes were red, but she wasn’t crying.

“Hi,” said Art, and he hugged her awkwardly.

He glanced over at Brad. “How are you doing?” he asked.

"I'm O.K." Brad didn't look O.K. He had lost two close friends to AIDS in the past few years. Art wasn't sure Scott had any close friends besides Brad, who was still such an enigma. People were dropping like flies, and Brad sailed along in the pink of health. So ironic. Art knew better, but he still blamed Brad for getting Scott into this.

Outside, the mechanical world of medicine buzzed on, seemingly oblivious to the pain in this room. Somebody tapped lightly on the outside of the door. It was a nurse - at least he was dressed in whites. You couldn't tell anymore. He was carrying a tray with bottles, hoses, and other paraphernalia. He nodded to everybody and laid out his equipment on the tray table.

"What the hell?" said Brad.

"What are you doing?" asked Betty. Art envied her assertiveness.

"Blood sample, ma'am."

"No. This patient is dying."

"I'm sorry," and he checked a slip in his hand.

"Yes, sorry, doctor's orders."

"Tell the doctor the patient's mother refuses." She was beginning to get worked up. She stroked Scott's hand all the time she was talking.

“I'm sorry, ma'am. You see, we have to make sure....”

“You are talking to an R.N. I know what you must ensure. You have to make sure you don't get sued. Now take that tray and get out of here.” She started to rise, still holding Scott's hand, and the nurse gave her a little salute and left.

They gave her a round of applause. “Nice going, Ms. Finley,” said Brad.

“Ridiculous what they do these days. Lordy! I let them take a blood sample from my mother when she was practically on her last breath, and I vowed I'd never do it again.”

Everybody broke into laughter. Then Scott groaned, and they came back to earth. His eyes were closed now. Gerry held tightly to Art's arm while Betty and Brad resumed their bedside vigil. Art studied the jagged line of stripes across the monitor above Scott's head.

The hospital wanted to move Scott to a different room, but Betty refused. “When they give up on you, they ship you to a little bare room with just a table and four walls. They're not going to do that to my son.” She knew how to use her nursing credentials to the maximum when she had to.

The green stripes gyrated wildly for a moment, then resumed their march. Everything else was on hold. Scott, already beyond consciousness, heaved a heavy sigh. The line of stripes on the monitor went flat. Betty's head went down on the bed, and they knew the waiting was over. Brad buried his face in the pillow next to the still head, and his body shook with sobs. Art and Gerry clung to each other, the tears flowing freely.

That night, Art kept churning things over his mind. One thing was clear: Other than Gerry, there was no family. The world was suddenly a very cold and lonely place.

*

“Hey, Mr., you all, right?” The dark-skinned pizza chef stood over him, the woman hovering close behind. Tears were streaming down Art's face.

“Yes, I'm all right. Thanks.” There was no point in trying to explain. “Yeah, I'm fine,” and he managed a little smile as if to prove it. He wiped his eyes and pushed back the chair as they watched warily. He stood up, and they backed away a little.

"No, really, I'm O.K. Thanks a lot," and he went out into the afternoon chill.

Art reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out the remaining cash. Three dollars and, let's see, fifty-five cents. He jammed the money into the pocket and turned south toward Cecil B. Moore. He couldn't wait for the S.S.I. check Monday. He'd pick up cereal, powdered milk, and maybe a few bananas. There were several corner groceries in his neighborhood. Begging was out of the question. He'd starve first. It's funny how you could survive on a bit of money when you had to. Betty's scolding countenance flashed through his mind. She'd always been the economizer, spending hours cutting coupons from the newspaper to save a few bucks.

As he went, he drank in the scene around him. You could walk through one block that looked like a bomb had hit it. Some of those buildings had probably been boarded up for years. If that fire had happened on the Main Line, they'd have cleared the lot in days. The next block would be different. House fronts newly painted, plastic awnings over the windows, and planters made out of old tires along the curb. He wondered how many of those blocks it took to turn a

neighborhood around. At the community center, they'd worked on projects like that. It seemed like they were always one grant away from going under and submitting pages of baloney to foundations and the feds, then having to submit for the next funding cycle before the first project had gotten underway. In the part labeled "Evaluation of progress to date," you lied. His academic training had made him good at that. In the end, they did go under. So, he shrugged, progress.

Several dealers checked him out briefly at the corner of 15th Street before returning to their banter. He remembered the first time he'd walked through these streets, eyes darting from side to side, wondering if the man approaching was going to rob him. Now, it was familiar territory. Alertness to his surroundings was now second nature, below the level of consciousness. He knew the places to avoid, but there never was a guarantee of safety. Oh well, Gerry had come within an ace of getting raped on the Haverford College campus. It was just her luck that the next young woman to go along the path was targeted. He'd long since overcome the self-consciousness about being the strange white guy. People either

ignored him or reacted. No matter. A few reached out.

Inside the little market, he checked the prices on the Cheerios. The big box was a better bargain, but he had to conserve his cash, so he settled for the smaller one. The woman showed him the coffee creamer when he asked about dry milk. O.K., coffee creamer it is. Mix it up with a bit of water. He'd have to guess at the quantities. At least this didn't have to be refrigerated. The slightest jar costs about twice the price of the cereal. God, they stick it to the customers in these stores. He'd wanted to get a banana but only had eight cents left. As he left the store, he fingered the change in his pocket. Eight cents from zero. That had to be a first. He felt surprisingly relaxed about the whole thing.

Sunday afternoon. Art headed back to the church. A lone man stood leaning against the narrow front lawn's wrought iron fence.

"Hi, do you know if Reverend Porter is here?"

The man took the pipe out of his mouth. "Come back at four-thirty. Evening service start at five o'clock."

“Do you know where I could find him now?”

“He home. He don't like to be disturbed on Sundays. Gettin' ready for prayer service.”

Art paused, then, “Do you know Ms. Hally?”

“Hally Robbins?”

“Yes - the one who lost the grandson?”

“Yeah. Everybody know Ms. Hally.”

“Do you know where she lives?”

The man squinted at Art momentarily, then began fussing with his pipe. At first, Art wasn't sure he'd heard the question.

“Ms. Hally. I was wondering....”

The man motioned down the street. “She on Croskey, second block down. Left-hand side. 'Bout the middle of the block. Look for the “Blessed Jesus” sign in the window.”

Art thanked him and walked briskly in the direction indicated.

In a few minutes, he reached the sagging two-story brick structure. A small wreath of flowers tied with a black ribbon hung above the doorknob. The 'Blessed Jesus' sign in the window had been taped several times. He went up the steps and rang the doorbell. Nothing happened. He rang again. Still nothing. He rapped on the door. There were voices inside, but still nobody

came. Finally, he banged heavily with his fist, and in a few moments, he heard footsteps approaching.

The door swung open, and a little girl looked up at him. Behind her, he could hear a TV set, running feet, and people talking loudly. The child turned and yelled something.

An adult was coming in from the next room. "Who's there?" It was Ms. Hally. She was wiping her hands on a grimy apron. Yes?" Then, a second look. "Oh, yes. You, the one who was at the funeral yesterday. What can I do for you."

"I wanted to talk with you."

She stood eying him for several seconds, then, "Come in." The room was set up like a classroom, with a beat-up desk and several wooden chairs in two uneven rows. A small sofa, two matching leatherette armchairs, and a coffee table stood by the front window. Ms. Hally emptied one of the armchairs and dragged it next to the desk. "Sorry, we're a little crowded here," she said. She sat behind the desk, folded her arms, and leaned forward. On the desk was an autographed photo of the first President Bush shaking hands with Ms. Hally. She noticed him staring at it. "That was back in the eighties. A

thing called 'thousand points of light.' We went to Washington to have dinner with the President."

"You were one of the thousand points of light?" asked Art

She chuckled, "Sure. Republican senator tryin' to make his points with North Philly folks." The face became stony again. "So, what can I do for you?"

"Ms. Hally... It's Ms. Hally, right?" She nodded. "I need to...explain. My name is Art Finley. I'm so sorry about Randy. You see, I lost my son to AIDS several years ago."

"Uh-huh, that's what you said yesterday." She shook her head slowly. "That AIDS..." and her eyes wandered off. "Work of the devil."

"It was bad - went on for about a year. It was just..." and he felt his eyes beginning to tear.

She waited until he was able to settle down. Art went on. "I heard about Randy in the Covenant soup kitchen and wanted to meet you. It was like, we have something in common." It had sounded so grand when he'd said it before the mirror. Now, it felt dumb.

"You a believin' man, Mr... Sorry, I forget your name."

"Finley, Art Finley."

“You a believin' man, Mr. Art?”

“I'm not sure what I believe. I guess after what happened to Scott – he was my son - I'm having a harder time believing right now.” He decided it would be better not to tell her he had never been able to accept the idea of an intervening being..

“Would you pray with me now?” she asked. She reached across the desk, and they clasped hands tightly. “Blessed Father, we ask your blessin' on Randy and Scott. And we pray for their souls and for forgiveness for what they did. And we ask you to take these children to your home and care for them. And please, God, take the devil out of those young people and make them whole. In the name of Jesus Christ our savior, amen.”

“Amen,” said Art. They sat with heads bowed, their hands locked together for a few minutes longer, and then a quick squeeze from Ms. Hally, and they let go.

The silence deepened. Finally, Art said, “How old was Randy?”

“He only twenty-nine,” and she shook her head.

“That's just two years more than what Scott was.” Art watched her face closely as he added, “He was gay.”

“Oh, gay. Uh-huh.” The eyes grew flintier, and he detected a hint of opprobrium in the voice. “Randy was doin' drugs. They think he got hold of a dirty needle.”

That seemed to end the conversation. He had wanted to share so much with her. Now, there appeared to be a wall between them. He searched around for another hook to keep the meeting going. “Randy's mother was at the funeral.”

Ms. Hally's jaw tightened. “Theodora...she...she's on crack most of the time. She's one bad apple. She comes 'round to the funeral - huh - that's the first time anybody see Theodora for a year or more. Abandoned the kids when they were tiny. I raised four of her little ones by myself. Randy's the only one got with the gangs and such.” The eyes became more animated. “Look a-here,” and she held up a framed picture of a young woman in a military uniform. “That's Julietta. She's an officer down at Fort Benning, down in Georgia. I come from Georgia. Place name Dodge County. You never heard of Dodge County, I bet.”

“No, can't say I ever did. You must be very proud of Julietta. What about the other kids?”

“There's Frederick. He works in the shipyard. And Alberta. She's a nurse at an old folks' home in Chestnut Hill. She has two little ones of her own. They're sweet kids.”

“You raised all of them by yourself?”

Ms. Hally laughed. “Oh, them and a dozen more.”

“Did you have other children...besides Theodora?”

“No, that was it. I got sick after her and couldn't have any more. Maybe the Lord was tellin' me I done enough harm bringin' that girl into the world. She trouble from the get-go.”

They sat in silence for several minutes. Then Art said, “Ms. Hally, I want to do something. You know, maybe keep some kids from getting into this kind of trouble.”

“I see. Well, we can always use help. A couple of churches up on the Main Line send us money to keep our work going. I got a letter here somewhere telling you how to make out a check,” she said, pulling the desk drawer open and beginning to search through the papers inside.

“I don't have money. I mean, work with some of the kids. You see, I live in the neighborhood.”

Her head came up. “Where do you live?”

“Cecil B. Moore, 1900 block.”

“What kind of work you aimin' to do?” Ms. Hally's eyes narrowed, and she moved back from the desk a little. Art remembered there had been incidents in the area. One particularly grizzly account involved a white man who lured neighborhood women into his apartment and then tortured and killed them. Here was a white stranger, his son gay, wanting to hang out with young kids.

He pretended not to notice. “Tutoring, for example. I used to be a teacher.”

“We pretty well fixed for tutors, Mr. Art.”

“I've worked with kids over the other side of Broad Street for years. I'd still be there if the agency hadn't folded up.”

“Uh-huh. That's nice, Mr. Art. Maybe Rev. Porter could think of sumpin'.”

Art didn't try to hide his anger. “Sorry to take up your time, Ms. Hally.” He was halfway to the door when she said, “What kind of tutorin' you have in mind?”

“Reading's the big problem, that and math.” Art came back and sat down.

“There are two boys. They're brothers named Arlo and Cutty. Arlo, he's behind in his reading

and spelling. He's in third, but they talkin' 'bout holdin' him back. Cutty, he's the younger but smarter in school than his brother. It makes Arlo feel bad if he is back in his brother's class, you understand?"

"Yes, of course. Can I meet them now?"

"Oh," she said smiling, "They're not here."

O.K., she was not ready to foist him off on any of her brood. Let somebody else take the risk. All right, it was a beginning. Maybe in time, she'd come to trust him.

"How do I meet them?"

"Come back tomorrow 'bout three. I'll have 'em here.

There was a commotion in the rear. Ms. Hally was up out of her chair in an instant. "What's going on back there? Clara! Clara?"

A voice came from the furthest room. "Ms. Hally, Jeffrey has done knocked over the flour bag. Now it's all over the kitchen floor!"

Ms. Hally shot Art a look of exasperation and headed toward the kitchen.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he shouted, and she waved to him over her shoulder as she charged through the archway.

That night, it occurred to Art that he hadn't taken any medication all day.

No skimming this thing. I couldn't put it down. Now, with my eyes seeing double, I had to stop. Just give them a rest—no frigging eye doctor.

Jesus, that is so pathetic. Your kid a frigging fruit basket and dying like that. Whew. Gave me the willies. All the kid had to do was stay straight instead of going for that homo crap, and he wouldn't be dead. Why didn't they give him those drugs that are supposed to stop HIV? Jesus. And why was I letting this get to me? Shit. I was glad Marie was doing the editing. I wondered what she thought about gays. It wasn't the kind of thing we talked about. She wouldn't go for the flashback shit. This had come in before she sent her comments to Art - I mean Earl. Art, Earl, all the same thing. She said so herself.

Later, I checked out my email. There was one from our friend Earl.

Hi, Danny.

You're right about email. It is easier than waiting for the snail mail. I appreciated your

comments. As far as I can see, your primary concern is the flashbacks. I've now put dates on them. I hope that helps. I understand what you're saying. Let me explain why I have used that device.

I am a fan of Henrik Ibsen. One of Ibsen's best plays is *Peer Gynt*. Unfortunately, it is tough to produce on the stage, so it rarely gets performed. But one can read it as a long poem. He is trying to discover who he is and his real core. I can identify with that. He picks up an onion and begins to peel it, and as he does, he says, "You're no Emperor! You're simply an onion - now, my good Peer. I will peel you, and tears and entreaties won't help you."

Peeling the onion is an excellent metaphor for the search for one's true self because as you peel away the layers, you keep getting closer to your essence, but then when you get there, there's nothing there. The essence has been in all those layers. So, life is a continual unfolding of your true self. The search for a "something" is an illusion.

Art is a man searching for his true self (and the mission of that self in the world). He does it by peeling away the layers that have evolved over

his lifetime. The flashbacks take us to those earlier stages (or pivotal events in his life's journey) in reverse chronology. So, each flashback digs a little deeper.

I have also used this reverse chronology because I think it packs a special punch. For example, we go through the agony of Art's son's death from AIDS. But when we meet the son earlier in his life, we already know what he doesn't yet know. Likewise, Art's marriage is on the rocks. Later, we can see hints of trouble in the earlier romantic phase of Art and Betty's relationship, but they don't know what's coming. To put it another way, I would hate to be able to look into my future; I might not like what I found there. My wife died from cancer. We were spared knowing that was coming when we were a young couple starting in life.

I know this sounds a little funny. It may not make sense to sell books, but it makes all kinds of sense to me.

Let me know what you think. I've made some changes - tweaking mainly - in response to your more detailed comments.

Thanks for your help.

Earl

All of which sounded screwy as hell to me. That's OK. Let Marie deal with it. I forwarded Earl's email to her computer. She was doing errands and didn't get the thing until the afternoon. Once she had dropped the bags on the kitchen counter, she entered the office. She must have been in there half an hour when I looked in to see what was happening. She was busy working on Earl's manuscript, so I left her alone. Keep her out of trouble. Meanwhile, I pissed away the time watching junk on TV.

It was getting close to dinnertime, and Marie was still in the office. I shoved the door the rest of the way open with my foot and stuck out two fingers like I was holding six guns.

"Hands up, varmint," I said, "Where's the chuck?"

"Oh, God," said Marie, looking at her watch. "Quarter to six already?"

"You were pretty deep into that thing," I said.

"Yeah, it's very absorbing. I need to read all the way through to get the continuity - such as it is," she chuckled. "He does manage to confuse me sometimes."

"Confuses the hell out of me," I said. "I don't get what he's trying to say."

A little look flickered across her face as much as to say I'm sure you wouldn't. Smug broad.

"We'll put together some notes once I've been through the whole thing," she said. "It's not the whole thing that adds to the problem. He's sent us just half a book. We'll eventually travel back to when he popped out of the womb. "I remember well the day I was born. It was so nice and warm and comfy in there, and then they made me come out into this cold, noisy, evil world."

She headed for the kitchen. "Sorry, got to get Danum's his dinner."

Dinner. Spaghetti and meatballs out of a can with a pile of lettuce on a side plate. Not up to your usual standards, kiddo. She forgot to put out the dressing, so I grabbed a bottle of Newman's Own from the cupboard. I unscrewed the lid when she said," No, we have one open in the fridge."

"So that's what you get for allowing old Danum's in the kitchen."

"Sorry," she said with that forgive-me smile of hers. It wasn't working; I'd seen it too many times.

Wine was my job. That night, I used stemmed wine instead of drinking glasses to prevent the meal from disaster.

So, we're sitting and eating, and as far as conversation is concerned, I'm doing all the heavy lifting. Meanwhile, this little smile plays around the corners of her mouth.

Meal done, and she says excuse me and heads back to the office. I diddle around on the tube until I saw the Mets playing the Phillies. All even, and the Mets are up. Yeah. All I needed now was a bottle of beer. Beer is to baseball what popcorn is to the flicks, so I head for the fridge to get a beer. My God, dirty dishes are still sitting on the table, and spaghetti sauce is crusting away on the saucepan.

I storm into the office. "Hey, sweetheart, you forgot a little detail."

"What?" she says, swinging her chair around in wide-eyed innocence.

"Just a few dirty dishes sitting around the kitchen, that's all. This place looks like a freaking pig sty."

One thing Marie never does is back down. "Oh, really," she says. Here we go; I can feel it

coming. “What do you think *we* should do about it, sweetheart?”

“Now, wait a minute. You throw a few things together for dinner; let us say something short of *haute cuisine*. You barely say a word all dinner. And as soon as you’ve swilled at the trough, off to see what’s happening in Artie’s la la land.”

I’m not sure what did it: the ‘swilled at the trough’ or ‘la la land,’ but she heads for the bedroom without a word. Oh no, not Queens again so soon.

Oh yes, Queens again. I never figured out how she packed her suitcase so fast, but before you know it, she’s heading out the door, lugging the thing like it weighed twenty pounds. Just before closing the door, she said, “Get another lackey. I got better things to do with my life.” I just stood there stunned by the whole performance.

Screw her. I don’t need her—plenty of fast food around. I ignored the yelling on TV - somebody must have got a run - and headed into the office to check for email. New one from her. It was the message to Earl.

Hi, Earl -

I have now read everything you sent me. Bravo. This is going to turn into something. I look forward to getting the rest shortly.

My more detailed comments are attached. As for the overview, I was moved by your response. Yes, I see now how you are using the flashbacks. It is indeed like peeling an onion. Maybe we could use the onion metaphor in your title. Just a thought. You are breaking a few Compositions 101 rules, but that is the way writing evolves. As they say, you must break a few eggs to make an omelet.

That having been said, flashbacks can be confusing enough. I'm afraid the double flashback is going to lose your reader entirely. I'm referring to the place in Chapter 8 where we are back to the meeting between Art and Betty's family in Virginia, and then we are flipped back to their first meeting in the hospital. That's a little much. You should try to rework that in some way.

I am eagerly looking forward to the rest of the manuscript.

Best,
Danny

I was already looking ahead to handling this on my own. No telling if or when she'd be back. At the moment, I didn't give a shit. I'd shoot the thing over to Angus and let his student's practice. But I'd better read the rest if he asked me a question.

Chapter 3.

Monday afternoon. Art arrived at Ms. Hally's place precisely at three, ready to tutor. His pounding on the door brought no response, and he wondered if the whole deal had fallen through. Maybe the old lady had just been stringing him along. Had he dreamed it all up in his mind? No, he wasn't that crazy. But then the other kind of crazy kicked in. Was this just one more failure on his part, confirmation that, at the bottom, he was no good at anything? Get hold of yourself, jerk. It's now precisely two minutes after three. You have taught enough years to know not everybody is driven by that compulsive clock you carry around in your brain. The world didn't work that way, whether in classes or faculty meetings. He was getting ready to give up, his standard solution for everything that got a little tough, when he heard somebody yelling at him.

"Oh, Mr. Art." It was Ms. Hally coming across the street.

"Hi. Are we still in business?" Art assumed that was going to be it.

"The boys got off school early today. Noon, I think. Teachers havin' a meetin' or somethin'.

Clara took the children up to see the work site. They're diggin' up the street on Diamond."

"Where do the boys live?"

"Over in the project someplace. I'm not just sure of the location."

"In Crispus Attucks? I'll go around and look them up."

"Don't know if they're home just now. Could be off playin' somewhere."

"That's O.K., I'll take my chances."

"Attucks is a pretty rough place, you know," said Ms. Hally. She scanned his face for a reaction. "Maybe one of the men can take you over and show you a little later."

"No need, just tell me how to find their building."

"You sure you want to go in there? There's some bad..."

"I've been in projects before. I told you I used to work out of a community center east of Broad Street."

She hesitated momentarily, then nodded and came up the steps, pulled out a ring of keys, and inserted one in the door lock. Inside, she went to her desk and began turning a rolodex. "I think I got 'em under Jefferson - that's Arlo's name. Cutty

is Martin. Arlo's daddy died. The other one? Who knows? I just took off one day. Funny, he's the one that married her. Another guy, the one that died, they just lived together. The boys live with their mom. Her name's Doreen...Doreen Jefferson. Her aunt lives with them, too. Aunt Tad. I don't know her real name. Everybody calls her Tad since I don't know when. Yeah, here 'tis: Jefferson. They're in Buildin' Number Four. You take the elevator to the third floor, and when you get off, you go to the first door on your right, next to the stairwell. It got a picture of a green space warrior plastered on the door. You can't miss it." It was apparent Ms. Hally had been there many times.

"Anything I should know...you know, about the family?" asked Art.

"No. I think Doreen will be happy. She has been after me to do somethin' about Arlo for months. I think he's a smart little kid; he just needs some help with the spellin' and other stuff."

Art got ready to leave. "Thanks a lot, Mr. Art," said Ms. Hally.

“That's something I wanted to discuss, Ms. Hally. I prefer just plain Art, no 'Mr.' in front of it, O.K.?”

She laughed. “O.K. - uh - Art. An' you call me Hally. That's what my friends call me.” They shook hands. Her grip was like that of a stevedore.

Art took his leave and headed toward the cluster of towers that dominated the skyline to the west. Though he'd worked for several months in and around a public housing project a few miles away, this was new territory. High-rise housing had a reputation for being more dilapidated and dangerous than the row houses he was used to.

The door to Building #4 stood ajar. When he entered the lobby, a strong smell of urine and spoiled food assaulted his nostrils. A small booth at one end of the lobby was empty. He guessed it was for security personnel. He took the elevator to the third floor and stepped off into a dim corridor whose walls were covered with graffiti. The door with the green space warrior was where Hally had said it would be. Inside, he could hear a TV set blaring and people talking loudly. He knocked on the door. The talk stopped, but the TV continued. He knocked again.

“Who is it?”

“Ms. Hally sent me.”

“Who?”

“Ms. Hally. Hally Robbins!” He was shouting now. A woman exited one of the other apartments, dragging a shopping cart behind her. She peered up at him briefly and walked past toward the elevator.

Two deadbolt locks clicked open, and the knob turned. The door opened a crack, and an eye appeared in the opening, then disappeared. Whispered conversation, loud enough to be heard above the TV but not so Art could make out what was being said. The door swung open more, and he saw a chain across the opening.

The smell of something cooking, potatoes frying, most likely.

“What you want?” It was a woman's heavy voice.

“Ms. Hally said you wanted somebody to tutor the boys.”

The face turned away from the opening. “Doree! Come here a minute.”

Footsteps and a new face appeared in the crack. “Yes?” Sounded younger than the other.

“Doreen Jefferson? My name's Art Finley. Ms. Hally told me you wanted a tutor; she said you wanted help for Arlo.”

The chain came off, and the door swung open. The interior of the apartment was very dim. The thin young woman with large round eyes stood with feet slightly apart and arms folded across her chest. “You a tutor?”

“Right. I'm willing to work with the boys on their schoolwork.”

“You a student? A couple of Temple students used to come around a few years ago. Then the semester ended, and we ain't seen them since.”

Art suppressed a smile. “No. If you want me to work with the kids, I have some free time.”

“You doing a study?”

“No.”

“Come in.” The inquisition over, he followed her through a gauntlet of boxes full of laundry. The other woman stood to one side. In the far corner, an older woman sat dozing in a wheelchair. She held a cordless phone in her lap. “That's Aunt Tad,” said Doreen. “This here is Velma. She's, my friend.”

“Hi,” said Velma, turning back to the TV. Doreen led him to a little round table on one side

of the kitchen. "You can sit there," pointing with the spatula to a tubular kitchen chair with rubber foam showing through a couple of slits in the stained plastic seat. "Boys, be home soon. They're at a friend's house down the way." She returned to stirring a sizeable black skillet full of potato slices, turning golden brown. "Arlo's like his dad. His dad couldn't read nor write."

"That can be very frustrating." Art was trying to be helpful.

She said nothing for several minutes, then, "What's your angle? I mean, nobody comes around here 'less they got an angle."

"I don't know exactly. Look, can't somebody want to lend a hand to somebody else? I don't know Ms. Hally's angle...if she has one."

Doreen continued to work at the stove, her back to him. Art felt the opportunity slipping away. Well, there is nothing to lose in waiting her out. He hadn't been kicked out yet.

Noisy scuffling and young voices were yelling outside the door. Velma yelled, "Wait a minute," and went to open it. Two boys bounded through the doorway and tumbled into the middle of the living room floor in a heap. One, darker and

more handsome than the other, noticed Art. "What is he doing here?"

The two of them, arm in arm, came into the kitchen and wrapped themselves around Doreen. She struggled to free herself and cuffed the tops of their heads playfully. "Ms. Maddy just dropped you boys off, not even coming to say hello to her old friend Doreen? Come kiss Momma," and her lips met each of theirs.

"Hi, my name is Art," he said, holding out his hand. The smaller boy reached out, grabbed it, and shook it vigorously. "Hi, Art," he said, giggling at the other.

"This is **Mr.** Art. He will help y'all with your schoolwork. Mr. Art, Cutty."

"Mr. Art. Hi, Mr. Art. You be teachin' us school work?" the two of them laughed.

"O.K., so you're Cutty. And you must be Arlo," he said, turning to the taller boy.

"How you know my name?"

"Oh, well, I'm sort of magic."

"How magic?" asked Cutty.

"Watch," said Art. He took a quarter out of his pocket, held it between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, and then appeared to

sweep it up in the right, which he opened wide. The quarter was nowhere to be seen.

“How do you do that?” asked Arlo.

“You magic?” Cutty asked.

“That's stupid,” said Arlo. “He hid it in his other hand.”

“Did not,” said Art, “Look,” and he turned both palms upward.

Cutty pressed up against him. “Show us another one.”

“Can't. Magic's all used up. I have to wait till tomorrow...after we do some homework, O.K.?”

“O.K.,” they both answered.

Velma called in from the living room. “You guys don't have to wait till tomorrow to do homework.” They ignored her remark, and she went back to watching TV. The boys went into another room that Art assumed was a bedroom.

In the living room corner, Aunt Tad grunted in her sleep, opened her eyes, and looked up. She stared at Art without saying anything.

“His name is Art,” shouted Velma, “He's going to help the kids with their homework.”

Aunt Tad nodded and smiled.

Doreen looked out the window. “Getting dark outside. Where do you live?” she asked Art.

“Down on Cecil B. Moore, 1900 block.”

“You drivin’?”

Art laughed. “I don't own a car.”

Doreen thought for a while. “Wait a minute,” she said. She grabbed an old sweater hanging over the back of the other plastic chair, threw it around her shoulders, and let herself out the front door. “Velma, tend those potatoes, hear?”

“Where she goin’?” Aunt Tad asked Velma in a growl. Velma shrugged and dragged herself up off the couch.

In about ten minutes, Doreen was back. “Come on,” she said to Art. “Aunt Tad,” she yelled, “I will be back in a minute, O.K.?” Aunt Tad nodded and waved to Art, smiling. He got up and obediently followed Doreen out the door. She said nothing as they rode the elevator to the lobby. Then, “Calvin gonna take you home.”

As they emerged from the outside door, he noticed a large black man leaning against a tree about twenty yards away. A scar ran from his temple down to his mustache. “This here's Calvin,” said Doreen. “He'll walk down with you. Nobody'll bother you if he's along.”

“Hi,” said Calvin, waving his hand. It is impossible to read his expression.

Art turned to her. “Hey, thanks, that's thoughtful, but you don't need....”

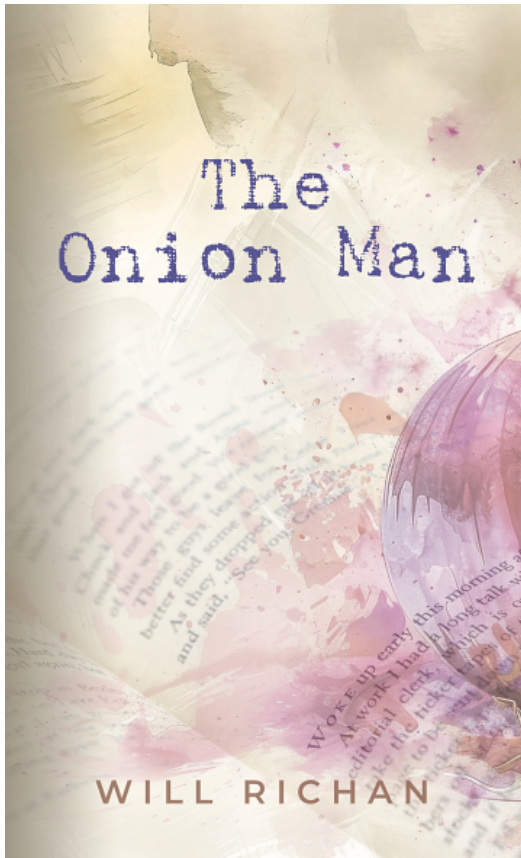
“Ain't nothing to do with thoughtful, mister; I just don't want nothing to happen to my kids' tutor.”

Enough already. Eyes seeing double, as usual. Plus, it's a first-class headache—frigging eyes. Plus, I'm not what you call a speed reader. I copied the email and sent it off to Earl. It looked fine for my purposes—anything to keep him paying. I closed the computer and headed for bed when I noticed the half-empty beer bottle on the coffee table and remembered I still had to clean up in the kitchen. The TV was showing a rerun of an old basketball game. Looked like the NBA finals from yesteryear. I never did go much for the hoops. All colored pretty much now.

He surveyed the kitchen scene. Jesus, what a slob. Good riddance, baby. I'll find somebody to come in and clean up once a week.

But getting somebody would take a while, so I'd have to clean up in the morning. Shit. Everything was cool before this Earl showed up. I was beginning to hate the bastard. Somehow, I

would make him pay, and I didn't just mean reader's fees.



Danny Rablo is a small-time con artist in the guise of a literary agent. Everything is tooling along fine until a real writer shows up. Danny clueless about how to deal with the real thing.

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