

Bootleggers

Tito Carr



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To the memory of my mother and father, and their lifelong love for each other.

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The author would like to thank the residents and staff of One McDonough Place—the residents for their fortitude and good humor, the staff for their kindness and compassion.

The Commons at Greendale

The Commons at Greendale is a great choice for older adults who can't live on their own, but don't need nursing care. It's just a little help throughout the day! If you're thinking assisted living may be right for you, we can help you through the process and answer any questions you and your family may have.

Aside from providing care and assistance to our residents, our assisted living community is designed to keep you connected to the people and things you value most. We develop programs and experiences that promote purpose-filled interactions and positive engagement. Our residents live happy and fulfilling lives because of the importance we put on connecting to what's meaningful and possible throughout life.

Located near the Sebequanash River on more than five secluded acres, The Commons at Greendale is a vibrant assisted living community where older adults enjoy an active, independent lifestyle and discreet support with everyday care needs from a 24-hour staff.

Free from the burdens of home maintenance, transportation and chores, residents have more time to pursue new interests or favorite pastimes. Each month is filled with a range of well-chosen social, cultural and educational events, including live musical performances, art classes and outings to nearby orchards and nature centers.

For those living with Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia, Greendale's Mind&Spirit Care[®] program provides innovative memory care in a separate, secure environment. This intimate, structured setting allows for more personalized care and attention.

If you're a caregiver looking for some relief, look no further! The Commons at Greendale offers you the opportunity to rest and recharge. We know how important your loved one is to you; we also know how important you are to them. Our Drop-Off Care[®] respite care program is the perfect solution for each of you to get the care and rest you need. Short-term stay guests benefit from the same services and amenities as permanent residents.

Floor Plans and Rental Rates

Select a living option below to see apartment rental rates and current availability.

Mission & History

Our mission at Greendale Commons is to create and nurture a warm, caring community where our residents, their families and our employees feel comfortable, secure and engaged at the highest level possible.

A Community within the Community

No discussion of Greendale Commons would be complete without understanding the deep historical connections to the extraordinary town of Greenbury. Picturesque and serene, Greenbury has played major roles in the community and cultural life of the region since its founding in 1709. The history of Greenbury dates back even further to 1664, when the Colonial Legislature sent Israel Parmelee and William Samuels to buy land from the Mangunt Indian Tribe.

To learn more about the history of Greenbury [click here](#) (Appendix A).

Where do you live?
In Colorado, Mom. Denver.
Oh. That's nice, dear.

Slap, slap.

Arthur's feet flopped forward. They flopped a bit harder than usual it seemed, hitting the floor at funny angles. His legs swung limply between steps as he made another thrust with his walker. Steady now, he told himself. It was still a long way to the dining room. He was late, and tired, and determined. As he reached the lobby he feared he'd have to sit down and rest a minute. Then he noticed the bouquet—not another one, he thought, not so soon—a flower arrangement on a table facing the front door with a photo portrait in the middle. And over at the reception desk, Renee waving at him. Send not to know, he thought.

So sad, said Renee, pulling a sad face. We'll all miss her.

Not really, thought Arthur. Whoever it was. Someone from the first sitting.

She was so amazing, said Renee.

To hear Renee tell it, everyone at Greendale was amazing.

Nineteen grandchildren and ten great grandchildren. Renee paused and sighed. Can you believe that?

No kidding, said Arthur. He had to admit that maternity on such a scale was an accomplishment of sorts. Not quite in the category of amazing, but counted for something. And it confirmed for him that Renee, Greendale's receptionist for as long as he could remember, knew far more than was good for her, and that he had best be careful what he might disclose in an unguarded moment. He continued his jerky gait down the hall. Women come and go. Everyone comes and goes. Here it was mostly women though, seventy/thirty. You just get to know someone, next thing there's an ambulance at the door and presto, a flower display in the lobby with their name on it. And Renee saying you were amazing. That's why he spent most of his time in his room, except for meals. He'd paid for the meals.

As he passed to the dining room he glanced out of habit at the lunch menu posted by the entrance, wondering if meals would change with the upcoming change in Greendale's ownership. Who knows? They might even get better. One could only hope. The last time he was in the hospital, strange to say, he thought the food there was better. He'd told Ted the chef about it and Ted thought that was funny—haha, Ted—funny it was not. It was serious feedback for Ted's benefit and his own, if not for the residents of Greendale in general. Arthur said hello in passing to each of the servers by

name—Kyle, Davis, Yolanda, Tyler—as he did every day. And who was that? At the all-women table by the entrance. The hen club, he called it. Cluck, cluck. Someone new? Always someone new. It was hard to keep up with them. He'd stopped trying. Women come and women go, maintaining a steady state of sorts. That's how Arthur thought of it, as a pharmacist would. And forget the lunch menu. Same old stuff. Even so, it was the focal point of the day. But not today. He hadn't slept well. His thoughts were elsewhere.

The numbers kept running through his head.

His table was beneath raised windows that looked past Greendale's front drive to the lush vegetation of early summer in New England. Arthur liked to sit with his back to the wall where it was easier to spot the servers and get their attention as they milled about the room. Today the water pitchers, the place settings, the white carnation in its little vase were all lit with the brightness, if not the cheer, of the midday sun. Not for him anyway. Cheerful he was not, or even hungry. It was the numbers, something he couldn't keep to himself after running them all morning. He saw the empty Greendale bus idling outside by the curb, back from its morning slog of doctors' appointments, as he made his slow turn around the end of the table. With his hands gripped tight to the walker's side rails he eased himself into his usual chair—respected by one and all as 'Arthur's chair' for the past eight years now—careful as always not to disturb his colostomy bag, and turned slowly to survey the room.

Not good, he said.

Palmer, dozing in the seat next to him, roused a bit. What's not good? said Palmer.

The numbers, said Arthur.

Palmer sighed and dozed off again. He'd forgotten his hearing aids.

What numbers? said Sophia, seated at the other end of the table. Typical Sophie, noted Arthur, never shy about butting into a conversation. In fact she butted herself into their table her very first day at Greendale. But that was over a year ago and it wasn't long, by apathy or affinity, till she was accepted as a regular.

The charges, said Arthur. The new fees. He'd seen it coming since he learned that Greendale, built and run by LifeSavings, a faith-based nonprofit, was bought by

ElderPartners Inc., a Nashville-based subsidiary of Western Health & Resorts Limited, owned in turn by AllSphere Capital LLC, a private equity firm run by a Florida and Cayman Island-based octogenarian and former Korean War fighter pilot.

Oh that, said Sophie. I don't bother with that.

Of the six regulars at the table he knew that only Herbert, besides himself, managed his own money—if Herb was to be believed, which was always an issue. Arthur managed finances for his sister, Florence. As for the other three, who knew? The new charges and fees announced last week got Arthur doing the math. He ran the numbers backwards and forwards, around in circles, did a sensitivity analysis of sorts, checked and double-checked his figures. The answer was always the same.

No way.

He couldn't afford them.

It was all perfectly clear and, as Arthur had come to harbor few illusions, not surprising. A fatalist, he'd always held the assumption that one day he'd be dumped out of Greendale with the trash—his projections being a bit histrionic—if he didn't die first. If they didn't die first, the constant conditional that went without saying for all of them, waiting for that endpoint that would put their problems to rest but whose timing for Arthur, as for most of his table-mates, was elusive. Elusive, for better or for worse? Hard to say. And where would he be dumped? No mystery about that. Some nursing home. Spending down his few remaining assets till he was sufficiently pauperized to qualify for Medicaid. Throwing the last pennies of a lifetime of saving and thrift into the coffers of the longterm care industry. That sucking sound. In his eight years at Greendale he'd seen that movie too many times. As for the others, who could tell what ElderPartners' planned 'enhancements' meant for them.

Arthur looked up and dang! There was Dot. It always startled him the way she appeared. The way she stole up to her chair. There was no walker in Dorothy's life. No elevator, either. She motored up stairs and down like she was walking on the beach. The way she strode through the dining room with her arms swinging at her side. So effortless and natural.

Amazing.

Arthur admired her for that. Everyone did, though a few harpies at the hen's table accused her of showing off with the swinging.

I guess I'm late, she said.

You're always late, said Flo from her wheelchair, adjusting the prongs of her nasal cannula.

I was sleeping, said Dot.

You're always sleeping, said Flo.

That was only partly true. Dot's drooping eyelids made it seem like she was always sleepy. Arthur was about to come to her defense when the server appeared to take their orders.

The turkey sandwich, said Arthur.

The turkey sandwich, said Dot.

Arthur said the numbers aren't good, said Sophie.

That's nice, said Dot. I don't like numbers.

The new charges, the new fees, said Palmer. From ElderPartners. He was shouting a bit as he roused from sleep.

Oh that, said Dot. I know. I can't afford to stay here much longer. That's what they tell me anyway. She put her napkin in her lap and smiled as if it was all in good fun.

That's terrible, said Palmer, shouting even louder. Where would you go?

I don't know, said Dot. Someplace.

Unlike Arthur, Dorothy had daughters, living daughters anyway, even if living in distant states, so a nursing home might not be in her future. Besides, she didn't need anything like skilled nursing. No yet. Just a little redirection now and then. As far as anyone knew.

Herbert, according to habit, had been the first one at the table in his corner seat. He had already finished his soup and was reclining in his chair, appearing his usual sanguine self, listening to the others ramble on with his hands folded comfortably on the pooch of his belly and his aviator glasses slipping down the bridge of his nose, their thick lenses magnifying his beady eyeballs to normal size. Herb was known to

have a nip or two in the morning. No worries, he said with the glibness of the unworried to no one in particular. I got it.

Arthur turned to him curious to hear this thing he got but Herb said nothing more, lounging at the end of the table like a man enjoying his after-dinner brandy.

You got what, said Arthur, the turkey?

No, said Herb tapping a finger on the side of his head, an idea. An idea how we can make some money and stay in this joint.

So you going to rob a bank? said Flo.

Something like that, said Herbert. Start a business. I got it all figured out. And I got to tell you, we're talking serious mazuma here. The potential is huge, and if it's done right it's gonna be a piece of cake. So anybody want a piece of the action? If you do, better get in the game now, 'cause the train's leaving the station. There's just so many people I can take.

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Arthur had heard too many of Herbert's sketchy tales to pay much attention to any new hustle. To hear Herb tell it, he was top dog in a dozen sales jobs. As a self-described prodigy in the age of swing, he claimed he promoted top bands in the business before bailing out for undisclosed reasons that, he hinted, involved some not very nice people and certain tax issues. He was rumored to have made and lost several small fortunes, a big spender who lived a lavish and dissipated lifestyle while the money lasted. In other words, most of what he said, especially about himself, was presumed to be a pile of bull. But as the summer weeks went by, with everyone at the table but Sophia and Palmer confirming that ElderPartners was pricing them out of Greendale, Arthur felt he had nothing to lose by hearing more. And to his surprise, he would soon find it appealed to his passion for, of all things, opera. A cunning move on Herb's part perhaps to draw him in? Who could say. But the bottom line was, what was there to lose? No one had much else to offer but the unspoken fatalism they brought to

each meal, marking time together as it ticked away. So one Sunday after a perfectly nice dinner, but feeling more pessimistic than usual—he couldn't say why, maybe it was the weather since nothing much had changed—Arthur pulled Herb to an alcove in the front sitting room and, settling their aching bones as best they could into a pair of Queen Ann chairs, asked him to lay out his scheme.

Scheme? said Herbert, his face kindled a brighter pink as he prepared to launch into his pitch. You mean business plan, Artie. Please, give me some credit here. I've worked this out in detail. In excruciating detail, actually. I'd be happy to show you the prospectus. But to give you the gist of it now, even shorter than my elevator speech—but elevator speeches at The Commons could take forever couldn't they Artie, those things are so damn slow, ha, ha—to give it to you straight, in a nutshell, in a word, I would have to call it...bootlegging. Yes, that's what it comes down to. Bootlegging, plain and simple.

Much as Arthur had prepared himself for Herbert's hype, he wasn't ready for total nonsense. Bootlegging? Either Herb was on the sauce big-time or had finally lost his marbles. Even if the specter of prohibition rose zombie-like from the grave to eat the brains of the good people of The Commons at Greendale, with the wealth of business opportunities that would present, he wanted nothing to do with booze.

And said so.

Which caused Herb to laugh himself into a coughing fit so prolonged it turned his ruddy face purple as he gasped for air. He couldn't speak for a full minute while Arthur handed him tissues and wondered if he should yell for Renee to call 911.

Who do you think I am, Al Capone? croaked Herb when he recovered, pantomiming a few random machine gun bursts with a Tommy gun. Good God Artie, I'm talking CD's here. Opera CD's. High class stuff.

You're what? said Arthur, seeing no reason to be less incredulous than before. Now you want to open a record store?

When he regained his composure Herbert leaned closer. With a pained expression from the soreness of his windpipe, and with what he deemed admirable restraint amused as he was, he began to explain it all as clearly as he could and—glancing around the room to make sure they were not being overheard—as quietly. No,

not records Arthur, he said. Compact discs. They don't make records anymore so there ain't no more record stores, old buddy. We're talking online sales here. Express shipping. Only the best, Artie, and we sell them cheap. The Met. La Scala. Vienna Opera. Joan Sutherland, Maria Callas, Placido Domingo, Pavarotti. It's like mail-order, but faster. You with me? He was speaking a little too quietly. Arthur couldn't hear a thing. So Herbert started over, but at the first sound of his raised voice he saw Renee prick up her ears at her desk in the lobby. I'll tell you later, said Herb, sitting up in his chair. I think this place is bugged. Come up to my room tomorrow after lunch.

Ready for dessert? Kyle stood by with pad and pen. No shorthand for Kyle, no memory tricks. He printed each letter carefully, as focused as a dentist doing root canal, and each word stood out neat as type. His white dress shirt and black pants were neatly pressed. He held himself poised like the young athlete he was, attentive but never rushed.

Arthur turned to look up at Kyle. His face, leather-creased, was freckled with age spots and the odd keratosis. His nose, slightly bent, was still strong and broad. You got any ice cream? It sounded more like a challenge than a request.

Of course, said Kyle. What kind would you like?

Spumoni, said Arthur. Sometimes ice cream bothered his colostomy, sometimes it didn't.

I'm not sure we have any. Hold on, I'll check. Kyle hurried to the kitchen and back before anyone at the table said another word. Sorry Arthur, no spumoni. I tried to save you some last night. Somebody must've took it. Kyle wasn't limping, Arthur noticed. That was good. Kyle blew out his knee in training camp. The surgery went well, but that was the end of his college football scholarship. Now he was back home taking computer classes at the community college.

What kind do you have? said Arthur. He wouldn't chance it for just any ice cream.

Kyle ran through the menu. Vanilla, chocolate, strawberry... and I think there's some Rocky Road, he hinted.

Rocky Road, said Arthur.

Rocky Road for Arthur, said Kyle. And Palmer, what about you?

Palmer was in his customary seat beside Arthur, their backs to the wall like seniors sizing up the high school cafeteria. He wore one of the Ivy League sweatshirts he favored for everyday use, and designer glasses with oversized frames that were fashionable a few decades ago. He roused himself enough to answer. What kind of ice cream do you have? he asked. His voice was smooth as a news anchor, the baritone of a much younger man. Palmer was always the gentleman and his table manners, except for dozing now and then, impeccable. He was the only one at the table who still had a car and a valid driver's license, though he only used it to get to services at the Episcopal church, weather permitting, and when he remembered it was Sunday.

Vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, and Rocky Road, said Kyle.

Do you have any spumoni?

No, Palmer. We're all out. How about chocolate?

No thank you, said Palmer. No dessert for me. Palmer was not put out. If there was no spumoni, he was happy to go back to his room and nap.

Kyle went round the table counter-clockwise. And Flo, what about you? Any dessert?

Spumoni, said Flo. Flo was so hunched over she stared directly at the table top from her wheelchair.

Kyle said they're all out of spumoni, said Arthur.

What? said Flo.

THEY'RE OUT OF SPUMONI, said Art.

NO SPUMONI? said Flo, turning her head toward her brother as she adjusted the nasal prongs skewed on her upper lip.

Kyle shook his head and spoke up. No. Sorry, Flo. All out.

What kind do you have? said Flo.

Vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, and Rocky Road.

Any pistachio?

No, said Kyle. Just what I said.

Then give me a scoop of chocolate and a scoop of strawberry. Not too big.

Kyle wrote it down on his pad, recording Flo's order verbatim with the word 'scoop' written out twice, clear as could be.

And you, Sophie? Any dessert?

I'll have the peach cobbler, said Sophie. Wishing to express a certain sophistication, relative as that might be at Greendale, Sophie made her own choices and tended to her appearance. Having a visitor that day, she tended to it a bit more—a beige cardigan sweater with a plaid wool skirt, and small hoop earrings. Her hair, still thick and wavy, was colored a deep silver.

Peach cobbler for me too, said Sophia's daughter, who joined her mother for their monthly luncheon. The family resemblance was striking, though the daughter was a good six inches taller. Mother tells me you'll be a hundred soon, she said to Arthur as Kyle retreated to the kitchen with their orders. That's quite a milestone. Are you the oldest person here?

Arthur scowled and pointed across the room with his lips. Ben's eight months older than me, he said. Bennet's table was directly opposite near the kitchen. His only lunch companion, Marge, was a blind woman whose red and white folding cane rested against the back of her chair. She had taught at the local college, as had her husband, and stayed on at Greendale after he passed away. Ben had hardly touched his food. His eyes were half-closed, gazing downward as if in prayer. He hadn't spoken a word the entire meal. Rumor had it he was Buddhist.

So how long have you been at Greendale? said Sophie's daughter.

Eight years, said Arthur. Since my wife died.

Then you must like it here. Such a nice place.

They were interrupted by Ted the head chef, back at work from his bariatric surgery a tad slimmer, looming high above them at the edge of the table.

Hello, Ted, said Palmer.

Hi fellas. Flo, Sophie. How was the fish?

Very nice, said Sophie's daughter.

How was what? said Flo.

So-so, said Arthur.

The fish, said Palmer.

My biggest critic, said Ted, laying a hand on Arthur's shoulder.

Needed more salt, said Arthur.

More salt, said Flo, twisting her head to catch a glimpse of Ted.

I'll look into it. Tough crowd, said Ted, winking at Sophie's daughter. Enjoy your dessert. He cocked his finger at Arthur. And Arthur, we'll get you more spumoni, he said, moving on to the next table.

Arthur turned to Sophie's daughter. I like salmon, but you got to know how to cook it. Ted don't know how to cook salmon.

A little butter, a little lemon, said Palmer.

That's right, said Arthur, but you got to know how to cook it.

Halley, Greendale's new activities director, bounced to their table in Ted's wake, thrusting her elbows with each step as if she were speed walking. She was an energetic young woman whose major fault, as far as Arthur was concerned, was her constant cheerfulness. Hi everybody, she said, laying her hands on the back of Sophia's chair as she rocked back and forth on her running shoes. Remember, two o'clock in the activities room. We're trying something new. Dominoes. Palmer, how about joining us?

I don't know, said Palmer. I'll have to check my schedule. But I appreciate the invitation.

When lunch was over Arthur slid his walker, stepped, slid again and stepped, until he was safely in the elevator before the door closed. He needed a little rest before trudging upstairs to hear Herb's spiel. Hi Arthur, said a woman standing next to him as she pressed the button for his floor. Uh-oh. Betty from the hen's table. The alpha hen, in fact. A woman who projected an air of authority even in her shapeless housecoat. How did you like the salmon?

So-so, said Arthur.

Oh, she said. I thought it was good.

You have to know how to cook it.

Maybe you like it different, said Betty.

The elevator doors parted and Arthur shuffled into the hallway. He could feel his heart beating steady as ever. He had his pacemaker checked a month ago. Interrogated. It was still working fine. They told him it should last another three years. He pushed lightly and his unlocked door swung open. He paused a minute for balance, looking in. The walls of his unit were hung with portraits, mostly of his wife, and seascapes, all done by him, painted decades ago during vacations in Maine. He made his way to the bedroom, folded his walker and set it against the wall. Backing slowly to the edge of the bed, he let himself drop on the mattress and removed his hearing aids, placing them dexterously in a small plastic case on his bedside table despite the numbness of his fingers. Then with practiced concentration, steadying himself to marshal his strength, he swung his legs onto the bed. His legs. He couldn't remember the last time he could straighten them. Not dead weight exactly, but still. His orthopedist told him he needed an operation and referred him to a spine surgeon. At his age? He pulled a blanket up to his waist and lay back, staring at the ceiling. He wondered how long he'd be able to stay at Greendale, realistically, even assuming he could still afford it. He looked at the last portrait of his wife. It showed the wrinkles on her neck and the puffiness under her eyes. Her lips were thin. Her nose, slightly arched, was still graceful. Her chin had a soft, pleasing curve. She wore a cloche hat with a bow, no makeup, and her skin was pale. The smooth crescents of her eyelids drooped to the top of her pupils. She gazed down and away, pensive, as if trying to recall something, unconcerned it seemed with the painter in front of her. She looked tired but not unhappy. Maybe she'd been posing too long and needed a break—a summer afternoon nap, a vacation nap in Maine. He could look at her shamelessly while she averted her eyes, as both the painter and the man lying on his bed. Strange. It was as if, years ago, he had painted Dot. Or so he imagined, not without an apology, and a plea for Marie's understanding. As for guilt, he wasn't sure.

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Palmer, in an orange and black Princeton sweatshirt, khaki slacks and penny loafers, was returning to his room for an afternoon nap. The elevator door slid closed and there was an intimate silence as he began his ascent. At first glance he didn't recognize the woman standing next to him. Then he realized she was the new admission, the one who sat by the dining room entrance at Betty's table. She was quite petite, a wisp of a thing, nicely attired in a vintage tea dress and pearl necklace, holding a white leather handbag with black polka dots. Interesting, he thought, but a bit much for weekday afternoons at The Commons. Her hair was thinning, parted in the middle and pulled back in a 1940s retro wave, a sort of a Victory roll, dyed auburn with the merest hints of white roots. Her makeup was rather thick, two red splotches on each wrinkled cheek, her eyebrows penciled dark and pointing slightly upward Joan Crawford-style. Palmer nodded politely. Which floor would you like, madam? he said in his smooth radio voice, the baritone that powered a prize-winning barbershop quartet in his college days. She said nothing, eyeing him straight on, inching closer to him until their shoulders were almost touching and he was struck by the strong scent of her perfume. The elevator hummed and cranked its slow climb. Which floor, madam? he asked again, less suavely now, backing up a step.

She set her bag on the floor and took a step back as well, laying her hands on her hips. I know what you want, she said, attempting a wink that became a tortured series of eye movements.

Palmer looked at her quizzically. Now she's an odd duck, he thought, trying to smile. I'd like to help you to your floor, he said. If you'll be so kind as to tell me which one it is. He held his finger poised over the numbered buttons.

Oh, you're a tease aren't you.

Something in her tone was now vaguely alarming.

Excuse me?

Don't play games with me Tiger, she said. I know what you want. You know what I want.

Sorry? Palmer, it was clear, had no idea.

Why don't you come over here and find out. She leaned back against the rail of the elevator and hiked up her dress, running her hands along the inside of her crinkled thighs. The door slid open. Palmer shot out of there like a man half his age.

After his rest, Arthur went up to Herbert's room and settled on the sofa careful as always not to disturb his colostomy bag. Herb locked the door securely behind him and set Arthur's walker off to the side. As way of hello, he shoved a sheet of paper under Arthur's nose and said,

Sign this.

Sign what? said Arthur.

The paper, said Herbert. The non-disclosure agreement.

A non-disclosure agreement? said Arthur. Are you nuts? You told me the whole thing last night.

Right, said Herb, but you didn't hear it. And I got to thinking, this thing is so big I need to be careful. So I came up with a non-disclosure agreement. Nothing personal.

Arthur took the sheet of paper, hot off the press from Herbert's printer, and read it carefully word for word. Then he read it again. This is bushwa, he said. I can't sign this now. I have to run it by my lawyer.

No lawyers, said Herb, warding off any potential lawyers by raising his arms in the sign of the cross. We got to play this close to the vest. Besides, lawyers just take your money and screw things up. And to be honest here Artie, it may not be exactly, how shall I put this, not quite...kosher?

Legal, you mean, said Arthur. Not quite legal.

You might put it that way, said Herbert. A cynical person might put it that way.

Arthur handed him back the non-disclosure and reached for his walker. Sorry,

Herbie. Not for me. I was in business fifty years, and everything I did was on the level. I'm too old for this phony baloney.

Herbert shrugged. Suit yourself, old man. Sophie signed it. Maybe you can pay the rent with your eagle scout attitude, but I can't. Me? I'd like to run a nice clean little boondoggle like ElderPartners, but we don't have the luxury of making the rules here. Damn your business ethics Arthur, this is guerrilla warfare. Hit and run. It's our only chance.

Arthur inched out the door with a dismissive wave of his hand. I ain't no gorilla, Che. Good luck with your revolution.

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Palmer was not his placid self at the dinner table that evening. In place of his usual threat to nod off, there was an edgy vigilance about him. The others tried their best not to notice, avoiding his anxious gaze. I have to move, he finally announced. I can't stay here. It's impossible. There was a sense of urgency to his outburst, pathos even, that startled everyone at the table.

Palmer, what's got into you? said Dorothy.

I thought you said you could afford it, said Arthur.

No, it's not the money, said Palmer. It's that woman.

What woman? said Sophie.

That woman. The new one at Betty's table. She's after me. I think a little condo would do. A one-bedroom in town maybe. I started checking them out. It could work. I still have my car, but I probably wouldn't need it much.

Nina? She's not after you, said Herb.

Yes she is, said Palmer. You have no idea.

I can guess.

Herbert, she wants to have sex with me. She said so, right in the elevator.

Relax Palmer, said Herb, pushing his glasses up so he could better scan the room. Don't take it so personal. She's after everybody. Pretty darn loopy, that one. I bet she doesn't even remember. You know how it goes—lights are on but nobody's home. Maybe it's her medication. Herbert looked over at the hen's table. Nina wasn't in her chair. Then he spotted her on the other side of the room. She was standing by one of the few men-only tables, chatting away. See? Over there. What'd I say?

Palmer didn't want to look. He was afraid she'd notice. What's she doing? he asked.

The usual, said Herb, dismissing the scene with a flick of his wrist. Flirting. She grabbed my butt in the lobby yesterday.

Palmer risked a quick glance. There she was, at the table Herb pointed out, staring right back at him. Oh no, he said. I really don't like this.

Palmer was right not to like it. As soon as she made eye contact Nina sprang away from the other table remarkably spry on her high heels, and with her polka dot purse dangling from her arm wobbled directly over to him.

Hello, Herbert, she said, placing a gnarled hand on Herb's shoulder. Want to introduce me to your friend here? She paused and lowered her voice to a breathy whisper. Hello there, Tiger.

Sorry, said Palmer. I'm not a Tiger. Really.

No? said Nina. You look like one to me.

That's my son, said Palmer. He's the Princeton man. I'm a Bantam, actually. Trinity College, class of '...

That's even better, said Nina, looking him up and down. I bet you're the cock of the walk.

Excuse me, said Palmer, shooting up from his chair. I have to get back to my room.

Hold on there Palmer, said Herbert. Sit back down, nobody's going to bite. Isn't that right, Nina? Palmer here's a little shy. He's not used to all the attention. Why don't you toddle on back to your table now and have some dessert.

Without another word Nina turned and reversed course, tottering like a sleep-walker back to Betty's table and the silent reception of the women there.

See? I can't stay here, said Palmer. Not with that.

I bet it's your car, said Flo. She wants a ride in your Lincoln.

She's dingy, said Arthur, that's all. I wouldn't worry about it, Palmer. Harmless as a goldfish. Anyway, I don't think she'll be here long. I saw her daughter in Kristin's office having a pow-wow with Rosemary and Halley. Looked like they had some serious business going on.

I like Nina, said Dot. She has style.

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Arthur stared at the new monthly statement spread on the desk before him, prompting his distress as surely as a court summons would. Everything about it was confusing, and slick, and intimidating. He felt a variety of emotions, all unpleasant, which boiled down to simple disgust and despair. There they all were, standing out from the marketing fluff like glyphs in their arithmetic starkness—base charges, additional charges, new unbundled service fees, additional surcharges, taxes on taxes it seemed, long columns of numbers adding up like the scroll of a grocery receipt at the supermarket. So it's come to this, he thought, remarking on the uncanny accuracy of his math. Death by a thousand cuts.

Greedy bastards.

How many more months did he have? He knew exactly. This was no longer an accounting exercise, this was the bottom line. Time to pay up or pay down, as the case may be. Maybe, if he was lucky and didn't have any surprise trips to the hospital, and cancelled a few doctors' appointments, and cut out a medication or two, and stretched out his incontinence pads, he could squeeze out a few more months. The items on his desk began to blur. He felt a little woozy, slightly off balance, like he better lie down before he fell off the chair and broke his other hip. He managed to get himself into bed and gradually folded his limp legs to the side, breathing deep and slow, closing his eyes to rest and imagine what it might be like to end this constant pressure, these

tedious calculations, these unremitting worries, this struggle of ever diminishing returns, and quietly, painlessly, thankfully, give up the ghost right then and there.

If only it were that easy. Especially the painless part.

Not that easy for his wife with her breast cancer, or his brother with his Parkinson's—maybe for his sister Phyllis in the car accident? Who knows what a hard stop like that feels like. Too sudden for pain, one would hope. Or a swift huge one. Ouch. And what about all those whose brains are sucked into the black hole of dementia? Painless maybe, but how easy is that? Deeper each day, forgetting how to speak, how to eat, how to breathe—sucked so hard no neuron can escape. Or maybe it's not a black hole, not a pit at all (had he read this somewhere?) but rather a kind of pedestal elevating you further and further above the desire or even the need for cleanliness, speech, food, air, thought, until it raised you up to the plane of the most enlightened of spiritual adepts? Nice idea that, but a stretch. And when death finally comes, at his age anyway, does it really matter if you're alone in a room at the far end of the hall, tended by the tattooed per diem staff working weekend nights? Or lying supine with a breathing tube down your throat or a scalpel in your belly or a 360 joule shock between chest compressions? Just stop.

Because at that point, who cares.

Or so he tried to tell himself, noting with relief his pacemaker holding steady, thinking a bit more calmly now, telling himself it's rather for the memories of the living than the comfort of the dying that you want to kick the bucket among loved ones in the real or imagined tranquility of your own bed, or else in the drama of the CCU if they, our so-called loved ones, prefer the memory of 'doing everything'. That's how he felt when his wife died at home, and then his daughter in the hospital, and his nephew, and his sister. His son, that was different. A jungle far away is very different. The tally went on and on. And if not for them, the dying, at least it helped address his own fears, at the time anyway. As for himself at this juncture in his attenuating life, he wouldn't really mind where. Just get the damn thing over with. His head began to clear a bit and his limbs stirred cautiously, testing their strength. But he didn't really want to die. Of course not. Quite the contrary. He fiercely refused death, rejected it, feared it as he always had, but it was the prospect of living now that scared him even more.

Arthur felt relieved but exhausted. What was he upset about, anyway? Just money. He allowed his mind to ease away from his financial worries, his aches and pains, his non-existent future, and drift toward the familiar half sleep between memory and dream. For a moment he was no longer nursing his insecurities on a bed in the apartment of an assisted living facility in a mid-sized New England town on a good-sized New England river. He was once again a young man who had made the trek across the French border, through the Catalan countryside to Barcelona. Once again it was May and the city beautiful, but he was not there to wander the Ramblas or note the architecture or sample the cheese. He was there to simply breathe the air. His fears were neither those of living or dying. They became the nightmare of a dream he could not believe was smothered in its crib by its own siblings, and its corpse spat upon by its own comrades, though he saw it played out before his own eyes. The events of May. He knew how lucky he was to get out of there in one piece. Then people wondered why he wouldn't speak to his sister all those years, incommunicado as if it were merely pique from some family squabble. Flo, the Young Pioneer. People would ask, intrigued but a bit skeptical, half-admiring (they'd seen the movies) if he was in the Lincoln Brigade. The Lincoln Brigade? No, he'd say, I'm not Jewish, and leave it at that. He had no idea where to begin. Nobody wanted to hear how those May events unfolded anyway. It was as if they never happened, an elision of time for him as well as the people asking. And maybe it hadn't. It might as well have been someone else. So be it. He had led a comfortable enough life since—husband, father, pharmacist, Rotarian, board member of the Greenbury Chamber of Commerce. He and his sister were now reconciled (if that's what you wanted to call it), people noted with tender satisfaction. He roused from his nap—woke is too strong a word—as from his other life.

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Ok, I'll sign, said Arthur.

He arrived early at the dinner table to catch Herb alone. He'd made sure the servers were on the other side of the room and well out of earshot before he uttered a word.

Sign what? said Herbert.

So Herbie wants to toy with me, thought Arthur. Just like him. But Arthur had to admit he might have deserved it after his curt dismissal of Herb's non-disclosure request. Maybe that's how business was done these days. No more handshakes. After all these years it amazed him that he could still be so stubborn and impulsive. On further thought, however, maybe he shouldn't judge himself too harshly. Maybe Herbert was the one being a jerk here. From what he knew of Herb, that was always a safe bet.

Your stupid non-disclosure, Arthur whispered.

Oh that, said Herb, settling back in his chair with a smirk of vindication. Let me guess. You must have gotten your new ElderPartners statement. Interesting little document, isn't it? They stick it to you so nice.

Herbert's satisfaction was poorly disguised, if disguised at all, and what irritated Arthur most was that Herb was right on the money. Acting like a jerk, but a jerk who knew the score. And a jerk who just couldn't resist digging it in, thought Arthur, getting the distinct impression that Herb's eyes were more bloodshot than usual.

What's with you, said Arthur. Your eyes are bloodshot.

Herb blinked a few times and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands. Must be my new medicine, he said.

Yeah, I bet, said Arthur. A new hooch prescription.

Forget it Art, said Herbert. You don't have to sign anything. If I can't trust you, who can I trust? Just give me your word.

That irritated Arthur even more. With Herbert you often found yourself going round in circles. The man was inconsistent. I said I'll sign, dammit, said Arthur. I want to do this by the book.

Herbert waved him off. Book, shmook. There's no book here. We make it up as we go along.

There was a long pause as Arthur reflected on Herb's bloodshot eyes, his new 'medicine', the habitual circularity of his behavior, and the implications it all had for

engaging the last of one's meager resources with a new business partner who just wants to 'make it up'.

Wing it? said Arthur, trying not to sound too appalled. What happened to your famous business plan? All that excruciating detail.

In the wastebasket, said Herb. The business plan has changed.

Just wing it, that's the plan? Arthur repeated.

Now you're on the trolley, Artie, said Herb. It's that simple. Fake it till you make it, as they say nowadays. Or if you prefer a more musical metaphor, even though you're not much of a jazz buff, our strategy is to rely on the art of improvisation. Because this is uncharted territory. Herbert was now back to his habitual pose—self-assured, amused, even a bit pedantic, hands clasped lightly on the bulge of his belly with his nose, cheeks and forehead glowing a deep red. He was about to prattle on when their little chat was interrupted by the arrival of Sophia easing into her place at the other end of the table. They gave her a silent nod, their usual greeting. Something's up, thought Arthur. She's wearing lipstick.

So what's the first one going to be? said Sophie to Herb.

Along with lipstick, her cheeks were touched with rouge. This is strange, thought Arthur. Why on earth did she look so cheerful?

Which one do you think? said Herb.

I don't know, said Sophie. There's so many to choose from.

But I chose yours, said Herbert.

Mine? Sophie gave a little giggle, an almost girlish peal of delight that would have sounded freakish coming from her had it not seemed so genuine. You mean my *Aida*?

Pos-i-lute-ly, said Herbert. Maria Callas. It's perfect.

Sophie turned her eager gaze to Art. Arthur, she said, did you know Herbert started a new business? He's an opera impresario. This is awfully exciting.

Impresario? Arthur wanted to blurt out that Herb's a fraud, a drunk, a con artist, but unlike what he would have done in his youth or middle-age or even yesterday, he managed to hold his tongue. The image of a nursing home loomed large. And who the hell, he wondered, says 'impresario' these days? But in her defense Sophie was

foreign-born and given to quaint vocabulary, especially in tedious descriptions of her childhood home in Vienna—its garden, its furnishings, the pastries and parties she loved so much—before the war. He doubted Herb had ever heard the word.

Herbert, said Arthur, what the hell's an impresario?

Herbert raised a plump hand with its pinkie ring, jabbing his fat forefinger straight toward the ceiling. An impresario, he said triumphantly, is the money man.

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Slap, slap. Knock, knock.

Come in Artie, said Herbert.

When the door swung open there was Herb at his desk with Sophie and someone else, a young man in blue jeans and tee shirt who looked very familiar, like— Kyle? Yes, a lot like Kyle. But different. Not wearing a white shirt and black pants, his work uniform. Kyle the server from the Greendale dining room, the nice kid who was taking computer classes at the community college. What was he doing there?

Meet our new technical consultant, said Herbert.

Hey Arthur, said Kyle.

This is legit, said Arthur?

Sure, said Herb. He signed a non-disclosure agreement.

I mean working for us.

I'm off the Greendale clock, said Kyle.

Arthur eased closer to the computer screen flashing on Herbert's desk. What the hell is that? he asked.

Kyle's showing us how to rip CD's, said Sophie.

These here are a little tricky, said Kyle.

Aida, said Herb.

They're encrypted, said Kyle. But not a problem. I found the software for it.

Rip? Why ripping? Is something wrong with them?

No Artie, said Sophie. He's moving them to the hard drive. Sophie was wearing makeup again, the rouge and the lipstick. And there was something new about her eyes, something dark and, he'd have to say, disturbing.

So why didn't you say so?

Because it's called ripping, said Sophie.

Then we burn baby, burn, said Herb.

He means copy them, said Sophia.

They want to sound so 'with it', thought Arthur, annoyed now. Pathetic and so patronizing. What was that about? And Sophie's eyelashes. What was with them? They looked longer.

Onto blank CD's, said Kyle.

First we do Serafim and Callas, said Sophie.

It was all going by Arthur too fast up to that point. Callas? he said, finally jumping in. You don't have Leontyne Price?

Of course we do, said Herbert.

Then I'd go with Price, said Arthur.

Callas will sell better, said Herb.

I always liked her version best, said Sophie. And after that, Toscanini with the NBC Orchestra. Remember that? I saw the original broadcast.

Callas is good, said Arthur, but why do *Aida* in blackface?

Herbert threw up his hands. Is this your damn ethics again, Artie? Cause I'm trying to make us some dough here.

Who isn't? said Art. I'm talking business, not ethics. Price will sell. For God's sake, Herbie, The performance has Placido Domingo and Sherrill Milnes.

Point made, said Herbert. Okay, we'll do both. Herb turned back to the screen. Next to the computer was a stack of blank CD's and piles of cheap plastic CD cases with pink and blue backing.

I gotta go, said Kyle. He seemed uncomfortable for some reason.

Already? said Herbert. Okay, tomorrow you show me how to print the labels.

No problem. So long, Arthur. So long, Sophie.

Kyle was out the door.

He's such a nice young man, said Sophie. And he speaks so well. I can't understand them half the time, the way they talk.

And we're getting him cheap, said Herb. He's building our website.

Arthur didn't care how Kyle spoke or what he charged. He wanted to know how the whole cockamamie thing was supposed to work. He moved closer to the computer and examined the screen. Was it really as simple as all that?

The originals sell for \$11.99, said Herbert. We should be able to get eight bucks apiece, easy.

If you say so, said Arthur. Show me how you do this.

Herb pulled up a chair and sat Arthur down beside him. He burned a CD of *Aida* with Leontyne Price and the London Symphony Orchestra, snapping it into its plastic case with a flourish that made Sophie give a little chirp as if she'd been goosed.

Here you go, Artie. First fruits of the season. Check it out at your leisure.

It seemed far too easy, so easy there had to be a catch. Arthur was willing to hold his nose and do not-exactly-legal, but not ludicrous. He gave the room the once over for telltale signs of booze. None, that he could see. No empty glasses in the sink, no empty bottles in the waste basket. That was some relief anyway. Then he looked down at the small square of plastic held in his knobby fingers, through the clear lid of the CD case to the thin silver metallic disc inside that was supposed to be their ticket out of the poor house. He said a little prayer for the success of their newly launched venture that went, whether intended or not, by express mail straight out to Hermes the Trickster, patron of thieves and god of scams. And by extension to Hermes the psychopomp. Or maybe the latter was where it was aimed.

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Where did you say you live, dear?

Colorado, Mom. Near Denver.

Oh. That's nice.

The Commons at Greendale: Our Team

Kristin Pizzutto: Executive Director

Kristin joins The Commons at Greendale with more than eighteen years as a geriatric professional with experience in community based services, skilled nursing and assisted living. She holds a Master of Science degree in Counseling & Psychology and is a Certified Dementia Practitioner. Her love for working with older adults came from the special relationship she had with her grandparents while growing up. Kristin is passionate about ensuring that each resident residing at The Commons is fully engaged in life.

Rosemary McCarthy, BSN, RN: Nursing Director

Rosemary worked for Greenbury Medical Center for over 20 years in the Critical Care Unit, and she brings all her expertise and knowledge to our staff and residents. Rosemary's approach to healthcare is to find the best way her department can meet your needs. Rosemary leads a team that cares passionately about the health and well-being of each and every resident.

Jacqué Jamison, Director of Marketing

Jacqué joins The Commons at Greendale with extensive experience in community development, event planning, digital and social media, and advocacy. She holds an MBA with a concentration in Healthcare Marketing. Jacqué is committed to promoting health and wellness to improve the lives of others and is passionate about assisting seniors and their families in choosing the right community to fit their individual needs. She loves building and cultivating relationships and being a resource to families.

Halley Dunning, Program Director & Resident Service Coordinator

Halley has a passion for the arts and holds a Masters in Recreation & Leisure Studies with a Concentration in Therapeutic Recreation, as well as a Certification in Animal Assisted Therapy. She prides herself on being an advocate for older adults as well as those with disabilities, and enjoys using her skills to improve quality of life for all residents at The Commons.

Ted Corman, Dining Director

For more than 10 years Ted has provided wonderful dining experiences for residents and staff of The Commons. His career began in the US Navy, where he received his culinary training and was the chef on submarines. He spent nine years in the hotel and restaurant industry and has over 15 years of experience working in assisted living communities. Ted strives to engage every Greendale resident in delightful and nutritious dining.

Lou Knoff, Licensed Plumber: Facilities Director

Lou was in-house overseer of The Commons prior to its formal opening in October 1998. He started his career as a plumber on a Naval Destroyer. After the Navy Lou worked as a contractor and has spent his later years in the hospitality industry. Lou is committed to providing a safe and comfortable environment for seniors. At The Commons at Greendale, when things need fixing, we know we can count on Lou.

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Oh crap, thought Kristin. She hoped it was not really happening, but no getting around it—her master’s thesis was “Denial: What’s The Problem?”—it really was. So she steeled herself as best she could, updating her CV and resigning herself to: giving

up her executive title, a return to clinical practice, a significant cut in income, etc., etc., as soon as news came the sale to ElderPartners was a done deal. It all seemed so rushed. An emotional shock for everyone. They should have given her more time to process it with her staff, to process it with herself and her family for that matter. The staff were in mourning. But LifeSavings Inc. needed cash fast—something to do with a class action suit, quite troubling, very unfortunate, involving their youth ministries and blessedly not connected in any-way-shape-or-form with senior care. Sign of the times. Something rather creepy and best left to the lawyers.

Two weeks later The Team showed up from Corporate to go over The Metrics, inspecting everything about Greendale's operations with fine-tooth combs and handheld devices. The building, the furniture, the decor, the grounds, the books, the charts, the personnel files. Interviewing staff, residents, residents' families. Even doing a quick local marketing survey. Real pros, she had to admit. And well dressed, she had to say. But all so young. Not that Kristin was over the hill. She kept herself in excellent shape. Yoga, zumba, 10k's, and the occasional half-marathon. Her arms looked great sleeveless, even better with a tan. Not that she couldn't talk the talk as well. After all, she was on the Board of the state association—Secretary, not too shabby. And she knew how to dress like an executive, unlike her busty bible-obsessed predecessor who flounced around in skimpy tops and tight little skirts. So tacky and unprofessional. My god, the looks she got from the men. The glares from the women. The whispers. The snickering. Just how did she get the job? Hello, LifeSavings. Families were not impressed.

Kristin was every bit the pro when she wanted to be.

The problem was the walk.

Get real, she vented to friends and family. Her residents were not 'customers', not 'consumers' or mini-profit centers. Not ATM's programmed to spit out money so Greendale's corporate masters could reap obscene bonuses and brag to their directors and the press about shareholder value. They were her clients, human beings who deserved to live out the end of their lives with all the dignity they could afford and The Commons could provide. Unlike Jacqué with her MBA, kissing corporate butt from the get-go like there was no tomorrow. Or Rosemary, who could keep doing her cushy little nursing thing regardless (for the most part, maybe, depends on her metrics), or Ted—

who would fire Ted?—she could not see herself in the dog-eat-dog high-pressure for-profit world of soulless corporate pod people. Screw it. It was a matter of personal values, full stop.

A month went by, then two, and still no pink slip. It's limbo, she complained to Lou. The stress of working under such uncertain circumstances weighed heavily on her spirits. Her health, she knew, was at risk. She increased her workouts. She decreased her carbs. She added GABA and lavender to her daily supplements. It was getting to be too much when the invitation to a national training session for ElderPartners directors arrived in her inbox. Held in Las Vegas. An invitation that required a serious talk with her husband to gut check her values. And see if Chuck wanted to go. Would that be selling out? Seriously, would it?

If you want to just walk away, said Chuck, that's fine. Things will be a little tight, but we can make it. You have to do what's right for you.

On the other hand how could she abandon her residents, especially the poor and often cute (like her grandmother) demented souls in the memory unit, her personal area of expertise, all declining but declining in dignity, and the fantastic work being done by her incredible staff, each one screened and selected for their caring attitude and people skills by the hiring process she had personally put in place? They were like family. No, they *were* family. An amazing family. Could she abandon her amazing family just because they now had a bigger mortgage payment on the old house they all loved so much?

If you want to stay, fine with me, said her husband. Maybe you should give it a try and see how it goes. You can always quit.

And they can always fire me, said Kristin. Which I still expect. Maybe they're planning to give me the axe at the workshop. Which wouldn't be surprising. They wouldn't have the decency to do it when I'm at work. At least at work I'd have some emotional support when I got the news. Clear out my desk while I'm away, that's how they do things. Poof, gone! Desaparecido. Like I never existed.

Maybe, said Chuck. But if they do, make sure you get a decent severance package.

I think I should go to the workshop, said Kristin, pouring herself another glass of Chardonnay. That'll give me a better idea what's going on. What the heck.

What the heck, said her husband.

So Kristin went to the workshop, which wasn't half bad. People were actually quite nice and welcoming. A smart bunch too, for the most part. From their greenish auras at breakout sessions, she was delighted to find that some of her fellow executive directors had values similar to hers. And she learned a ton about cutting edge trends in assisted living, like ElderPartners' new Mind&Spirit Care program which was soon to be rolled out nationwide. All in Vegas, with Chuck. The shows, the parties. A real hoot, she had to admit. Back home she'd just have to wait and see how things went. One day at a time.

Mid-fall in Greenbury. Even with its lower arc the afternoon sun shone bright between the clouds. In the courtyard behind Greendale's Kountry Kitchen, separated from the loading dock and dumpsters by a high wooden fence, it warmed the patio furniture enough to let Arthur sit comfortably in shirtsleeves for a few minutes after lunch. Maples ringing The Commons were tinged red, the oaks and beeches had yet to turn. Arthur looked up. He liked trees. He long suspected they knew a lot more than they let on, proof that the more you know the less you have to say. All their lives they had everything they needed right where they stood. How smart was that? He was sitting with Herbert for a little tête à tête, a private meeting he'd arranged to hear the latest business update after the two of them took a casual pass around the courtyard to check for eavesdroppers.

So who's actually in the deal at this point? said Arthur, shading his eyes with his hands. He'd forgotten to wear his old sun hat, a Panama bought for a Caribbean cruise celebrating his fiftieth wedding anniversary.

Everyone, said Herb.

Everyone, grunted Arthur. Who's that?

The six of us, said Herbert, removing his glasses and turning his face with its rosacea rash toward the fall light. UV, he said, holding his eyes shut tight, is good for my complexion. Arthur imagined Herb watching bright colors, oranges and reds swirling across the back of his lids like the lava lamp his grandson kept on the dresser in his bedroom as a teenager.

God I wish I had a cigar, said Herb, raising his fingers to his lips and mimicking a puff.

The six of us at the table?

Right, said Herb. You and me. You know about Sophie. So Dot, Palmer, and Flo. That's six.

You signed up Flo? Arthur jerked almost upright. There was a muffled gurgle in his lower gut and he felt a little squirt.

Of course.

She's my sister and you didn't even tell me?

She's your sister and she didn't even tell you?

What does Flo bring to the party, said Arthur, besides her oxygen? For that matter, what do any of them bring besides their big mouths? They're going to blab this thing all over the place.

For Pete's sake, calm down Artie. We all have our part. Sophie's an opera nut, like you. Me, I don't know diddly-squat about opera. Truth is, I can't stand it. So I'm counting on you two. And Palmer's not just a lawyer. He has business experience too, you know.

Not in retail.

No, but you do.

You're damn right I do. And Dot?

Advertising.

Dottie? She worked for some crooked congressman. What gave you the idea she was in advertising?

No, she'll be *in* advertising. *Our* advertising.

We're advertising? With Dot? To who?

Artie, our market is not Gen X here. And everyone brings a little skin to the game. I can't finance this thing on my own.

And what about the blabbing?

That's a risk we have to take. That's why we limit partners to the table. Besides, who's going to believe our little pipe dream? Plausible deniability, Arthur.

Pipe dream, you got that right.

And you. You got any better ideas, Mr. Retail? We have nothing to lose here.

I wonder about that, Herbert. I really do. Arthur was ready to go inside. His face felt flushed and he wanted to change his bag. He started to pull himself up on his walker when he was pestered by a question, and a light-headedness, that made him stop and ease back down. As soon as his head cleared he said, What do you mean you can't stand opera?

I figured we'd get back to that, said Herb. So okay, I'll tell you. It's the music. What can I say? It's the lousy music. All that bellowing and screeching. But to each his own I suppose. Nothing personal, Artie.

Who said it's personal? said Arthur. I just want to know. If you hate opera so much why are we doing this?

They felt a sudden chill as a cloud covered the sun. A light gust of wind rustled the branches overhead. Arthur thought the trees were trying to tell him something, a warning perhaps. They would know. Herb stood up as Arthur managed to struggle to his feet. It's a business decision, said Herb. Nothing more, nothing less. Makes no difference to me what I sell. Encyclopedias, vacuum cleaners, used cars, life insurance, concerts, big band tours, opera CD's, it's all the same. What counts is the market demographics. Who do you think listens to opera, Artie? Take a wild guess. They ain't poor and they ain't young, If this ain't like shooting fish in a barrel, I don't know what is. C'mon, let's get some cookies.

It was a Greendale weekly event, baking day in the Kountry Kitchen. Herb knew Arthur was nuts about oatmeal raisin cookies warm from the oven or gooey chocolate chip, served with a glass of apple cider that time of year. Arthur would probably wrap two or three in a napkin and take them back to his room. Lucky Arthur, thought Herb, doesn't have to worry about his damn blood sugar.

Is this Renee?

Yes, Herbert. This is Renee. What can I do for you?

Get Lou up here.

Of course. But first tell me, what's the problem?

I can't pee. Call Lou.

Why Lou?

He's a plumber.

Are you serious?

Of course I am.

If you really can't pee you should talk to Rosemary. Or go to the emergency room. You want me to call?

I don't want to talk to Rosemary. I want Lou.

You're joking.

No, I'm not. I'm serious as a heart attack.

Herbert, don't say that.

Sorry. Just a figure of speech.

Okay, hang on a minute.

Hurry up. I can't pee.

Sunday. Here we go again. Arthur looked out his bedroom window. The parking lot would be full. The overflow would park along the entrance drive. There'd be tire tracks on the leaf-strewn lawn, kids running down the hall, strangers in the sitting room.

He dreaded Sundays. He'd have to admit there were also a few things he liked about them. Fresh flowers everywhere to impress the visitors, and the best meal of the week. But families filling tables in the dining room—a son from across town, a daughter visiting from Arizona, grandkids, great grandkids—rekindled pangs of loss mercifully burned out the other six days of the week. Sunday again and here he was, last man standing on the edge of his human connections. Gone were wife, son, daughter, sister, grandchild. Was there a grand nephew somewhere out west? He'd lost track. He had his one sister left, barely, after coming full circle with Flo's nonsense. He didn't want to see much of Flo when he got home from the civil war debacle in Spain, nor after she finished working with the stooges at the American Medical Bureau. She moved to Buffalo after the war, then to San Francisco with her partner Helen when some concerned citizens made a stink with the school board—politics or lifestyle or both. Out of touch nearly sixty years. Regrettable? Who could say. He had his reasons, so senseless now though they seemed important at the time. Maybe both assessments were valid, he'd come to realize. An act perfectly justified at the time becomes perfectly wrong in retrospect. And they were all so busy with their lives.

Doing what, exactly?

After Helen died, Flo lasted six months in her condo too weak to get out the door before checking into a nursing home with her inhalers and oxygen. When Arthur found out he moved her to The Commons. Arranged for her home health aides. Managed her finances. He concluded, with good reason, his younger sister would be out the door feet first well before him. But in the meantime? With ElderPartners? He sometimes envied the residents whose families filled a side room reserved for Sunday dinner. Almost envied. He'd gradually let go of those attachments. What choice did he have? Solitude suited him. At least he wasn't brain dead, not yet anyway he assured himself. He still read the papers. He watched cable news not for companionship let alone for background noise. He read carefully, listened closely, made sure each morning he knew the date and day, the weather forecast, the headlines. He was up on the news from Washington and the happenings in town. Amazing how much things had changed in his ninety-nine years and how little. Arthur did not feel great about the state of the world. He never had. But after all this time he was sure of one thing. People, himself most of all,

weren't half as clever as they thought they were. What comforted him was his vision of a world he would never live to see. It made no difference whether that world would come about or not, all that mattered was that he could imagine it. Were the utopian dreams of idealistic young men still a joke when they lasted a lifetime and the world was still a stinking mess? No, not utopian. Practical and necessary. It was a matter of survival. Not his, the species.

He debated whether to go to dinner or have a sandwich in his room. There he could listen to the *Tosca* Herb had just burned for him after the disappointing debut of their *Aida*. Disappointing was an understatement. Big flop more like it. Herbert was convinced someone—the record companies, the opera houses, maybe even the artists themselves—were blocking their orders. But Kyle said no, his website was working just fine and to prove it pulled out his phone and ordered a copy. Now that's truly amazing. He'd read about gadgets like that in sci-fi mags eighty years ago. Still, he mused, what's all the fuss about online sales? Just a new version of mail order as far as he was concerned. Montgomery Ward, Sears and Roebuck worked it out a century ago. Okay, it's a little faster now. Big deal.

What's the rush?

Back in the day all you had to do was lick a stamp and drop your order in a mail box. Now you need a device. Then another device. Then a newer model of the device. You have to buy so you can buy. Cha-ching, everyone's making money from everyone making money so what the hell, might as well get in on the action or else you're a sap, right? Maybe. Arthur wasn't so sure. That would be thinking like Herbert. Arthur had been a small businessman most of his life, but he couldn't help thinking like a pharmacist as well. You want to make money, great. Do right by the customer. Which, in his business, meant giving them the right drug, the right dose, the right quantity, the right instructions. You screw up, people get hurt. It's your reputation not to mention your conscience. Although the biggest money maker, he had to admit, was the liquor section in the back of the store, something his father started the minute prohibition was repealed. They got their customers coming and going. Not a bad racquet. Not his fault either. After all, it was their choice. You have to take liquor in the right dose, like any

medicine. So don't be a dummy. Too much of anything is toxic. Yes, he worried about Herbert. And he worried about his own judgment. Was desperation making him stupid? No, he'd go to lunch. Best meal of the week. Get his money's worth.

As he came off the elevator Arthur heard the clack of billiard balls and a familiar country club laugh. He detoured down the hallway to the pool room where he found Palmer and a young man brandishing cue sticks.

Artie, said Palmer proudly, this is my grandson Jeremy. Jeremy waved an arm tattooed from shoulder to wrist. Rangers, said Palmer. He's just been deployed.

Second tour, said Jeremy.

Arthur was confused. Deployed? Where?

Afghanistan, said Jeremy.

Why had Vietnam crossed his mind, Arthur wondered, quickly damning up the flood of memories about to break loose. Then it was not Da Nang, Khe Sanh, or Hue. Afghanistan? Someone else's son. Someone else's war this Sunday.

How about a game? said Jeremy.

No, I'll watch, said Arthur. He recognized the painful pleasure in Palmer's eye as he lined up a shot. That's it Palmer, thought Arthur. Hang on to the moment.

Nine ball in the side pocket.

Now, this very moment. Arthur watched the ball shoot across the green felt.

Nice shot, Palmer.

Arthur turned away. It was his son, a conscientious objector, a medic. Dead in a helicopter crash. Leave it at that.

Sundays. The scent of flowers in the hallway. His pain mixing with others' pleasure was too much for the dining room. Arthur walked back to the elevator. He took a sandwich and his memories in his room, listening to *Tosca*, saving a few pennies for Greendale and ElderPartners, Inc.

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Heel flat, heel flat, tap and tap and tap and tap, and let's keep that torso tall and steady. Open up your lungs, warm up those knees, and ready and, five and four and three and two and one. Good! Now start your march, knees up, five and four and three and...

Chair exercises with Halley.

Halley, with a smile only someone with her level of energy and physical fitness could maintain while remaining relatively sane, looked trim as a lynx in her tank top. She was perched on the front half of a folding chair with her spine held straight in exemplary posture, facing the Greendale crowd slumped about the activities room. Her blond pony tail swayed to the movement of her limbs, spilling down her back through the Velcro fastener of a pink baseball cap emblazoned with the ElderPartners logo. The boys were sitting in the back row.

We got our first order, said Herbert, failing to mention it was Kyle's test.

Maybe we should lower the price, said Arthur, trying his best to lift each leg on the beat.

We already did, said Herb.

Have you checked the competition?

Eleven bucks and change, same as always.

Keep marching. Let's warm up those quads.

I don't mean the record company, said Arthur. The other shysters.

Hey, hey, Artie. Don't use that word, said Herbert, putting a finger to his lips. Especially in public. And to answer your question, no I haven't. But I will.

You mean you don't know how. You'll out-source it to Kyle.

Maybe.

Another expense.

You say expense. I say startup cost.

Turn the doorknob, lift and pour and five and four and three and two and one. Feel that rotator cuff warming up everybody. Good! Now we're going to open the cabinet. Open the cabinet, ready? Five and...

Now where do you live, dear?

In Timbuktu. Timbuktu, Mom.

That's nice.

So that was it, she still had a job! And maybe there was something to be said for ElderPartners after all. LifeSavings Inc., for all their good intentions, was a very provincial outfit. She had to admit she was getting a much broader perspective on the business. And nothing wrong with running a tight ship. After all, she was a responsible steward of resources. Stewardess? Haha. A tight airship. Nothing wrong with having some corporate muscle, real resources, real expertise, at your back. What a change. But a new incentive system? Kristin wasn't so sure about that one. She always believed people should do their job well because it was the right thing to do. When you start putting dollar signs out there, what kind of message do you send?

I don't see the problem, said her husband. If you're doing a good job, why not get rewarded? We could take that cruise to Hawaii.

Or remodel the kitchen, which was long overdue. Okay. She would keep an open mind, suspend judgment for the time being. She was excited about Mind&Spirit Care though, evidence-based practice right up her alley. It sounded quite awesome. So many of the old-timers, the ones she'd known for years, were headed that direction. She wanted to be ready for them. She wanted to do everything in her power to help them preserve their higher selves on that journey. It was important for their families as well. So why not start with something bold, a bit edgy even, like a spiritual toileting pilot? She'd volunteered Greenbury. Things like that made it worth getting out of bed in the morning. She might even become an ElderPartners' Mind&Spirit mentor with, who

knows, a chance for national exposure. Her weak spot as director, she knew, was—so crucial, so dull—finance. Corporate, of course, had people all over that stuff but she had a suspicion Jacqué would turn it to her advantage. Jacqué was sharp, and ambitious, and slick. A bit too hip for seniors in her opinion. In other words, Jacqué was someone worth keeping an eye on. Which was why they were now making their weekly rounds together in the dining room.

Hi Arthur, how are things going? said Kristin. Arthur was always first to be addressed at his table. Staff at Greendale were almost Confucian in their respect for the super-aged. Turning one hundred was like being admitted to an airline's million-miler club.

Hard to say, said Arthur, setting down his fork with a glance at Herb. I just got my monthly statement. It's a little different.

I hope everything was clear, said Kristin. Anyone have a problem?

Herbert almost spat out his juice. For a moment he looked like he might need to be Heimlich'd until, to everyone's relief, he started gasping. Yeah, it's real clear, he said. Way too clear.

You okay? said Kristin.

In what way? asked Jacqué.

The new charges, said Arthur. Nickel and diming us to death. Is that ElderPartners' idea of 'enhancements'?

Oh, Arthur. You can't blame ElderPartners for that, said Kristin. Your rates were due to go up regardless. It's been ages since you had an increase.

A year, said Herbert. We get one every year.

Exactly, said Jacqué.

Sophie had been watching the two women closely. She liked the way they were coiffed. Businesslike, but feminine. If she were younger, and if she worked, she would want to dress like that. Can I touch your hair? she said, reaching out her hand toward Jacqué.

Jacqué sprang back. For an instant she was tempted to actually speak her mind, then composed herself out of sheer force of habit. That's an issue we need to talk about, Sophie, she said. Why don't you come by my office sometime?

It looks so nice, said Sophie. I just don't know how you do it with your kind of hair. Do you straighten it?

I'll be glad to fill you in, said Jacqu . On all of it. But not right now.

Kristin wondered, too. She had always wanted to touch Jacqu 's hair. How soft was it, really? It seemed like it would feel kind of frizzy, like a Brillo pad or something.

Touching Jacqu 's hair was not on Arthur's to-do list. This is different, he said, getting back to the rate increases. They're pretty steep. It ain't easy to take for everyone here.

You're only being billed for the services you chose, said Jacqu .

As far as I can see, our services haven't changed. Only the bill.

I'm glad you mentioned that Arthur, said Kristin. Because someone from ElderPartners will be here next week to explain the new system. It's all about giving you more options. Choice is good, right? And it's not that complicated. They'll be happy to go over it with you. And if you need a little help with anything we'll see what we can do. We're all family here. We can work things out together. Okay? She nodded and smiled and looked around the table. Remember, my door is always open.

We're so screwed, said Herbert the moment Kristin left.

You can say that again, said Arthur.

We're so screwed, said Herb.

It's a little complicated, said Kristin over the dinner table. A weighted average. Some formula based on admissions, satisfaction scores, expense reduction, and the dollar amount of added services. They didn't give us much notice. She gave a large sigh as if she really didn't want to go into it. Math. So boring.

Sounds reasonable, said Chuck. Chuck was the most common sense person she knew. He kept her grounded, he was her anchor, She also thought he looked very sexy in jeans the way he hopped out of his truck.

A lot of my salary's at risk, she said, which was both the rub and the point of the whole thing, the undercurrent of anxiety it created and the desire to address that anxiety. Reward and punishment, rats in a maze. Psychology 101. All she wanted to do was provide for the well-being of old folks and here she was in a Skinner box.

But the upside is big, said Chuck. LifeSavings never incentivized you like that.

I guess, said Kristin. They were a little behind the times. She didn't add that she felt a little nostalgic for the days when metrics weren't in her face first thing in the morning. She hardly admitted it to herself. That was history. She was not one to look back. Not someone, she wished to remind herself and others, to run away from a challenge.

And I made up my mind on one thing. Jacqué is not going to push me out of a job. I can do this.

You know I support you, said Chuck, whatever you decide.

She knew she was lucky to have such a supportive guy in her life. He was a great father, too. And he wanted a new kitchen just as much as she did. I'm not doing this just for me, you know.

Of course not.

Art and Herb sat in Herb's room for their weekly 'business meeting'. Kyle's website was up and running for the past month and hopes, stoked by Herb at every opportunity, were running high. He had little trouble collecting another round of start-up cash from his table-mates.

So what's the total? asked Arthur. He knew it couldn't be good. He could tell by the way Herb was so nonchalant at meals. And now it wasn't just his own dwindling funds he was worried about, it was other people's as well. He felt responsible.

Herb was staring at the computer on his desk as if the key to some dilemma were hidden in the screen. Three, he said curtly, drumming his fingers on the desk. Two *Aida's* and a *Tosca*.

No surprise. Arthur nodded knowingly. Before or after we lowered the price?

That would be after, said Herb, still glued to the screen.

Arthur considered the implications for a moment and gave out a thoughtful grunt. Grunting had become a major form of expression for him, with a host of meanings and nuances unknown to the young. Maybe we should lower it some more, he said.

Herb swiveled his chair around and looked Arthur straight in the eye. Artie, he said meekly, which struck Arthur as almost sad the way he was play-acting, we're down to two bucks a pop. Any more and we lose money on the sale.

How about a buck fifty?

Right, said Herb, back to his obstinate self. Meekness did not suit him for long. Lose money on every sale and make it up on volume, that's your business plan? It's not like we're going to corner the market with a loss leader here.

So what's the problem?

Too much competition, said Herb. I had no idea there were such crooks in this business. You'd be amazed at all the unscrupulous characters trying to sell stuff out there on the web.

Herb and his demographics, thought Arthur. So much for Mr. Salesman of the Year and his market research. Arthur was getting a very bad feeling here, a feeling like Wile E. Coyote, genius, was chasing the road runner off a cliff. A feeling like, this is what comes of having a business partner with a drinking problem just winging it.

I thought you said this was a sure thing, said Arthur, throwing up his hands.

C'mon Artie, said Herb. Don't have a cow. There were bound to be a few snags. We just have to find the sweet spot. Then it's off to the races.

If we don't run out of time first.

Time? You still worried about time?

No Herb, said Arthur. I stopped worrying about time a long time ago. I'm worried about space.

Where do you say you live?

It's still Colorado, Mom. Denver.

That's nice. When did that happen?

Drop-Off Care did not excite Kristin. Oh, she knew it was important for families, for Greendale, for the community, for ElderPartners. Caregiver burnout and all that. Granted, it was a nice niche. Families needed respite and there were empty units to fill one way or another. So okay, the families were grateful. That was satisfying. It helped the bottom line and all, but there was no real *relationship*, just a brief and responsible warehousing. The poor drop-offs sat alone in the dining room like new kids in the school cafeteria.

There was only so much you could do for them.

It was nothing like the longterm investment that Mind&Spirit Care made in the lives and eventual deaths, peaceful deaths, 'good' deaths, which was the real point as far as Kristin was concerned, of Greendale's demented but otherwise fairly healthy—or else they'd be shipped off to nursing homes—residents, by honoring and respecting the spirit of their true essences. Now that was impactful. Drop-offs not so much. Drive-by-Care, Rosemary called it, maybe because the nursing staff bore the brunt of the extra work. It was almost impossible to get an accurate med list for the drop-off crowd with all the damn pills they took from god knows how many doctors and other practitioners and by the time you did, with the phone calls, faxes, emails, and paper bags full of expired prescriptions, they were back home with their regular caregivers,

hopefully none the worse. But they'd get to that later in the meeting. Anyway, that was nursing's problem. Deal with it, nursing. The elephant in the room, at least as far as Kristin's executive staff was concerned because Corporate certainly had taken its measure, was an admission rate that was not keeping up with departures. Which meant that if admissions didn't pick up, or departures slow down, or drop-offs make up the difference, she could kiss that nice little incentive bonus for that nice Hawaiian cruise and that nice remodeled kitchen good-bye. But no way she going to let herself bomb. Not now. Not after she'd searched her soul and made the commitment.

Kristin called the meeting to order.

First item of business: *a la carte* items. Falling behind budget, people. What's the story here?

I'm like totally surprised, said Halley, looking around the conference table to make sure she included everyone. Really, I am. In her professional opinion, she went on to say, the choices were all so fantastic, so worth every penny and probably even cost-effective health-wise in the long run. In other words, they were such a good deal.

So what's the problem? said Kristin.

The problem is not the program, said Jacqué. Customize your own state-of-the-art health-promoting assisted living services? We all know how forward thinking that is. The problem was they focused their attention on new admissions, she went on, which was important obviously, but maybe—this was just her intuition talking, she had no data—they had not promoted the new *al la carte* services aggressively enough to the current residents because she assumed, perhaps mistakenly now she had to admit, the appeal would be obvious. If not obvious to the oldsters of The Greatest Generation and their Depression-era mindset—a frugality that was almost hard-wired—at least to their more affluent and consumption-oriented Boomer offspring. But okay, whatever, that was on her. My bad, she said. I own it. I'm on it.

Kristin shook her head and sighed. She loved the aroma therapy program. She was sure that pairing it with therapeutic massage would be an instant hit, something intuitively obvious. ElderPartners was so ahead of the curve. There was nothing remotely like it in the area as far as assisted living was concerned. Who more than the functionally impaired and declining residents of The Commons at Greendale needed or

deserved the boost to their immune system, the anti-depressant effects, the improved memory, to be gained from Greendale's selection of essential oils? Sandalwood, peppermint, lavender. Just thinking of them relaxed her.

Thanks for stepping up, Jacqué, said Kristin. But don't be too hard on yourself. Admissions are the priority. This should be a slam-dunk, but no. And why is that? she asked, genuinely perplexed. The physical benefits were important of course but paled in comparison to what she considered their spiritual healing potential. Kristin wouldn't recommend anything she hadn't tried herself. Who couldn't use a good aura cleansing now and then? Halley, god bless her, such a positive person and so mindful, was doing her best to sign people up every time she did group work, but Kristin suspected there were doubters on the staff. Rosemary possibly. Rosemary was a little old school. And some of the doctors, of course. Then there were the families. Could be some resistance there, a lack of awareness. Hard to ferret it out.

Rosemary, what's your take? said Kristin.

I'm not sure, said Rosemary. They might be priced a little...high?

What makes you think that? asked Jacqué.

I don't know, said Rosemary, just a guess. Some of the residents can hardly afford co-pays on their prescription meds.

We didn't set the price, said Kristin. And if you want to talk about over-priced, look at the drug companies. If people spent more money on natural medicine they wouldn't need all that junk.

Rosemary nodded. Right. But it might be nice, she said, if they could afford ... both?

Okay, pricing was something Kristin could bring up with ElderPartners. It was tricky, though. She'd have to find a way to go about it that didn't draw more attention to Greendale.

Moving on. Let's get to the occupancy rate, said Kristin. You've all seen the numbers. Jacqué, what are your thoughts?

By the end of the meeting Kristin was convinced that someone or something was pumping negative energy into the place, but she didn't need a staff meeting to tell her that. She could feel it in the hallways, in the dining room, in her office. Greendale

had dropped below the ElderPartners' composite mean score and was headed toward the bottom quartile. Bad mojo indeed. It needed serious energy work, a good property cleansing, crystals and maybe smudge sticks. She'd always wanted to try smudge sticks. But the metrics, always the f'ing metrics. So left-brain, so stressful. She'd try to get in a massage that afternoon. And Jacqu  better kick up admissions. It was her butt on the line, too.

Kristin's fears were well-founded, if not her solutions. The next day Corporate informed her they were bringing in a consulting group for a series of fuck-us groups, as her staff were quick to call them.

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We're getting clicks now, said Kyle. Kyle, for one, was excited, and for good reason. The website was his baby. The clicks were happening. With orders, and real money coming in.

Unbelievable, said Arthur, sitting on Herb's couch for their weekly meeting. What's selling? he asked, thinking it must be *Aida* or maybe the Paris Opera's *Carmen* he'd suggested recently.

Oh, some new stuff, said Herbert. We had to broaden our offerings a bit.

I told you *Carmen* would sell, said Art. *Carmen* has sex appeal. He rubbed his hands in delight with the same motion he used to rub them with hand sanitizer before each meal.

Actually, said Kyle, not realizing Herb was giving him signals to cool it, our best seller is *Phantom of the Opera*.

Arthur's head snapped back as if he'd been smacked. When he tried to talk he almost choked.

Now before you get riled up, Arthur, said Herb, growing alarmed as he watched Arthur sputter, you have to admit it's still about opera. Okay, maybe that's a stretch. But

Three Tenors is number two. That's the real deal. There's some *Tosca* in there. Sophie loves *Three Tenors*, you know.

So now—Arthur paused to keep from choking again—so now, he began, afraid his blood pressure was going through the roof, so now we're selling Pop Opera and Broadway musicals?

As a matter of fact, said Herbert, unriled, yes we are. Twenty-two hundred dollars worth of Pop Opera and Broadway musicals. You can offer all the classics you want Artie baby, but you can't tell the public what to buy. It's all gravy.

Maybe, said Arthur, calming at bit at the idea of money rolling in. But maybe advertising as 'Cheapest Opera CD's Anywhere' is not reaching the right clientele.

Tell you what, Arthur, said Herb. Let's get some cash under our belt. Then maybe we can think about upping our image for the high rollers.

Arthur had to bow to Herbert's logic. The clock was ticking. And he had to admit, he was actually quite astounded they'd made even a penny, from anywhere, off Herbert's little hustle. Twenty-two hundred dollars?

Damn.

That covered startup costs and more. And Kyle, what would they do without Kyle? Such a good kid, a kid with skills. And, god forbid, maybe Herb actually knew what he was doing. Much as Arthur knew the whole thing was a long shot, if not an actual joke—not to mention the niggling fact of its illegality that he'd conveniently put on hold—he couldn't help but think now of sales projections, revenue growth, a steady new income stream, and financial security for his last days. For a moment, almost against his will and certainly against his better judgment, Arthur felt a hint of actual euphoria. For a moment dollar signs flashed before his eyes.

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In the end, after Palmer and Herb explained to Arthur as best they could what a focus group entailed (It's like a bitch session, said Herb. It's like a committee meeting,

said Palmer.), the whole table decided, including Arthur against his better judgment once again, to participate. So it was Art and Palmer to the men's group, Dot and Flo to the women's, Herbert and Sophie to the mixed doubles. Arthur, needless to say, as long as he was being dragged into this, had some opinions he wished to share. Herb just wanted a free massage. He finagled Arthur and Palmer, neither of them big on touching by strangers or anyone, to gift him their credits. The women made it clear they had no intention of giving up theirs.

Dear Arthur,

As a valued member of the Greendale family, we'd like to thank you for your willingness to participate in our upcoming focus groups. The Commons at Greendale and ElderPartners Inc. are committed to excellence in customer service, and to upholding the highest standards in senior living. No matter how much we achieve, we always strive to do better. That's why we would like to hear your ideas and opinions regarding the enhanced programs now offered at The Commons at Greendale.

A representative from Syn-Age, one of the nation's top marketing firms in senior care products, will be leading your discussion. You will be in a group with six to nine of your fellow residents. We assure you that your responses to their questions will be strictly confidential. A \$50 credit toward therapeutic massage will be applied to your account at the end of the focus group discussion. The date, time, and place of your session are listed below. Please look for signs directing you to your group.

We look forward to seeing you there, Arthur! At Greendale, your opinion always matters.

Sincerely,

Kristin P.

Executive Director, The Commons at Greendale

'A warm, caring community'

Arthur lay flat as he could across the green felt of the pool table slowly lining up his shot, speaking in hushed tones as his legs hung limply to the carpet. I think Dot's losing it, he said.

No way, said Herb, standing with his back against the wall in the Greendale Pub, drink in one hand and cue stick in the other. She's fine.

No, really, said Arthur. She didn't make it to breakfast or lunch. I'm worried about her. Despite the tremor of his hands and fingers, Arthur got off a steady shot that sank the striped ball he was aiming at, but bad luck landed the cue in a corner pocket. It wasn't just about Dot missing lunch.

Artie, you worry too much. Herb took a sip of his highball and set down his glass. It's ruining your game.

Maybe I do. I can't help it.

Herb retrieved the cue from the ball return and went to the foot of the table, bending his back as much he dared to line up his shot. I know you do, he said. And I know why you worry about her. Art looked on from the other side of the table, leaning on its beveled edge for support as he would a walker.

Why I worry about Dot? said Arthur. I worry about everyone.

The hell you do. Admit it, you're stuck on her.

Arthur shot up straight as his spine allowed. Stuck? he said, almost shouting. What does that mean, stuck? Don't be ridiculous, Herb. Dorothy's a good person. She's a friend.

You know what I mean, said Herb, giving Art the sly look of a man who's had several drinks by mid-afternoon. She's a choice bit of calico, buddy.

She's a what?

Arthur you hound, you're sweet on her. Don't kid yourself, my friend. I see that look on your face when she walks in the room.

And what look is that, Miss Lonelyhearts?

Herb nicked the four ball into the side pocket with a soft practiced touch, then blew on his cue stick like it was a smoking gun barrel. You tell me.

I'm fond of her, that's all. So what?

Herb moved around the table to line up his next shot, his face flushed and his eye remarkably steady behind his thick lenses. Right. Fond. That's what I'm saying.

I'm fond of you, too.

Art's timing, whether deliberate or not, was right on the money. Herb miscued, lifting the ball off the table with a chortle he couldn't hold back. Good one, Artie, he said, genuinely amused. But I doubt that.

It's true, said Art. But I'm not stuck on you.

Herb took another swig of his drink and paused to catch his breath before retrieving the ball from the floor. Thank god, he said, rolling it to Arthur for his next shot. You're not my type. But I'm not Dot, either.

Forget Dot, said Arthur. She's just a friend, like I said.

I know, said Herb. But don't worry, old buddy. I don't think she's losing it. Anyway, not any more than you or me.

That's not saying much, said Arthur.

Sophie appeared down the hallway. She often dropped by to watch their games or maneuver her way into a doubles match if they could scrounge up another partner. I thought I might find you two here, she said, glancing at Herb's empty glass. I tried your rooms but nobody answered.

Just a friendly little game, said Herb. Want to sit in? Herb had been very solicitous of Sophia lately.

No thanks, said Sophie, a bit breathless. I came by to give you the news. Renee just told me Dot is in the hospital.

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The Greendale Commons bus knelt by the hospital's main entrance. Bob the driver helped Arthur down. Arthur eased onto the sidewalk and steadied himself with his walker.

You okay, Arthur?

I'm good, Bob, said Arthur. Thanks.

I'll be back at three, said Bob.

Three o'clock. I'll be here.

It was a long way to Dot's room. Arthur made a determined push and set off toward the lobby. It was slow going. A stream of people brushed past him—some in wheelchairs, some in business suits, hospital staff uniformed in a spectrum of identifying colors. Lots of old people, obese people, people who didn't look so good. It occurred to him those would be the kinds of people you'd find around hospitals. Not a place where the beautiful people hang out. He had the distinct impression that passers-by were looking at him and wondering if he was about to fall, or if they should help him somehow. What was wrong with them? In his own mind he was fine. In his own mind he functioned as he had ten, twenty years ago. By the time he lurched to the visitor's desk it wasn't just his legs that felt weak, there was an emotional exhaustion as well. He'd spent so much time in hospitals with his wife, he almost gave Marie's name when the volunteer asked who he was visiting. They had been in and out, back and forth for months, with her cancer. The familiarity of it was not something he wished to remember. Or the anger and frustration. She'd wanted to pass away in their summer home in Maine but it was February. Bad timing. No last sunset for Marie. No westward view of a blazing sky and the water glowing pink from the shore of their little island. She'd had to imagine it. But he captured those sunsets as best he could in his paintings, as he captured her. What he could never quite master was the grays of cloudy days, the silver, purple, metal hues in sea and sky. Gray, he thought, amid the bustle of the lobby, is the richest color, the truest and most difficult. He had finally given up on gray.

Would you like a wheelchair? said the woman at the information desk. It might be easier. One of our candy strippers can take you up.

A teenager behind the desk showed off her braces with a big metal smile. His impulse was to decline of course—he was a visitor, not a patient—but she was already behind him with the chair. Sure, why not? Maybe he was an invalid after all. They set off toward the elevators. What a relief to know Dot wasn't in the critical care unit, or

oncology. Oncology would have been hard to take. You don't always know what people have been going through, even people you think you know. Marie's brave fight, terrifying and ultimately futile, trying her best to keep it to herself. He couldn't go through that again. Why was it always a battle with cancer? When he had his pacemaker inserted nobody said he was in a battle with heart disease. The elevator doors slid open. His young escort backed him in. It felt humiliating to be among figures towering over him, the sense of a child's powerlessness among adults. Which was silly, he knew. Some people lived their entire lives in wheelchairs.

Full lives.

But what kind of impression would he make on Dot, she of the easy stride and steady gait? It was not exactly his posture of command, seated in his time-honored chair against the far wall of the dining room. Oh well. Nothing he could do about it now. His walker was back at the information desk. Then again, who was the patient here? He had made it. He was visiting her. It was not too late, that was the important thing. He checked his colostomy bag. All in place. His gift was in his lap. And now he realized where he was heading. To the surgical floor, which couldn't be good. He didn't quite know what he'd been expecting. Pneumonia? A stroke? Now maybe it was stitches, dressings, blood. The candy striper steered him into Dorothy's room to find her sitting upright in bed, not looking all that bad. Except for the tube in her nose.

Arthur, said Dot, smiling her faint smile that looked a little dreamier than usual. She tried to sit up higher but slid back down. I can't believe you're here.

The candy striper left him with a promise to return. Arthur rolled himself closer to the bed. How are you, Dottie?

So-so, she said.

I seen worse, believe me.

Greendale sent flowers. See them over there by the window? Aren't they pretty? And Halley came to see me this morning.

Arthur lowered his voice. How they treating you?

Okay, I suppose. The nurses are nice. The doctors are in and out before you know it.

I guess that's good. You're lucky. How do you like the food?

The food? said Dot. I don't know. I can't eat anything. They say there's a blockage in my intestines.

A blockage? Of course, the tube in her nose attached to that thing on the wall. He thought of his colostomy. Too bad, he said. The food here's good. His gift from the Greendale kitchen lay in his lap. Arthur felt foolish. Peach cobbler, how stupid can you get? I brought you some dessert. Guess it wasn't such a good idea. Maybe you can give it to the nurses. Flowers, he thought, I should have brought flowers. Sometimes you don't get a second chance.

How's the opera business going? asked Dot.

So-so, said Arthur. He thought a vague answer would suffice. It was not the time or place for negativity.

Herbert thinks we'll be rich, whispered Dorothy. She finally managed to sit a little higher in bed. She straightened her hospital gown as best she could. It was untied and drooping down to her breasts.

Herbert thinks a lot of things, said Arthur. What would you do with rich, anyway?

Stay at Greendale, said Dot, what else? I like it there. My daughters don't really want me with them. They're busy with their own lives.

Sure. And after that?

Give it to my grandkids. Have you seen how much college costs these days? My tuition in secretarial school was seventy-five dollars a year.

Arthur bit his lip. It wasn't so much the fact he had no family to pass any new-found wealth to, it was Dot's belief there might be any in the first place. It was too easy to believe something when you needed to, especially when some huckster was feeding your hopes with predictions of exactly what you wanted to hear. How eager people were to count their chickens, the heart of the age-old con Herbert mastered long ago, made easier in this case by Dot's need for direction. It wasn't fair play. But then again, Arthur was not immune by any means as he was vaguely aware. It was nice to live in a dream. So comfortable to live with your hopes, almost as much as your prejudices and conceits.

I'm sorry you have to see me like this, said Dot. I'm not my best.

Arthur snapped out of his foreboding. You look fine, Dottie, he said. You always look fine. Almost like your old self.

With this tube in my nose? She started to laugh but the tube caught in her throat.

Beside that maybe, said Arthur, noting a greenish sludge oozing through the tube to the wall suction. Then he said what was really on his mind since he got off the elevator and noticed which floor she was on. Are they gonna operate?

I don't know, said Dot, seeming as unconcerned with surgery as she was with her finances. They're waiting. They say it might unblock by itself.

That's good, said Arthur, easing up on his worry. That's very good. Anything that wasn't cancer was good, and anything that could unblock by itself was even better. He didn't know much about blockages, but he couldn't see Dot with a colostomy. But then he couldn't see himself with one either.

Dot closed her eyes and drifted off. Best to let her rest, he thought. Arthur moved his wheelchair to the foot of the bed where he could look more directly at her face. She was so calm he had to watch her chest move to make sure she was breathing. When she made a sudden sigh he startled and almost called the nurse, but she settled right back to her leisurely rhythm. He felt peaceful watching her, keeping quiet, just being there, more at ease than when they were making small talk. He dozed off to a memory of another hospital, another vigil, when his daughter was born. It was the long, anxious labor of a first pregnancy. After she delivered, Marie had asked to see the tomato. It's the anesthesia, he was told, sometimes they hallucinate. It was a healthy tomato, an eight pound baby girl. There were more fragments of dreams, something about his daughter as a little girl playing in the backyard with her brother, something he forgot to do for her, but mostly it was a restful nap. They both woke slowly, rousing together when an aide came to take Dot's vital signs. It was getting toward three o'clock and change of shift. The bus. Arthur said good-bye with a squeeze of Dot's hand, and the candy striper with the shiny braces wheeled him down in time for his ride back to Greendale.

Two days after Arthur's visit, Dot changed into her regular clothes and was ready to go. Arthur is so considerate, she thought, as she made a last check for personal items—browsing through the bedside table, the dresser, the bathroom—before returning to Greendale. He reminded her a bit of her second husband. Not that she remembered much about that marriage, brief as it was, and she being in such a fog most of the time with all the alcohol flowing at the non-stop social events and fundraisers that were part of her job. The pressures of a campaign every two years. It seemed as if the congressman's staff were cycling through the demands of each year's work like farmers through the seasons. Not to mention the pressures of motherhood. Yes, a bit like her second husband, serious and responsible. There was something about that solidity that she obviously needed, but he was not much fun when a girl needed to kick up her heels now and then without being harassed, especially as she worked so hard keeping the whole office together while everyone ran around half-cocked or half-crocked. No wonder she had to unwind after work with a few gin and tonics of her own. No, Arthur was sweet, but it must have been such a strain for him to come to the hospital she almost wished he hadn't. She wanted to be sure he'd be around for his 100th birthday. What a shame if he expired a few months short, though really what's the difference? It's just a number, she thought with a shrug as if someone were listening in. But it was an accomplishment, not that anyone could take credit for it. She might even have a glass of wine or champagne to celebrate. That would be something after thirty years of sobriety, after all the doctors and sponsors and meetings that it took to keep her on the wagon. Her kids never gave her much credit, but that was their issue. She had to do it for herself.

Everything looks good, said the nurse. You're all set for discharge. An aide will take you downstairs. The nurse made a few more entries in her computer and wheeled her workstation out the door.

Life looks so much brighter without a tube in your nose, thought Dot. Everyone was so pleased when she passed gas, something you find only in a hospital. Thank

god she didn't need an operation. They said that's what caused the blockage in the first place—scar tissue from her caesarean births, births spared the pangs of labor. But while other moms were holding their newborns she could hardly move for the stitches, for the soreness in her belly. But it was life. Amazing that she'd given life to those two girls, life which flowed through her however it was they came out. How amazing that she had done that from her own body. Not that she was anything special, but she couldn't help feeling proud when she thought about it. A knock on the door ended her musing. Dot wanted to walk out of the room under her own steam, but the nurse's aide insisted on escorting her down in a wheelchair.

Once you're out the door honey, you can do whatever you want. Till you get there you're on my watch.

Dot sighed and sat down as she was told. The aide piled a bouquet of flowers in her lap with a plastic bag of clothes. Her daughters said they would come to see her if the doctor thought it was serious, but it was such a long way. They had their jobs and their kids and she was doing fine, so she told them not to bother though they said something about coming one of these days to look for a less expensive place. Greendale's price increase—everybody seemed concerned about that, Arthur most of all. She'd like to stay at Greendale if she could. Why did things have to change? And there was the van, waiting for her. They really did take good care of you, she thought. And the food wasn't bad either, despite Arthur's carping. That was just Arthur. So she hoped Herbert's opera business would be a success. If anyone knew what they were doing, it was Herb. Arthur wouldn't partner with just anyone, she reasoned. Herb had a certain flair, a natural persuasiveness. He was more than a salesman, he was a, what was it? A showman. An entertainer. The kind of man you'd like to have flirting with you at a party. Funny but harmless. And she could tell Sophie had a thing for him. That was cute. She thought Herb knew it too and got a kick out of it, though Sophie would be the last person to admit, even to herself, that she felt anything special. That happens, as Dot knew. She well knew, in retrospect anyway, those times when everyone around you can see what you're doing and you don't have a clue. It was the story of her lost years. It never affected her work though. She didn't miss a day in two decades. It didn't

matter how tired or sick she was, she always made it to work. You have to hang on to something.

The aide handed her over to Bob the bus driver, who stored her things in the overhead rack while she sprang out of the wheelchair and up the steps of the van into the first empty seat. Good to see you Dot, said Bob. I thought maybe they'd send you to a nursing home for a while. The discharge planner, in fact, had suggested it. Dot thought she was joking until they had her sign a paper stating she was duly informed of the hospital's recommendation and chose not to accept it.

I feel too good for that, said Dot. There's no place like home. What's new at The Commons?

They're having those focus groups today, said Bob.

That's nice, said Dot. Whatever that was. She looked out the window as the van pulled away from the hospital, trying to remember what her second husband looked like. Nothing like Arthur, actually. And he actually wasn't that sweet, especially to her girls. Even through the haze of her addiction she could see that. She might not have been the most reliable of mothers, but she was not going to let them be abused. There was much she didn't remember about those times, which was a blessing because there was much she wanted to forget.

Dot felt strong and steady enough for the stairs, but followed Renee's advice and took the elevator to her floor. She unpacked the few belongings she brought from the hospital and squared them away in her room. She put on a fresh set of clothes and brushed out her hair in front of the bathroom mirror. She could feel she had lost weight. She wondered if she was in time for lunch. Though still slightly repulsed by the thought of food, she went to the dining room out of habit to find Flo the only one seated at the table, hunched over a soup bowl with oxygen tubing wrapped around her ears.

Oh, it's you, said Flo, raising her eyes high enough to get a glimpse of Dot. Right on time.

Where is everybody? asked Dot. Something had changed while she was away. It was the same room, but strangely unfamiliar. Had she been in the hospital that long? She had no idea what day it was.

What do you mean, where are they? Where were you?

In the hospital.

You sure? You don't look that bad.

Flo went back to her soup, her lips hovering just above the bowl, silent as if it required all her concentration. When she finished she explained how the focus groups had upset everyone's lunch schedule. Dot knew that Flo didn't like her, but didn't take it personally. Flo didn't like anyone. Dot always liked Flo, though. Flo never said much, but when she did came straight to the point. No idle chit chat. Like one of those smart women who was top of their class, but got so used to having her ideas ignored that somewhere along the line decided to keep her mouth shut rather than argue with people who had no clue what they were talking about. She knew how that went. Some women developed other, more destructive habits for the same reason.

By the way, this is the first sitting, said Flo.

That explains it, thought Dorothy, at least the unfamiliar part. A relief of sorts. She didn't know what Flo was doing at the first sitting, but they were both there together. It didn't matter why.

So are you going?

To what? asked Dot.

To the focus group, said Flo. The one you signed up for.

I did? Then I suppose so.

Good. We'll go together.

When they finished lunch Dot pushed Flo and her oxygen tank to the activities room. Folding chairs were arranged in a semi-circle facing a young woman who looked to be in her mid-twenties, casually dressed and slender, sitting composed beside a digital recorder and a flip chart with questions written in red marker. The scene was almost like the briefing rooms where she'd taken notes in her accurate shorthand, then speed typed for the congressman. They'd discuss them over cocktails, or maybe at his apartment when she was in the Washington office. He was always good to her, she had to admit. At least in the beginning. She always had a good time in D.C. The questions floating past the focus group didn't make much sense to her, but people were nodding their heads like they knew what was going on. Flo kept pointing at the flip chart and trying to speak. Her voice was so weak and hoarse that it was hard to make out what

she said. Something about inflation, and charges for things she never asked for. She asked why they didn't get professors from the college to come give talks once in a while. Which was a great suggestion, thought Dot. You have to listen closely. It's easy to think Flo's just mumbling nonsense. Dot had always wanted to go to college. She planned to go when the kids were grown but with this thing and that, funny how time gets away from you, it never happened. But she managed her recovery which was no mean feat and, if you had to choose one, probably better than a college degree. There were still lots of things she's like to learn though, things of absolutely no practical value, like Renaissance painting or how birds and butterflies make it to the same place in Mexico every winter. The young focus group woman kept coming back to spa services for some reason, asking what things would make people want to stay at Greendale. But Dot was perfectly happy there as it was, so she didn't care about the questions or say much except how nice it was that Halley came to visit her in the hospital and how helpful Bob the van driver was, carrying her things to her room when she got back that morning. She didn't know why Flo seemed so angry with ElderPartners when she spoke. It must be about money because that's an emotional topic for most people, even worse than meals. People get angry when they're worried, but Herbert and Arthur's business was going to take care of their money problems so there was really nothing for her to worry about. And credit for a massage? That was very thoughtful of the people at ElderPartners, despite what Flo thought, and the nice young lady who, what did they call it, facilitated?

(For full transcript of The Commons at Greendale Syn-Age Male Focus Group, see Appendix B.)

Monday morning. The weekend shifts were over, the work week just begun. Jasmine padded softly into the Greendale nursing office. She was a short, sturdy woman in clean teal scrubs, standing patiently by Rosemary's desk while Rosemary finished a note on the computer. Rosemary, she said in her soft Barbadian accent, I got to tell you somet'ing.

Yes, Jasmine. What is it?

I t'ink we got another case, said Jasmine. She was silent for a moment as she waited to be questioned, then added um-hum, nodding her head to indicate that she was, in fact, quite sure there was another case.

A case of what?

I went to room 221 to give Maxine her meds and found her on the toilet wit' stool all over the bat'room floor.

That was, indeed, another case. The second one in two days.

Did you call housekeeping?

Of course I did. Right away. And I went and got a gown, a mask, and gloves. I cleaned up Maxine good and I bagged the clothes and sheets.

Good work, Jasmine. Thank you. I'll take it from here.

Here we go, thought Rosemary. Norovirus time. Her first call was to Kristin.

Hi Kristin, this is Rosemary. I'm afraid I have some bad news. No, nothing like that, no ambulances. It's just. We just had our second case of gastroenteritis. Yes, I'm sure. No, like I said no one in the hospital yet. Right. We'll start checking. Yes, I'll go ahead and notify the health department. Rosemary went back to her computer. What was a little diarrhea to an old ICU nurse? Could be worse, not like it's the flu. She went ahead and notified the health department. They reminded her to get stool samples, which was easy to forget.

Kristin leaned forward until her forehead was resting on her desk. No, she thought, her eyes still open though they almost touched the wood, this is the last thing I need. Then she realized her negative self-talk was leading her down that familiar

rabbit hole of doubt and self-pity, a place she'd worked hard to leave behind. Not going there, she told herself. C'mon Kris, you know what to do. She raised herself up and closed her eyes taking slow deep breaths, guiding her thoughts to images of a clear blue sky, a sparkling waterfall, abdominal cramps, a meadow full of wildflowers, diarrhea and virus particles. Really? Forget the meadow. The meadow wasn't working. She took more deep breaths, centered her chakras and switched to a scene on the seashore. Smelling the ocean, feeling the breeze, hearing the sound of the surf. But the smell was a bit funky, like old seaweed or something gross that washed up on the beach, and the pounding surf started to feel like a migraine. From the rim of the watery horizon she could visualize a large cruise ship bearing down on her, a plague ship, a kind of Holland America Line *Flying Dutchman* meant to warn her there were to be no more Greendale admissions for a while, and half the staff would be out sick, the dining room would be closed, meals had to be delivered to the rooms, surfaces disinfected, food thrown out, visitors screened, well-checks made on residents three times a day, warning signs posted in the lobby, face masks, procedure gloves, protective gowns, everyone, staff and residents alike, scouring their hands with hand sanitizer as if the virus was some kind of blood guilt. All of which was standard procedure, of course. And the bottom line? Simple arithmetic: expenses up, revenue down. Fucking great. She had to notify Corporate right away, and then the f'ing Department of Community Care Licensing. The local news would call, no doubt. Like, yes, this was most definitely the last thing she needed. The worst day of her life? It's up there. *Fuck you* waterfall. *Fuck you* ocean. She fumbled in her purse. No, not the probiotics. She fumbled some more and found the Xanax. Two? Why not? Two tabs it was. She put her head back down on the desk. Before long she realized she didn't care all that much. What a joke. She picked up the phone. No big deal. She was a professional. She knew the drill. Hey, shit happens.

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Two days later and the Greendale lobby was strangely quiet. Instead of flowers on the center table there were large bottles of Purell. Renee, wearing mask and gloves, thumbed through a magazine at her desk and waited for the phone to ring. Herbert and Arthur sat at a card table in the living room playing cribbage. The bay window beside them was streaked by a light drizzle, and when from time to time they glanced outside they saw an entrance drive that was dark, still, and empty.

God, I hate this, said Herbert. It's like peeing out your butt.

They both wore blue nitrile gloves, and their voices were muffled by their face masks. Peeing out your what? said Arthur, cupping a hand to his ear.

PEEING OUT YOUR BUTT.

OUT YOUR BUTT? said Arthur. YOU'RE LUCKY YOU CAN PEE OUT YOUR BUTT. Me, I'm sick and tired of changing my bag. Half the time the damn thing leaks. It doesn't do my skin any good. He lay down his cards and counted, advancing his peg down the board.

I'm just sick and tired, said Herb. And my butt hole's sore as your colostomy. He tallied up his points and moved his peg in turn. Arthur watched him carefully, counting to himself, keeping a close eye on exactly where Herb's peg landed.

We'll be okay though, said Arthur. It's Flo I'm worried about. It don't take much to do her in.

Do what?

Flo.

Who?

FLO!

Renee looked up.

You don't have to shout, said Herb.

I'M NOT SHOUTING, said Arthur. I'm worried.

Three days, Artie. We just gotta make it through the next three days.

That's fine as far as I'm concerned, said Arthur. I have my operas. I don't mind staying in my room, as long as I don't run out of gloves.

Three days of opera? That would kill me faster than the runs.

Three days with you, said Arthur, and I'd kill you faster than the opera. Now deal.

Herb shuffled with a riffle and bridge, followed by a smooth one-handed cut. You know Kyle's out sick, he said as he dealt the cards.

Kyle? So what. He's young. He'll be fine.

They looked over their hands and discarded into the crib, talking as they played without taking their eyes off the cards that flashed on the table.

They say he's got the flu.

Great, with all the time he's back and forth to the kitchen. No wonder everybody's got it.

No, the other flu, said Herb. The influenza kind.

Then I hope he stays out. He can work from home. But he shoulda got a flu shot. Did you get yours?

God, no. I never do. I have an egg allergy.

No you don't. I seen you eat custard.

Custard's okay, said Herb. If I eat eggs it upsets my stomach.

That's not an allergy.

That's what Rosemary says, too. What does she know?

So what do you say?

I say leave me the hell alone. I don't believe in flu shots. That last time I got one I was sick as a dog. So don't try to convince me.

Why should I convince you? You never listen to anybody. Besides, I never got a flu shot in my life.

Artie, you're a pharmacist. What's wrong with you?

Nothing's wrong with me. I hate needles, that's all.

Me, too. Excuse me a minute. I'll be right back.

Go. Hurry.

Where did you say you live now, dear?

I don't know, Mom. It doesn't matter.
I thought you lived Out West somewhere.

Herb left the focus group with a big smile. He was more convinced than ever that young people didn't know how to sell squat these days.

That was interesting, said Sophie as they waited for the elevator.

Interesting? Herb was not about to share his opinion quite yet. He made a habit over the years of listening to other people's reactions before giving away his own, taking advantage of the opportunity to tailor it to his needs. What did you make of it? he asked.

LifeSavings never did anything like this, she said. I think ElderPartners values our opinion.

Really? His smile got bigger and, if possible, more ironic.

Really, said Sophie.

And what do you think they're going to do with our opinions?

See how much money they can squeeze out of us, said Sophie. Isn't that the point?

A ding announced the elevator's arrival. As the doors slid open Herb took Sophie by the elbow and escorted her in. Yes Sophie, he thought. Bingo, baby. You hit the nail on the head. They think we're saps. Fuck-us groups indeed. What a joke. They'll take their findings back to the home office and committee the thing to death, then blame 'market conditions' or some such bullshit, anything but their own stupidity, when they fall flat on their face. No one will actually be responsible, least of all bunch of pricey consultants, because that would mean ElderPartners was a bunch of dopes for hiring them in the first place. When Herb was coming up in sales his only credentials were results. He learned to sell on the job, from real masters, from people who had style, people who knew their own minds and wouldn't take crap from anyone. As far as

he was concerned, all the market research in the world didn't mean a thing if you didn't have passion for what you did. A vibe. Not a phony vibe either, it had to be real. Your very own personal vibe. You had to get people stoked. You had to get them pumped. You had to make people think they were the bees knees for buying your shit. And you had to make sure they had a good time doing it. These focus group types, he opined, what a bunch of vibe-less stiffs. He could sell spa services in his sleep. But he wouldn't. In the end you have to believe in what you're selling. Sure he was a salesman, but he didn't sell hooey and he didn't sell snake oil. Contrary to what Arthur probably believed, and the shyster image he sometimes liked to play for laughs, he would not sell just any old garbage. Because, in the end, you can't sell garbage. You need a hit tune, and he knew a hit when he heard it. He could usually tell by the first measure, if not the opening chord. You give him something he knew would be a hit—forget what other people thought—and he'd sell the shit out of it.

Sophie accompanied him to his room. She had taken quite an interest in the business lately.

I think I'll have a little drink, said Herb. A glass of Port maybe. Something to aid the digestion. Can I get you something, Sophie?

No thank you, Herbert, said Sophie. But you go right ahead.

Are you sure?

Well, said Sophie, maybe a little glass of sherry?

Sorry Sophie, I'm out of sherry. But try some Port. Just a taste. It's the same idea.

Okay, if you say so. Just a taste.

This broad, thought Herb, has no idea she's being coy.

Herb opened a bottle of vintage Port, admiring as he always did the richness of its ruby color as he poured. His wife liked sherry, too. He couldn't stand the stuff. But it was a ritual, he sipping his martinis and she her sherry before dinner, his dishwater blond Midwestern wife with her flat nasal vowels and the girlish quality of her voice, which couldn't have been more different from Sophie who, after sixty plus years in this country, still had a foreign accent in the lower registers of female speech. He proposed a toast to opera and the success of their enterprise, then settled back in his chair

swirling his drink like a gentleman at his London club—a pose he was quite conscious of because, at bottom, undergirding the salesman, the promoter, the entrepreneur, the bon-vivant, was Herbert the actor. As long as he could remember he wanted to be on the stage. Even more than money, in his youth at any rate, he loved theater. It was his father who put the kibosh on that. The one thing his father couldn't stop was his son's drinking, so Herbert was happy to cultivate that particular past-time as compensation for his lost ambitions. He knew he could have been a decent actor, too. Maybe better than decent—TV, or movies even. Oh well. All the world's a stage, he acknowledged with a certain resignation as he brought the glass to his lips, might as well strut upon it wherever and whenever you can. He took a large swallow of the Port and felt it warming his insides like a soft quilt. Sophie was a little hard to take as far as he was concerned, a bit on the rigid side like his mother maybe, but she seemed to believe in his little enterprise and, god bless her, she was being quite generous. He assumed she was wealthy enough to risk some cash on a whim or two, unlike Dot who was near the limit of her fixed income. And he couldn't be sure, because her foreign features derived from a slightly different physical aesthetic, but when he looked at her closely he could imagine she was once pretty enough. Not that he was unaware of how his own looks had devolved. He'd once been, to his youthful imagination anyway, something of a golden boy. A nice build, fair complexion, full head of blond hair, though it's true his eyesight was never that good. That was a problem for anyone aspiring to leading man status in the days before contact lenses, not that he would have minded being a character actor. He would have been more than pleased, in fact, if it came to that.

Why don't we put on some music, said Sophie.

By all means, said Herb. Without thinking he tried to pop out of his chair, but his knees froze in pain and he fell back stifling a groan. He tried to look amused, as if he'd just taken a pratfall for laughs, took another sip of his drink and eased himself up more carefully. What would you like, my dear?

Do you have *La Rondine*?

How about Jimmy Dorsey?

Don't be silly, Herbert. You know I can't stand all those saxophones.

Herb sorted through the CD's Arthur lent him until he found her opera. He poured himself another glass of Port, more generous than the first, and settled back to listen. Business was business. And it was funny how after a drink or two he came to realize and appreciate how odd it was that Sophie, as she sat there with her drink, and his wife, though each were raised in different faiths in the midst of different continents, had much in common. They were both the eldest child with two younger brothers. Both their fathers were lawyers. They both liked to ice skate when they were young. Her husband was in sales and loved Duke Ellington. It was a little uncanny. He had come to feel more relaxed in her presence over the past few months, a little protective even, although it was she who was patronizing him. Even the sound of Puccini's sopranos and tenors blaring away in Italian seemed to bother him less when she was around. She gave his room a certain presence.

I love to hear it but opera must be seen too, said Sophie. We should go to a live performance one of these days. What do you say, a trip to New York?

We? said Herbert.

Yes, all of us.

That might be nice Sophie, he said, but I'll pass thank you. I'm sure Arthur would take you up on it if he could manage. And maybe Palmer and Dorothy. Even when relaxed and dreamy with the cozy glow of vintage Port in his belly and his warming regard for Sophie, Herb had his limits. But sales weren't happening and he needed some new ideas. If he didn't come up with something soon he might have to resort to desperate measures, even Sophie's expedition.

The body needs salt.

Your body, maybe.

I'm gonna bring my own.

Be my guest. It's your funeral.

My blood pressure was good this morning.

I just use pepper.

I forgot to take it.

It's not the same.

I got used to it.

Have it your way.

Their server, Davis, a young DJ working his day job, arrived with dessert. He'd been monitoring their table chatter for weeks, something he couldn't help out of boredom and habit. He circled the table discreetly in a most unDJ-like white shirt and black pants. Here's a news flash, said Davis, taking the opportunity to speak up during a lull in the conversation. Y'all ain't bootlegging. He set down the last plate and took a step back, noting the puzzled looks all around. Just sayin'.

Just sayin' what, exactly? said Herb.

Just sayin' you ain't bootlegging, Davis repeated. Y'all pirating.

Aaargh matey, said Palmer, brandishing his dinner knife. We're buccaneers. Palmer's mood seemed lighter since Nina disappeared.

Arthur almost gagged on his ice cream. Davis, he said, where on earth did you get that idea?

Which idea? said Davis.

That we would be involved in, you know. What you said.

Everybody know that, said Davis. Ain't no secrets in this place.

I disagree, said Sophie. This place has lots of secrets. Thank goodness.

Maybe it do, Sophie. But not when y'all talk like that. Opera CD's? You can hear Palmer all the way down to the front desk.

What do you mean 'pirating', asked Herb?

It's like this, said Davis, squaring up after setting his tray on its stand, freeing his hands to emphasize the point he was about to make. Pirating is when you just copy something and sell it. Bootlegging is recording something new that ain't on the market yet. You know what I'm saying? A live performance, usually.

Herb blinked and drifted off for a moment. My God, he said, snapping his fingers. That's it! He bolted up in his chair as if he'd been jabbed by a hat pin.

That's what? said Arthur.

The answer, said Herb. Davis, you're a genius.

Thank you, Herbert. I'd like to think so. When I get my career going y'all can say you heard it here.

That's Davis? said Sophie, as Davis stepped back to the kitchen. I thought it was Kyle. No wonder he sounded different.

Kyle's taller, said Dot.

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Twilight filtered through Greendale's windows as the first sitting gathered for dinner—the early bird special as Herb liked to call it. By the time residents shambled in for the second, the ground, the sky, the woods outside were faded to black. It was late fall. The prospect of another New England winter seemed to dampen everyone's spirits. The six aged entrepreneurs of the opera scheme were settled at their usual table. 'The Commoners' as Arthur liked to call their little band, much to Herb's annoyance. He preferred 'The Uncommoners', but that was too unwieldy, so he settled for the 'Operantics' to please Sophie, which never caught on. They were parked in front of empty soup bowls without much to say. Saturday dinners at Greendale were always silent, contemplative affairs any time of year, held in an atmosphere of emptiness that was almost reverential, an atmosphere that was patently absent the other days of the week. Maybe it was their stark contrast to the weekend pleasures pursued in the outside world that brought it on. Whatever the source, it was a recurring ritual that allowed the frail remnants of their generation to sense together what they could share with no one else—their hard-earned and, most of them being New Englanders, unspoken *weltschmerz*. It was as if this one evening a week, since in America you're only as old as you feel, Greendale residents were free to feel their age. For some reason this Saturday, for the Operantics, it seemed even more so. Finally Arthur spoke up.

Service is slow tonight, he said.

Even Herb was subdued. Despite his claims to Arthur, they weren't selling more CD's and he was looking down in his cups. He didn't even have the energy to hype the prospects of his scheme the way he did with such manic joy before everyone joined up.

What's with Yolanda? said Herb. His annoyance was unusual. It was not like him to grouse or carp about the staff. It was his habit to curry favor with everyone.

So many young people are on drugs these days, said Sophie as she watched Yolanda scurry about the other end of the room.

I didn't get my decaf, said Flo from her wheelchair.

It ain't just young people these days, said Arthur. He'd seen a news feature on drugs that morning, something about a growing epidemic of older folks in the heartland. New drugs, same dope fiends. How much morphine had he dispensed in his day?

Maybe not, said Sophie. But young people don't work like they used to. You could count on Sophie for a banality now and then that would usually get a nod from the Greendale clientele.

I think the staff work hard, said Dorothy. She was the only one whose mood hadn't changed. She always dressed up for Saturday dinner at the Commons, as she dressed up for Saturday dinners all her life. This evening she wore pearl drop earrings with a print dress, and shoes with a slight heel. Her dress size had hardly changed in forty years.

I bet they're back there on their cell phones, said Sophie, speaking Spanish so we don't know what they're up to.

I like hearing Spanish, said Dot. It reminded her of vacations in Acapulco.

Palmer asked Sophie, Didn't you grow up speaking German?

Yes, said Sophie, but when I got to this country I swore I would never speak that language again.

Yolanda rushed over and cleared their soup cups.

Finally Yolanda, said Flo, hacking up a wad of phlegm I didn't get my decaf.

It's coming, Flo, said Yolanda

Why are things so slow? For some reason Arthur seemed eager to get the food he always claimed he didn't like.

Sorry Arthur, said Yolanda. We're doing the best we can. The kitchen's short-staffed.

Yolanda, Arthur noticed, had put on weight. It showed in the waist of her unisex outfit, the same outfit—white shirt, black slacks—worn by all the dining room staff. Her henna-dyed hair was cropped short, and her white collar half covered the black rose tattoo on her neck. Her two kids were home with their grandparents.

It's the weekend, said Palmer. People always call out sick on the weekend.

That's so inconsiderate. They don't care how it affects other people, said Sophie.

No, that's not the problem, said Yolanda. They cut back on staff.

What do you mean cut back? said Palmer. He was curious rather than indignant, having been through his share of RIF's in his career, most of them engineered by him.

We're all part-time now, said Yolanda.

So there's less work? asked Dot.

Yolanda laughed. Less? I wish, she said. Management said they got to cut expenses, so there go our benefits. Plus we all get less hours. And they let some staff go.

ElderPartners knows the drill, said Palmer, nodding his approval. They're doing it by the book.

Yeah. I just wish they weren't throwing the book at *us*, said Arthur.

Flo made a heroic effort to clear her throat. All eyes turned to see if she was choking. Why don't, she said, pausing to take a deep breath and clear her windpipe as she pointed at Yolanda. Why don't you organize?

What you mean, 'organize'? said Yolanda.

I mean why don't you join a union and go on strike, said Flo.

I don't have time for that, said Yolanda. I got kids at home.

Of course you don't. They count on that.

And what would you people do if we went on strike?

That's management's problem, said Flo

No, that's our problem, said Herb. Unions are a bunch of crooks.

Like everyone else, said Flo.

I ain't seen Davis around, said Arthur as Yolanda cleared his place.

Yolanda set the last of their bowls on her side tray. They laid Davis off last week, she said.

Davis has other plans, said Herb. He was gonna quit anyway.

Yeah, but not so soon, Yolanda shot back. His DJ'ing don't pay the rent. Not yet, anyway.

Actually it was Herb who had plans for Davis, his last and only hope.

I'm going to complain, said Arthur. He glanced at Dot, wondering if she thought complaining was a bad idea. He took her lazy smile as a sign of encouragement.

Good luck with that, said Yolanda, setting her hands on her hips to give him a Boricua neck roll. But you didn't hear no complaints from me. I need this job. Be right back with your entrees. She raised the clearing tray onto her palm and hurried toward the kitchen.

There was another general silence as the tablemates returned to their separate thoughts. It was not an awkward or uncomfortable silence, more like the tranquility of a Quaker Meeting with a touch more resignation.

The clam chowder wasn't half bad, said Palmer, waking from his management reverie.

Needed salt, said Arthur.

It seemed perfectly fine to me, said Dot.

Salt, said Flo. Needed more salt.

They lapsed into silence again for a moment.

The clam chowder's better in the hospital, said Arthur.

When's the last time you got salt in the hospital? said Herb.

I don't know what it is, but they're doing something right over there.

If you say so, said Palmer.

I told Ted he should check it out, said Arthur. But he don't listen to me. He never listens to me.

Wise up, Artie, said Herb. They're saving money on salt.

Yolanda appeared with their orders, the last table to be served. They ate in silence again, a silence that seemed almost like peace.

Here's the plan, said Herbert. Arthur, Sophie, Dot, Palmer, Flo, Davis, Kyle, and Yolanda were crowded into his small living room like a gathering of the tribes. Pirating is out. We're doing real bootlegging now. Why bootlegging and why now, you ask? Because it just so happens the Metropolitan Opera is handing us the opportunity on a silver platter. They just announced they'll broadcast live productions in movie theaters this year. All we have to do is record them and put them out on CD's. Got the picture? You with me?

The assembly took a moment to ponder his pronouncement. Flo spoke up first. But won't the Met do the same thing?

Yeah, probably, said Davis. Put them out on iPods too. You know what I'm sayin'?

Or streaming, said Kyle. Good-bye CD's.

I don't know about any of that new bullshit, said Herb. They can do what they want, but I hear what you're saying. We have a short window here. One season and we're out. We sell on price and volume, just like before. Only this time we'll get the jump on the other pirates.

There was a new sense of urgency to their preparations. The ElderPartners' clock was ticking loud and fast. The Greendale executive staff seemed more stressed than ever. There didn't seem to be much interest on their part to 'see what they could do' for anyone in financial straits. All their efforts were focused on reeling in new admissions. One of Dot's daughters had already paid a visit looking for cheaper options nearby, and made it clear there were less expensive ones in Colorado. Arthur and Flo were barely holding on, skimping on necessities to stretch their funds a few more months.

Davis, as a bona fide DJ with something of a local reputation, was made technical director of the new project. Fortunately he had most of the recording equipment they needed at his disposal, but he didn't waste the opportunity to hit up Herb, who hit up Sophie, for some high-end microphones. Sound quality, he asserted logically, was everything. Fortunately that argument was an easy sell to their opera-loving patroness.

After we rehearse the procedure at the theater, Herb continued, we record *Eugene Onegin* as a trial run. Then we nail this thing with *The Barber of Seville*. That's it. That's our hit record. Then look out, Katie bar the door. All we have to do is sit back and count the dough.

Just one question, said Palmer. He was wearing his Trinity College sweatshirt and a new pair of jeans his daughter-in-law bought him. He wasn't seen much in Princeton orange these days. Why would they allow us to record?

Allow us? said Herbert, cutting short a laugh. Now that would be stupid. Of course they won't *allow* us. Palmer, have I ever mentioned guerrilla warfare? Hit and run? Our challenge is to record without getting caught. But the team here is on it, right Davis?

No problem, Herbert, said Davis. But y'all got a job to do to help us out. We'll go over that when the time comes.

In his insurance work Palmer was used to skating as close to the line as the law allowed. Drifting over it would be an interesting little change. Why not?

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I think things will be all right, thought Kristin. She was amazed at the deep well of resiliency she'd discovered within herself. Greendale had weathered the norovirus outbreak without much damage—a few hospital admissions, a brief mention in the local paper, no sanctions from the health department—and then survived the flu season with only one death, and that was someone who'd been immunized. So kudos to Rosemary.

Not too shabby, team. Halley did such an awesome job putting together the post-viral ice cream social, and the Gatorade and gloves were such a playful touch, a sense of humor being so important in the workplace. Go Halley! But once the crises passed, and the adrenaline subsided, and the old routines re-established, there was a letdown of sorts. An emptiness accompanied her home each evening until she finally dared to peek inside and ask herself, when she was out for a pre-dawn run, or in yoga class at the gym, or sitting on the toilet with her eyes tearing up for no good reason, why am I doing this? And then stepping back and asking, why am I asking this question? And then wondering, which me is asking? She thought perhaps some spiritual voice was calling her back to her essential work, her true calling as a healer, until she realized that no, maybe she had it backwards with the projection thing and she was the one a tad depressed and needing help. The Xanax were coming out of their bottle a bit too often. The extra glass of wine after dinner could be a clue. But why? She had a great job and a great team to work with and the old folks she cared so much about. She had a loving husband and her kids were doing well in school, why should she feel bad? What was wrong with her, just when she needed a burst of energy to get those admissions rolling? It was hard to make time for her own therapy given the demands of work, and family, and her other self-care activities (there was nothing she could give up, she'd looked into it), so she made an appointment with her gynecologist to get a prescription for the SSRI she knew always did the trick.

Where did you say you live?

I love you, Mom.

Oh. That's nice, dear.

As he went through his chair exercises, Herbert's mind was on the arrangements for the group's upcoming theater outing. A no-brainer, one would think. Who could object to Greendale residents attending a highbrow cultural event at a Saturday matinee? All they needed was the bus. When she finished leading the routine, Halley bounced up from her chair and gave her charges a round of applause. Herb was flushed and slightly out of breath. Waiting to corner her and press his request, he felt for his pulse and found it rather hectic. Quick, then slow, then quick again. Served him right for taking it. He sat back down and decided it was best ignored. No big deal. Not like he was having chest pain or anything. After a moment he stood up slowly and braced himself. So far, so good. Maybe it was just the residue of a mild hangover. He caught Halley as she was about to leave the room. She listened attentively until he mentioned the word 'bus', then began to fidget ever so slightly, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, squeaking her running shoes on the wooden floor as her ponytail wagged behind her.

I don't think there'd be much interest, she said, managing an apologetic smile.

Why suddenly not her bubbly self, Herb wondered? When he assured her there were at least six people ready to sign up, her next objection was that it was too long a drive. She hinted obliquely, while nodding in search of the affirmation he did not return, that her concern was the need for frequent bathroom breaks and thus the desire to avoid, you know, the embarrassment of, she whispered, incontinence. In other words, speaking in her normal tone now, the importance of preserving the dignity and safety of Greendale's residents.

Is it me, Herbert wondered? Had he not been clear enough? The movie theater was no farther than the casino. Traveling with diapers was as common for Greendale residents as wearing support hose, and much easier to put on. Why was she balking? Then his old salesman instincts kicked in. Something else was at play, he sussed. Here was Halley, the Activities Director, The Commons' biggest booster of fun and games, making up reasons why they shouldn't happen. What's wrong with this picture? As he

watched her skip out of the activity room it was obvious what he needed to do. Follow the money.

Is Kristin in? said Herb, ignoring the injunction of her administrative assistant as he hurried past to the door of Kristin's office. Kristin was in, and on the phone. When she saw him she raised a finger, swiveling away as she pointed at the receiver to signal she was obviously busy. Herbert gave a curt nod to indicate he would wait right there at the doorway. He'd worked his way past too many gate keepers, slipped through the doors of too many big shots, to be put off by the administrator of an old folks home. Kristin continued a leisurely conversation with her back turned while he waited, ignoring the repeated pleas of her assistant to please take a seat outside. When Kristin finally finished her call she swiveled back to find him still parked in the doorway. He entered without waiting to be called, and plopped into a chair in front of her.

I just had a funny conversation with Halley, he began, knitting his eyebrows—so light and thin they were almost invisible—to indicate how mystified he was. It seems she has objections to an afternoon outing to a movie theater. For a Metropolitan Opera broadcast, of all things. Strange, don't you think? I thought maybe you could shed some light on why she would be so negative.

This is the first I've heard of it, said Kristin, in the restrained tone of the polite executive brush-off. I really can't comment until I understand it better.

It's simply this, said Herbert, aware of her impatience and choosing to ignore it, goaded rather to dig in deeper. There's a lot of interest in going to these Saturday matinees. We'd like to use the Greendale bus.

The bus, said Kristin, throwing up her hands with a bureaucrat's air of helplessness. We're having problems with the bus. Maybe that's what Halley was referring to. The timing isn't good here, Herbert. Maybe in the future. But I'll look into it and let you know.

The bus seems to be running fine, said Herbert.

No, no, it's not that. Nothing mechanical. There are some insurance issues, liability concerns, and some personnel things that we have to deal with. I can't get into specifics.

So Bob finally flunked his drug screen, said Herb. I thought he was driving kind of funny lately.

Don't even joke about that, said Kristin. There's nothing wrong with Bob. He has diabetes and two grandchildren to take care of. He's not going to risk his job.

Then it must be the cost, said Herbert, following his instincts. You're cutting back on activities while our rates are going up. You don't want to pay overtime or something, is that it?

Kristin drummed her fingers on her desk. No Herbert, she sighed. Of course not. Our cultural activities are what make Greendale special. We'd never skimp on those. Let me get back to you, okay?

Bingo.

Okay, said Herb, but we need to know soon. The first broadcast is coming up. Which was quite true, although their first planned recording session was two months away. They needed to get the lay of the land, the sooner the better, and he didn't want to let her off the hook.

A few days later as the second lunch sitting drifted out of the dining room, a small group of residents, leaning on walkers and straining from their wheelchairs, gathered around Herb as he perused the new postings on the Greendale activities board. There it was, the item he looking for. An afternoon outing to *The Magic Flute*. Tickets for the Metropolitan Opera's first live nationwide theater broadcast, he announced, were now available. They could be purchased through the Greendale activities office while they lasted, with an additional surcharge for transportation, snacks, and various incidentals.

December. It was officially holiday season at Greendale, that special time of year when joy, goodwill, and adequate safety precautions prevailed. Decorations were set out with a vengeance the Monday after Thanksgiving. Trees, wreaths, garlands. Nothing hung within 18 inches of ceiling sprinklers, all according to the NFPA Life Safety Code.

The smell of sugar cookies baking in the Kountry Kitchen mixed with choruses of *Let It Snow* and *Frosty the Snowman* wafting from the ceiling speakers of its well-decked halls. Menorahs and strings of Christmas lights were plugged snug into power strips with built-in ground-fault circuit interrupters, displaying their green UL tags. Greenbury College carolers dressed like elves, their hands well sanitized with an alcohol-based product, roamed the corridors and led singalongs in the activities room. The amount of combustible materials displayed on ceilings and interior walls was limited to 10% of the aggregate ceiling and wall areas of any room or space, though the silver metal tree in the front vestibule could technically be considered a hazard blocking means of egress. But the tree was so pretty and what were the chances, really? There were sprigs of holly and a snowman centerpiece on each dining room table, and the wait staff scurried about in Santa hats.

I gotta get out of here, said Herb. Artie, you want to go downtown?

Arthur pointed to his legs and his walker. Not really, he said. What was Herb thinking? The last time Arthur went downtown, two years ago, he collapsed on the sidewalk and had to be taken back to Greendale by ambulance. A totally humiliating experience, especially for someone who wasn't even willing to give up his driver's license.

Flo, of course, was out of the question. Palmer? said Herb. What about you? A little excursion? Herb wouldn't mind a drinking buddy.

Sorry Herb, said Palmer. Not today. Not feeling up to it, I'm afraid. To judge by his mood the holiday spirit was not upon him. Palmer seemed more passive than usual lately. It was hard to tell if he was going with the flow or simply adrift.

Sophie?

I'd love to, but I have my painting class.

Herb looked out the window. Darkest December, not exactly the most inviting day for an excursion even for a more lively group than this, despite the holiday feel they were bound to find downtown. But he had to get out. The walls seemed to be closing in on him, as if literally increasing the atmospheric pressure he felt pressing his head and eyeballs. Atmospheric and financial.

I'll go, said Dorothy. Dot was not Herb's first choice but she wasn't such a bad deal, all things considered. The best walker in the bunch, although he was afraid she might have a tendency to wander. He'd just have to keep an eye on her.

You're on, said Herbert.

Herb needed an outing. He had a bad night. It was not like Marley or a Christmas ghost dropped by. He was thinking of his boys, who hadn't. After all he'd done for them, not even a phone call or a lousy card? Okay, he reflected, maybe he hadn't been the perfect dad. He missed a few birthdays, so what? He was out there trying to make a buck. Did they think it was easy? On the road? And sure, he might have hauled off and given them a good whaling now and then when they deserved it. Everyone did back then. They always brought that up. Maybe he could have been more patient, but it's not like they were little angels. Why did they have to provoke him? Tales of drunkenness and cruelty, those were their mother's lies. They had no idea the kind of stress he was under. So if he spent the day a little tanked once in a while, that was a man's prerogative. He had his own version of the problem. He'd spoiled them.

The wind was raw, and the Greendale grounds shades of brown. Not exactly a winter wonderland, Herb noted as he stepped outside. Dot motored straight down the front steps, head up, arms swinging. Herb was judicious enough to ease down the ramp and hang tight to the metal railing as he made his way to the driveway, his breathing heavy in bursts of white puffs. At the door of the Greendale bus he made the gallant gesture of handing Dot up the steps, which she graciously allowed, though she could have been of much more use to him. Inside it was comfortably warm, with the faint smell of exhaust fumes and upholstery cleaner in the air. They sat together, directly in back of Bob the driver with a good view of the road ahead.

Too bad Arthur can't get out, said Herb.

I don't think he minds, said Dot. He's happy staying home and taking it easy. After fifty years working downtown, it's not like he's missing anything. Besides, he's had more than his share of adventures in his life. He traveled all over the world, you know.

There's a lot about Arthur I don't know, said Herb.

When he was young, here she lowered her voice to a whisper, he was a Communist.

Not exactly, said Herb. He said he was an anarchist.

Same thing, more or less, said Dot. Isn't it?

Sure, as far as I'm concerned. Does that bother you?

I don't know, said Dot. She gave a deep sigh and looked ahead at the traffic. It was a long time ago, I suppose. He really is a kind man. And very lonely, I think. I'm the last person in the world to hold someone's past against them. Casting the first stone and all that. So were you some kind of anarchist, too?

Me? God, no. Herb placed both hands over his heart. I'm a patriot. A red-blooded American. I love this country. Just not the government, or politicians.

Dot smiled, thinking of her work in the congressman's office. It must have slipped his mind. Poor Herb, not being very diplomatic at the moment. The bus made its first stop at an orthopedist's office, then dropped them by the new pharmacy on Main Street. They paused on the sidewalk a moment to get their bearings. Dot pointed to a florist's shop across the way.

That used to be Arthur's drug store, she said.

The last family pharmacy in Greenbury closed a decade ago, years after Arthur sold his business, making way for the two national chains in town. They went inside the boxy, high-ceilinged store. Tinsel was everywhere on heaped-up displays of cheap holiday goods, the usual Christmas standards piped from the sound system overhead. Herb was confused for a moment. He didn't know which store he was in. It could have been anywhere. He looked around, not an employee in sight. Finally he oriented himself from the overhead signs and made his way to the natural medicine section for the mix of vitamins and minerals he swore helped his hangovers. Dot wandered to the other side of the store, content to browse the hair products aisle. She would leave the incontinence pads for a more discrete visit. Neither needed to pick up prescriptions, as all medication was delivered to The Commons. It was one of the few remaining features still bundled in the basic room fee, though they imagined that would change soon enough.

The holiday season was always a tough stretch for Herb. They only reminded him how much he'd lost, and he could never picture himself as a loser. As he steered Dot to the checkout counter he began to appreciate that he was accompanied by someone who didn't pay much attention to all the hoopla either, if for entirely different

reasons. It was hard to know what Dot paid attention to, if she paid attention to anything. Her moods, unlike his, seemed as steady as her gait. He needed a drink.

How about a bite to eat? he said. A legitimate excuse for some alcohol at that time of day, and in keeping with the holiday spirit.

Sure, said Dot. But first let's look at the decorations. I think they get better every year. And, she said, if he wouldn't mind, she'd like to browse a gift shop or two as long as they were in town. Little presents for the Greendale staff—candles, bath bombs, holiday mugs. Despite Herb's thirst it was still a bit early for lunch. He looked at his hands. No shaking yet. Traffic was light, the street hushed. They strolled down the sidewalk as if on a movie set before the action begins. Lampposts were festooned with pine garlands, strings of light, wreaths. Candy canes dangled above the street. When Dot found her crafts store, Herb took the opportunity to excuse himself and duck out to the nearby liquor mart. The display of so many friendly spirits finally brought a holiday smile to his face. What a beautiful sight, he thought, we're happy tonight. Luscious little bottles sittin' up on the shelf. His supplies were running dangerously low. He selected one of his favorite vintage ports and, it being the season, a high-end bourbon. Sure it was overpriced, but you only live once. And if you didn't, what's the difference? He almost forgot. A nice bottle of sherry as well, gift wrapped.

When they finished shopping they settled into a cozy booth at a corner pub where Herb knew you could get a hot roast beef sandwich and a decent bowl of chowder. He was about to order a martini straight up, but looked across the table at Dot, then at the dark wood of the bar, the bare brick walls, and decided to go with a Guinness. Dot ordered a cup of tea.

C'mon Dot, it's the holidays, said Herb. At least have a mulled wine or something.

Dot only smiled and her lids drooped a bit more, giving her that dreamy expression that made her seem absent. That's okay, she said, thinking back to the good times and blackouts of untold holiday office parties. I've had my share of holiday cheer,

Just for ceremonial purposes? said Herb.

No, thank you. Not for me. I haven't had a drink in thirty years. But you go right ahead.

Her dreamy smile was making Herb feel self-conscious. Was there a message there for him? Judgment or sympathy, maybe both. Or maybe nothing, just his projection. She was a stranger woman than he knew. Whatever it was, it made him quick to change the subject. You think Art will make it to a hundred?

Of course, said Dot. He's amazing.

In his own way I guess, said Herb. He thinks *you're* pretty special.

Me? Dot laughed. Don't be silly. I'm just a girl from Norwich.

He doesn't visit just anyone in the hospital, you know.

He visits Flo.

That's different.

Not really. So who do you think is amazing? asked Dot, her turn to change the subject.

If you ask Renee, everyone at Greendale. But me? I don't know. Art, for sure. And Ben, they say. But I don't know Ben.

So many people at Greendale had interesting lives, she said. Some you'd never guess. But Ben is truly amazing, and not just because he's the oldest one there. Did you know the Dalai Lama visited him?

I doubt that, said Herb. The waitress brought his stout. He took a long draft for emphasis.

Really, said Dot. He came with a whole retinue. They had their heads shaved, the yellow robes and everything. The nicest people.

Herb took another swallow. The Dalai Lama? In Greenbury? Sure, why not. He was starting to feel a bit better. Maybe the holiday season wouldn't be that bad after all. He felt his vibe returning.

Sophie told me a few things about you, said Dot. Sounds like you've had an interesting life, too.

I have my stories, said Herb, trying his best to recall what he may have told Sophie after a few highballs. He signaled the waitress for another beer.

Sophie thinks they're funny. Never a dull moment, eh?

I'll let you in on a little secret, Herb whispered, leaning across the table. Swear you won't tell.

Cross my heart.

I *am* amazing.

That got the laugh he was looking for. Could be, she said. Sophie thinks so, anyway.

I will not, said Herb, disabuse her of that notion.

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When I die, said Arthur, sitting at the end of the exam table while his cardiologist listened to his heart, I want you to list the cause of death as ‘nickel and dime’. Arthur had the inconvenient habit of talking while his physicians were doing their best to hear the aged sounds his body continued to make.

Interesting, said Dr. Choudhry, the cardiologist, pulling out the ear pieces of his stethoscope and draping it around his neck. For a moment Arthur assumed he was referring to the findings of his auscultation, and interesting would not be good. Is that some new disease? said the doctor.

Hardly, said Arthur, relieved that Choudhry meant his comment. He reminded himself to keep his mouth shut when someone laid a stethoscope on his chest. Actually a very old one, he explained. They found graves of bankrupts in Egypt and Babylon with all the telltale signs. There’s a lot of it going around Greendale these days. An epidemic you might say.

Choudhry moved to the front of the exam table, arms folded across his lab coat, deadpan, a man with a keen sense of humor who rarely allowed himself to smile lest his patients think he didn’t take them seriously. It could be reportable, he said. What are the symptoms?

Trouble sleeping, said Arthur, straightening his sweater. With his numb fingers, shirt buttons were too much trouble for a doctor’s visit. Fumbling with them would be yet another humiliation. Headaches, he continued, empty bank accounts, suicidal thoughts. That’s just for starters.

Uh, oh. Sounds serious. I hope it's not contagious, said Choudhry, patting the wallet in his back pocket.

You better believe it is. A silent plague. You could have it and not even know. It eats away your finances for years, then one day it pops out and you're dead as a doornail.

Just like heart disease, said Choudhry, helping to steady Arthur as he eased off the table toward his walker. Is there any cure?

Sure there is, said Arthur, trying not to let his legs buckle as he held onto Choudhry's arm. Large infusions of cash. Very effective. You'd think there'd be some kind of prevention, but it's impossible to get people to wash their grubby little hands.

Good luck with that one, said the doctor. I'd stick with the cash.

Too bad Medicare don't cover it.

Well, your ticker's okay. How about we see you in three months?

Neither Arthur nor his cardiologist, despite his pacemaker and kidney problems, thought he would die of heart disease. They couldn't say why, just that if it hadn't killed him yet it never would. Choudhry made a mental note to let Arthur's other caregivers know he was okay turning off Arthur's pacemaker when the end approached, should he request it. It was Arthur's clearly articulated wish, or whim, to keep his corpse free of pointless technology. Not that ongoing electric impulses would matter much at that juncture. It was just an untidy detail he wished to spare the undertaker.

Unknown to Arthur and the other members of Herb's little enterprise, Sophia was now bankrolling the whole operation. Twenty-two hundred dollars from online sales? Herb's little fiction and well-kept secret, but strategically so. It was for everyone's good in the long run, he assured Sophie. Her father the lawyer had done quite well in real estate and left her, if not a small fortune, at least a tidy sum that her not-so-successful husband had been unable to get his hands on or even dent to any degree. Herb was

always observant enough, at least in matters of his own self-interest and especially when cornered, to sense an opportunity at hand, and had been quick to turn on the charm when he noticed Sophie take a personal interest in him and his venture. What else was she going to do with her money besides control her children and indulge her grandkids? Twenty-two hundred dollars was nothing. And the sales fiction kept Artie psyched up, which you had to do once in a while to keep him in the game. Art could be a skeptical old bastard. People get so squirrely when their little investments don't pay off right away. Not Herb, of course. He had cojones. He knew how to stay at the table with the hutzpah of a true gambler, the illusion that if he kept his cool long enough he could stare down Lady Luck until she blinked. Truth is, the Lady had blinked more than once in Vegas and Atlantic City, where the casino hotels comped him when his credit cards maxed out and he had to drink cheap wine to keep off the shakes. No, you had to keep the image of success before people's eyes, in graphic form, clad in the trappings of their own personal visions, or their faith wilts. You had to make them see the mansion, the beach house, the Gulfstream, the private island they're going to buy when they finally hit the jackpot. Hype it and keep hyping but don't push, just let them stroll into the fantasy under their own power. Because without a vibe to vibe up others, you're nothing. Herb had no interest in marching down the playing field slow and steady, three yards and a cloud of dust like some ordinary schmuck, no matter how effective that might be in the long run. For him it was all or nothing, the touchdown pass in the end zone for a quick score. Building a business piece by piece from the ground up showed no panache. It just wasn't cool. The only thing that kept him from being an out-and-out con man was that he actually believed his own pipe dreams, and even when fueled by alcohol worked quite hard at them.

Sophie, Herb realized, liked to drop by his suite and hang out, usually when Kyle was there for cover—a personal visit disguised as business, transparent as that was. He was happy to play her favorite arias while she peppered him with questions about their website and rattled on about the tenors she admired. In return he told her stories from trips on the road with the big bands, of the Empire Room and Chez Paree in Chicago, Roseland and the Savoy in the Big Apple. He left out his nights dodging drunks in dives and roadhouses. Of course she was more than welcome to drop by.

Sophie, Herb knew, had to be kept engaged or it was all over. Not that he particularly liked working with Jews, New York Jews in particular. When he was down in his cups the words 'dirty Jew', heard often enough over the family dinner table growing up, might fall from his lips as readily as his impressions of Chico Marx, which were quite good, and meant as true homage. After all, during most of his working life in sales and more so in the music business, Jews were his fiercest competition. The damn Jews always seemed to have the inside track. To a kid from a long line of small town Midwesterners, Jews were people to be despised, envied, and—though nobody would say it out loud—grudgingly, so grudgingly one could disregard it, admired. And Sophie? Even more so. A European Jew, a German (Austrian, same thing) Jew no less. Getting her investment in his deal was just a little pay-back for all the times he'd been stiffed or cut-out or out-manuevered. The times he'd felt like a rube. So her answer woke him up like a slap on the head when he asked off-handedly, making polite conversation as they sat in his room one afternoon sipping their Port and sherry, listening to her operas, as he felt his belly suffused with a comforting warmth and she traced with her finger the rise and fall of a melody while the soprano belted it out, if she ever missed her native Vienna.

She said nothing, lost in the music it seemed.

I hear it's a beautiful city, said Herb.

A chill fell on the room as Sophie put down her drink and turned to answer. Her expression, coquettish up to that point, darkened as if a switch had been flipped. In a steely voice, level and clear, she told him about the day a ten year-old Jewish girl watched Hitler's storm troopers goose step down the boulevards of Vienna while the good Aryan citizens of the city lined the streets to celebrate, hoisting the Nazi salute and cheering them on, as if it happened yesterday. So no, Herb, he told himself, taking a large gulp of his drink, I guess she doesn't miss Vienna.

And not only that, Herbert, she said, I swore when I got to America I would never speak the German tongue again. I have never gone back, and I never will. That place is dead to me.

Okay then, he got the picture. A little different from growing up in Winnebago County, Herbie you putz. It made his sixty years of aimless wanderings from Peoria to the Commons at Greenbury, through America's gritty cities and hard scrabble towns,

seem small change by comparison. He refilled his glass and vowed from that moment on he wouldn't give her grief for listening to whatever music she liked, and maybe there was something to this opera stuff after all. Maybe there was a little more to this Sophia—this wizened foreign-looking woman with the funny accent who had somehow managed to fit in and make herself a regular at his table in the dining room—than her pocketbook. But her pocketbook was a damn good thing, and he did appreciate it.

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Their run to the nearest arts cinema for the debut of *The Met: Live in HD* was planned as a scouting expedition. 'The business', i.e. Sophie, picked up the tab for *The Magic Flute* and the team loaded up the Greendale bus along with seven of their unaffiliated fellow residents for the matinee, making a baker's dozen half in adult diapers so form-fitting you'd never know. Kyle and Yolanda were back at work but Davis was in the lobby waiting for them, decked out in sun glasses, bandana, and a baggy plaid shirt buttoned to the collar and hanging almost to his knees. The scene was not exactly Davis's cup of tea, nor filled with his peeps, but he was there to do his job armed with all the technology he could smuggle under his clothes and—who could have predicted, least of all Davis—to have an unexpected experience that was a minor revelation to the maturing rapper who, no shit, used it to add a new lyrical dimension to his work. Meanwhile he was getting paid an hourly rate inflated to twice what he usually got DJ'ing. Herb didn't quibble about the price. He reasoned this was one of those times you couldn't afford to be cheap.

Davis pulled a remarkable array of meters and small recording devices from his pants, causing them to sag even lower, and distributed the technology to the Greendale team before positioning each one at strategic locations throughout the theater—Flo in the back row in her wheelchair, the others spread from side to side for balance. Then he and Herb ambled about, unassuming as they could make themselves but not exactly

inconspicuous, a young black rapper whispering and gesticulating to an old white con man, casing the joint like two would-be jewel thieves.

Got to get the feel of the room, said Davis, looking up at the ceiling. He clapped his hands and listened for a moment as if for an echo only he could hear. It's not just about the acoustics, Herbert. Anybody can find that shit out. In my work I go beyond that. You see, every room have a personality of its own, you know what I'm saying? They can have the same acoustics and sound very different. It's a proven scientific fact. Most people don't appreciate that. I call it their atman, cause I'm a very spiritual person. That's what give me my edge in DJ'ing, At-Man Productions. At-Man—that be my brand, Herbie. And that spirit going to take me all the way.

It all made sense to Herb. He'd been in enough clubs in his day to know. So what's the deal with this place? he asked, looking around with the pragmatic eye of his ancestors, an empiricism passed down through a dozen generations happily escaped from their demi-paradise on the other side of the pond.

It's a little soft, a little flat, said Davis, glancing from ceiling to walls to floor. Not the kind of place you expect to pop. That might be good for this kind of music, I don't know. We'll see.

Herb took a center seat in the theater's middle row, saving a place next to him for Davis who went around to the team checking each of the Commoners' devices one last time and giving his final instructions.

When the show started Arthur was simply awed. The magic of the silver screen, the grandeur of the Met, the sound of Mozart, in real time. And hot damn! There was Renee Fleming, totally gorgeous, towering over him backstage in living color, inviting him into her world, while from the orchestra pit came the anticipatory drone of instruments joining the oboe's tuning note. He felt his heart skip ahead of his pacer. He tapped his hearing aids and settled his colostomy bag. A scouting expedition? Hardly. It was the opening of a blessed new space where The Common at Greendale was a joke, ElderPartners a bigger joke, money the biggest joke of all. The only thing worth caring about was the transport of the next three hours. Everything else—rent, meals, CD sales, friends and family, his bodily functions, even the yoke of the past—could take care of itself. Everything except his digital recorder, which he forgot to turn on.

Corporate wanted to go over the focus group results. Oh well, it was going to happen sooner or later. Kristin braced herself for the expected spanking Southern-style, starting with Scott something, Assistant VP of Marketing, straight from the Nashville headquarters with his PowerPoint presentation of 'The Data'. 'The Data', a seemingly neutral signifier that was anything but of course, a term with such an ominous ring it was like the name of an implacable force that rained down from the heavens on a flawed humanity struggling to do its best in an imperfect customer-centric world. Or so it seemed when she was in the shower that morning. Because these data were not sand toys for graduate students or little quants playing computer games on the beach. Not from Syn-Age. No way. These were the hands of judgement especially designed and beta-tested to point their giant index fingers straight at your worst fuck-ups. But maybe she was catastrophizing again. So easy to go there when your day is revved up from too much caffeine. Kristin popped a Lexapro with her kava tea. She had thought of going with the female news anchor look Fox style, but ditched that idea when her husband grabbed her butt and said, 'Nice ass, hon'. Okay, not sleeveless, forget the skirt above the knee, though assessing herself in the bedroom's full length mirror she had to say her legs were looking great thanks to six-day-a-week workouts. A trim charcoal-grey pants suit, and makeup a little heavier than usual but not overboard. Something to give her more sense of protection. Because, she had to admit, she was feeling vulnerable. A hollow feeling, a feeling of insubstantiality. And what was her defense? Compassion? Empathy? Right. Resident fuck-us groups were not going to show how much she cared about her people or people in general, let alone how well she handled disease outbreaks or dealt with the state health department or placated family members or honored the dignity of the poor souls sequestered and fading away in the memory unit. Kristin squeezed her eyes shut. Hold on. Hit pause. Challenge

those thoughts. That's right, just breathe. Monkey stretch. Self-hug. Small hoop earrings or stud? Oh god hurry up, you're running late.

The two of them—Executive Director of the Commons at Greendale and Assistant VP of Marketing from Nashville—sat quite alone in the cluttered conference room used for Greendale staff meetings. Kristin turned off the overhead lights, prepared now to take her medicine as best she could as Scott something began projecting slides from his laptop on the large wall screen. He must be a little younger than her, she guessed, though well on his way to total baldness, wearing glasses with chunky black frames whose message was: corporate but youthful. She wondered how much he made a year with bonuses, bonuses that depended on people like her.

We've run these things a couple of ways, said Scott. First content coding with Verbatim Blaster and NUD*IST, then content analysis with TEXTPACK. The methodology is robust.

Don't roll your eyes, Kristin told herself. Not here, not now. She nodded knowingly and tried to look impressed. Tried heroically. God, she hated those cheap PowerPoint screen effects just to list some asinine bullet points.

I know most people don't get off on this kind of thing, he continued, speaking slowly in the regional accent of a Southern mountain-boy tempered by four years of East Coast college, obviously getting off on this kind of thing. The reason I mention it is just to assure you there's no personal bias here. I know it's called qualitative research, but the analysis is just as objective as any statistical treatment. Hey, the data is only what our customers tell us. It's not like we make this stuff up.

I don't need this bullshit, thought Kristin, continuing her display of thoughtful attention. You patronizing geek. You don't f'ing think I studied research methods? Statistics? Call your so-called analysis what you want, it's just a half-assed Rorschach test. It says more about you than it does about us. But maybe she was being a little defensive here when she hadn't even heard the conclusions let alone been told the consequences.

So here's the bottom line, said Scott, pausing when he got to the last slide headed 'The Bottom Line' with its blast of fanfare from a large bugle icon. Most of these findings are pretty much in line with your average responses nationwide. But there's a

couple places where I'm sorry to say you'ins fall short of the mark. I'm talking specifically about Mind&Spirit Care and spa services. It seems you have a fair number of people in regular AL who could or should be in the memory unit. As for spa services, we don't expect a lot of men to be interested, but the women here aren't too keen on it either. They're suspicious, which is unusual. The data don't tell us why.

Kristin nodded, listening as intently as she could. There was something in the smooth rhythm of Scott's speech that lulled her into thoughts of a nice beach vacation as she began to speculate that maybe things weren't as bad as she feared. No big surprises. Nothing shocking. She could live with that. What about the meal complaints? she asked, shifting back to work mode.

Nothing to write home about, said Scott. That's the most common complaint we get everywhere, no matter what we do.

Okay, now what, said Kristin. What are next steps here?

That's really not for me to say, drawled Scott. Your regional VP is fixin' to get in touch with you about that, he said, as if she were to expect a visit from her favorite aunt. I'll ping you my PowerPoint. He checked his watch. Kristin realized he was running late for his one-on-one with Jacqu e. She didn't know why it had to be one-on-one and assumed something suspicious was afoot, an end run or worse, especially after she asked if she could be there and was told politely no. Jacqu e, of all people. Good luck debriefing *her*. So much for that feeling of relief. Was this a Xanax moment? She'd saved a few tabs, just in case. Just half, maybe? No, this was no time to let her guard down. She wanted to be on her toes for the little brunch they were holding for Scott and her executive staff.

I do love bagels, said Scott at brunch. I love Nashville to pieces, but it's hard to get a decent bagel there. Outside downtown, anyway. Which summarizes the substance of the conversation Kristin felt she had to be on her toes for. So what, she thought. Banal was better than painful. She and Jacqu e saw him out the door and into his cab to the airport. Y'all have a blessed day, he said, waving good-bye as he slipped on his sunglasses and attached the earbuds to his iPod.

When Kristin got back to her office she was sure she was going to having a nice little cry. And why not? She deserved it. But it was not to be. She knew that after she

dried her tears the rims of her eyes would be bright pink for god knows how long and she'd have to tell everyone it was her allergies again and they'd have to pretend to believe it. No, she hated it when staff came to her in tears. There was a big box of tissues on her desk just for that. Only one thing to do. Get away. Spend some quality time in her beloved memory unit.

She hurried to the other end of the building. She waved her ID badge at the reader on the wall and the door clicked open. It was unusually bright inside, partly from the lighting, partly from the sunshine streaming through the large windows of the high-ceilinged dining area, brighter than the hallways and common rooms of the main facility, as if the memory unit residents were being drawn to a place of light as their faculties were dimming. There was a stillness so foreign and science fiction-like, it felt as if she'd stumbled into the relative time of a thought experiment. Two trains traveling near the speed of light in opposite directions or something equally unintelligible. Or beams of sunlight bending around the penumbra of a distant planet named for Arthur's psychopomp. A woman on a walker faced her from the middle of the corridor, her movements frozen like film frames in a slow motion scene. Kristin felt oddly linear. She had come with a purpose to the least purposeful of venues. Then noise returned as suddenly as to a diver breaking the water's surface.

It was Halley, coming out of a resident's room with a golden retriever in tow.

Hey Boss, said Halley, what brings you down here? The dog had a smile almost as broad as Halley's, panting with his tongue hanging to the side. But in contrast to Halley he appeared rather low energy. An old dog, obviously. He seemed to relish the opportunity to sit and swish his tail on the floor.

I don't know, said Kristin. I just had to get out of my office for a minute. She hoped at least, watching the sweep of the feathery tail, the dog was clean.

How about that guy Scott? said Halley. I was like, I love the way y'all talk down there. I said y'all, I don't know why. And he was like, you should come on down and visit. Nashville is a happening place. And I was like, yeah, I went to Charleston last year and I loved it. And he was like...

Kristin wasn't sure how she felt about Scott, or about the animal assisted therapy going on in front of her. She knew she was reluctant to object to the dog. That would be

kind of closed-minded, not the hippest thing for sure. A sign of her age? Some Gen-X hangup? What was wrong with her. She worked hard to deal with her prejudices, to bring them to the surface so they wouldn't unconsciously interfere with her work. She could be hip when she wanted to be, she could handle it. Still, these mutts were rescues and half of them had epilepsy. How therapeutic is a dog seizing in the hallway of a dementia ward, peeing all over the floor and who knows what else? Gross, in her humble opinion. She sighed. Pets were part of the Mind&Spirit Care protocol and at least Halley was certified. That played well with Corporate, and it looked good on their promotional material. It's not like she didn't like dogs, but still.

He's okay, I suppose, said Kristin, still thinking of Scott's meeting with Jacqué and, perhaps, the dog. I'll go over the focus group results with everyone tomorrow. She almost said fuck-us. She almost wished she had.

Okay, said Halley. Say good-bye, Charlie. Charlie looked up at Kristin like, aren't you going to pet me? Kristin gave him a quick pat on the head. Charlie stood up gingerly, giving her a goofy smile with his drooling tongue.

Arthritis, said Halley, leading him away. Poor old guy.

I guess, thought Kristin, that's appropriate somehow. She continued her way to the common room. A large TV screen dominated the space, playing a rerun of the Andy Griffith Show in what looked less like black and white than washed-out color, as if all the characters and the town of Mayberry itself were gradually fading away. The sound was off. Four residents were scattered about the room in mute postures. She closed her eyes. Peace, thought Kristin, that lasted a welcome moment before a quacking sound brought her back from the absence she was seeking.

No, Nora, called a firm voice, that's not your room. One of the nurse's aides was gently re-directing a tall, gangly woman who was quite well-dressed.

Hello, Bobbi, said Kristin.

Hi, Ms Pizzutto. What brings you down here this morning?

I just thought I'd drop by, said Kristin. Then, thinking it best to give some reason, asked for the unit manager. Is Susan around?

You just missed her, said the aide. She went to the nurse's office.

Maybe I'll wait for her, said Kristin. She sat down on a large sofa in the middle of the room, found the remote and switched the channel to cable news, sinking deeper into the cushions, unsure if her sense of the world closing in was threatening or protective, feeling like the twin who stayed home aging while everyone else went for a timeless joy ride on the rocket ship.

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I love you, Mom.

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Flo didn't calculate much. She could when she wanted to, and without much effort. And it's not that she didn't like to think about numbers. Actually she loved numbers. They were like old friends, except they didn't wither and die. But calculations were for accountants and engineers. She looked down at the contours in her cup of minestrone. A small topological feast. Small pasta shells and aptly named beans that looked exactly like miniature kidneys meticulously dissected from tiny animals, mice or chipmunks maybe, color and all. She looked for meat and didn't find any. That was good. The contours of chopped meat did not appeal to her. She remembered the day Helen announced she was vegetarian, or was it vegan? That was the end of the ham bone in her split pea soup. Anathema to Helen but something that was always a treat for Flo's mother. That's how much things change, a hundred and eighty degrees from one generation to the next. A little beef stock for flavor wouldn't hurt but forget the chunks, they were hard to chew. The edges of the carrot slices were soft and rounded but the fibrous celery retained its shape. It was almost a shame to eat it. She wasn't particularly

hungry anyway, but she was tired of being asked if she lost weight. There's only so much ice cream you can eat.

Flo?

She heard her name called high above her.

Flo? Ready for your sandwich?

Sure.

Can I take your soup?

She looked up and saw Kyle reaching for her cup. I'm not done yet.

Okay. No rush, said Kyle, backing off.

Flo resumed her contemplation of shapes to the clatter of dishes being cleared and Herb yakking away at his end of the table. Herb—blah, blah, blah. What a clown. She missed Helen's cooking. Flo never liked to cook. Damned if she was going to go to work, do the shopping, come home, cook dinner, do the dishes, and then start grading papers while her husband read his newspaper or went to his meetings. Or they went to meetings together and she'd be grading papers past midnight while he slept when they got back. That wasn't the worst of it. The worst of it was listening to him. It's one thing to have a decent brain, which she had to grant he had, but to think you have all the answers is what drove her nuts. That and the fact she didn't find sex with him much good. Maybe what put her off was his smell more than the physical act. It was as if he could never get the cigar smoke off his skin. She saw a dark hand set a plate in front of her with her tuna sandwich. Kyle's hand, she assumed, noticing the light palms. She took a sip of her minestrone, cooled now to room temperature. Bland. Everything was bland these days. They say you can taste food better when you stop smoking, but she never noticed that. Her breathing seemed worse since she stopped, too. She figured It was about time for Dot to show up. Always in the middle of the meal, making more work for the servers. Dot was losing it. Such a conventional woman, she didn't know why Arthur was so taken with her. Why did Dot have to act like a dummy, Flo wondered, when she was no dummy. Then thinking back to her ex-husband again. It wasn't as if she didn't have her meetings too, not to mention her lesson plans for the next day. And then he'd want sex, just like that, usually after he stopped off for a few beers with his buddies. That was his 'equality'. That was his 'liberation'. Sure, you could help raise

money for the Party and then go iron their shirts. But at least they had some hard-headed realism, some discipline, which Arthur could never accept. He could never get with any program. Such an individualist, hung up on humanity's so-called freedom. An egotist. And then to become so petit-bourgeois. Well, what had she done with her life? Try to teach math to kids who couldn't care less, most of them. Summer trips to Italy with Helen. Now sex with Helen, that was liberation. That was freedom and pleasure. But all water under the bridge. What was the big deal, anyway? God, they were all such idiots. Here she was having lunch with a con man, a fat cat, a widow who never worked a day in her life and, if she ever showed up, a government flunky. Enemies of the people, she might once have said. So much for her classless society.

And there was Dot, right on schedule. From across the table Sophie looked at Flo as if trying to get her attention, swiping at her nose. She was weird that one, thought Flo, with all her silly gestures. Always putting her nose into other people's business, and the little crush she had on Herb was so pathetic. At her age she should have more dignity, or better sense. Though some days Flo liked Herb, sort of. He did have moxie. A con man through and through but at least he was honest about it and, she'd have to say, entertaining. But the way he played Sophie like a fiddle. Well, that was Sophie's problem. And there she was again, motioning as if putting something up her nose. Flo raised a spoonful of soup to her mouth and realized what Sophie's gesture meant. The prong of her nasal cannula had slid to the side on her cheek. No wonder she was feeling more breathless. She centered the prongs in her nostrils and felt the flow of oxygen start to dry out the lining of her nose. She tried to take a deep breath but her chest wouldn't move. What she'd give for a smoke. She had no idea how Arthur made it to Spain and back without a cigarette. Everyone there smoked. Just his oppositional nature.

Kyle, I'm done with my soup. Where's that sandwich?

Right in front of you, Flo.

Why didn't you say so?

Can I get you anything else?

Some iced tea.

Flo looked at her tuna sandwich. The bread seemed a little dry. Maybe she'd skip it and save room for dessert. What was Herb saying? Something about an outing? Yes, she'd take the sandwich back to her room. She could throw it out there. Something about the Met. She had no interest in opera. An elitist bourgeois art form if there ever was one. Not quite as ridiculous as ballet, but close. Men loved to watch those dancing girls prance around under the guise of art, half-naked in their tutu's. Guys prancing too, though not exactly her preference. But she could still appreciate the animal power of a good pair of legs. The Soviets, what were they thinking? Didn't all those defectors tell them something? If she were Minister or Culture...

Kyle, wrap the sandwich for me.

Even talking made her breathless. Not one of her better days. Her inhalers didn't do a thing. Cost a fortune and didn't do a thing.

No problem. Anything else?

Ice cream. Any spumoni today?

I think so.

And a cup of coffee.

What about your tea?

Forget the tea.

But if Herb's cheap opera CD's sold, she was all for it. What was that to her? Everything's a commodity. The last thing she wanted was to go back to a nursing home, and if cheating the system—the immoral and criminal system she despised all her life—would keep her out, that would be fair enough as far as she was concerned. End her life in a double occupancy room with a stranger? How bad can you get? There were times she couldn't stand being in the same room with someone she loved, even with Helen, let alone a roommate who'd just had an amputation or a stroke or who knows what. They try their best to cover up the urine smell in those places, but you can't. She would grant there's still life in nursing homes if you looked hard enough, little embers of humanity glowing here and there, which she didn't want to look for if she didn't have to. So she'd go along with Herb's half-baked scheme, with any scheme. What was there to lose? Kyle set her dish of ice cream in front of her. She fumbled for the spoon. It was sweet, but why were the flavors so hard to distinguish? The cheap stuff, probably. What

was Dot saying? Something about snow days in D.C. Like a holiday, everyone out in the streets. Repeating herself again. Dot was a good-looking woman she'd have admit, and maybe that was enough for Arthur. But clueless. She was the enemy in fact, as if it mattered any longer. The congressman this, the congressman that. The man was a crook. The whole system is nothing but legalized theft. Arthur's probably laughing at himself because the one thing he and Herb agree on is that the government, any government, should drop dead. Individualists both of them, in their own ways. No discipline. If Arthur and his ilk had shown some discipline in Spain, things might have been different. No respect for authority. Must be his toilet training. So what was hers? Doesn't matter how old you are, you still have your issues.

They came straight from lunch to debrief the *Magic Flute* expedition in Herbert's living room. It was just the planning committee—Herb, Arthur, Davis and, of course, Sophie. When Arthur finally straggled in Herb slammed the door and called the session to order. He was neither sanguine nor unworried, and let them know it in no uncertain terms.

Sure there were a few glitches, said Arthur, out of breath and leaning on his walker. But what a performance!

That's not exactly the point Artie, said Herb. You're like a dope dealer sampling the merchandise. We're not doing this for kicks, you know. Herb was near the end of his rope. After all the trouble he'd gone to arranging the bus, making sure Davis had the right equipment, rounding everyone up, getting them all in place. To have half the crew botch their assignments was a total aggravation. Especially Arthur, taking his eye off the ball. That's what happens when you work with amateurs, he reminded himself. Or maybe Artie was losing it. FUBAR, but you have to go with what you got. Davis, he said, what's the bottom line here?

The bottom line here, said Davis, is we still don't know what the fuck we doing.

The *Magic Flute* trip was a complete waste of time and money, said Herb. He didn't mention the fact that he'd also had to sit through three hours of musical torture. At least they performed the bloody thing in English, and something about the music wasn't as bad as that Italian crap. But now he'd have to experience the torture an additional time he was not counting on and the upcoming lineup did not look good.

Consider it a dry run, said Arthur.

A dry run? We don't have time for any dry runs, said Herb. And it's too late to get us all to *I Puritani*.

No loss there, said Arthur, winking at Sophia.

Did I mention we're not doing this for fun? said Herb.

Relax Herbie, said Arthur. We still have time to work out the kinks. There's that new one coming up by the Chinese guy.

Oh god no, said Sophie. Not for me. Give me the classics, in Italian preferably. Not this modern nonsense.

It's Placido Domingo, said Arthur.

I don't care, said Sophie. It's still a waste of time.

Hold on a minute, said Davis. It's the dude who wrote the score for *Crouching Tiger*. That's some serious shit, people. I don't mind seeing that.

IT DOESN'T MATTER, screamed Herb. IT'S JUST TO PLAN THE RECORDING.

Calm down Herb, said Arthur. We're not deaf.

Herb bit his tongue. Why couldn't they all just shut up and do what he told them? This group stuff was bullshit as far as he was concerned. In his world there was only one lead pony and that was him. It's the only way things got done right. Here's what it comes down to, he said, calming himself as best he could. We got one more shot at testing, okay?

One more what?

ONE MORE SHOT, ARTHUR, said Herb. THAT'S IT. I DON'T CARE IF IT'S IN SWAHILI. Then there's dress rehearsal with *Eugene Onegin* and showtime with *The Barber of Seville*. That's our payday, baby. So cash it in, 'cause after *The Barber* it's all over. We don't get a second chance. If we blow it we can kiss Greendale good-bye. Are you with me?

Greendale already kissed my ass good-bye, said Davis.

A blessing in disguise, said Herb.

Tell that to my landlord, said Davis.

They all agreed to have a go at *The First Emperor*. Trouble was, it was less than two weeks away. Arthur felt chastened, and rightly so. He knew he'd dropped the ball. He swore he'd find tickets and transportation one way or another. As they all shuffled out the door Herb asked Sophie if she could stay a minute.

If you don't mind, Sophie. I have a few things I'd like to go over with you, he said as he closed the door on the others. Business-wise. Can I get you a drink?

No thank you, Herbert, said Sophie. I'm sorry things didn't work out. You don't look very happy.

I have sherry, said Herb, rummaging through his cupboard. Somewhere. I got it just for you.

Thanks, that's awfully sweet. But some other time. You go right ahead.

Herb poured himself a generous scotch and settled on the sofa.

You still don't look happy, said Sophie, sitting next to him with her back as straight as she could make it, her hands resting lightly on her knees.

I'm not, he said. I hate screw-ups. He watched the ice swirl in his glass for a moment as if it might reveal something to him, his fate maybe, or an idea how to escape it.

There's still time, don't you think?

Not much, said Herb. We're cutting it pretty close.

What about the CD's?

The CD sales? Herb tried not to laugh. Doodly-squat, I'm afraid. Nada. He sighed, took a long deep sip of his drink and stared at the ice in his glass again. And now we have to do another test run with Davis. I didn't budget for that.

Ah, said Sophie. Is that what you're worried about?

Of course. That and a hundred other things.

Well, you don't have to worry about that one. I can cover it. That's not a problem.

Really?

Really.

Sophie, said Herb, almost spilling his drink as he reached out and patted her hand, you're a peach. Did I ever tell you that? You're our angel.

Well, patron maybe.

What would we do without you?

You flatter me, Herbert.

And you'll get back every penny, I swear. With interest. Sure you don't want that sherry? said Herb, bounding off the couch to refill his glass.

Well, maybe just a taste.

Herb could have kissed her. And there was a time when he would have too, without a second thought. Now he was content to simply imagine himself leaning over and pressing his whisky-soaked lips firmly against hers. If you close your eyes you can imagine just about anything. There would be enough talk in the dining room as it was. Clucks from the hen's table. Who cared? Sealed with a kiss, now that was the way to do a deal. He poured 'just a taste' into the sherry glass he bought especially for occasions like this.

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Lauren, Ed's sous chef, looked grim as she burst into Kristin's office to deliver her news. Grim but determined. She was a crusty woman—thin and wiry, blunt, coarse, and good-natured for the most part, though not at the moment. Her dingy chef's coat was splattered with grease spots and sauces that testified to the hands-on nature of her work. The black captain's hat she favored in the kitchen suited her personality better than any skull cap or traditional toque, the same way it suited her leisure-time fashion riding on the back of her husband's Harley. She was in charge of the Greendale kitchen on Ed's days off and relished the temporary rise in status, cruising the dining room like a minor celebrity to chat with residents and their families at the end of each

sitting—an ElderPartners requirement—avoiding Arthur as best she could, asking everyone in her raspy voice with her raspy laugh how they liked the meal.

He's at it again, said Lauren.

And who would that be? said Kristin, breaking off her discussion with Jacqué.

Herbie, who else?

At what again? said Jacque.

The booze, of course.

Are you sure? said Kristin. Because this is a delicate issue. Things could get dicey.

Lauren cleared her throat with a protracted smoker's hack to continue. He fills a water bottle with white wine, she said, and brings it to the table. Then he pours it in his water glass. We're talking a good eight ounces, maybe more. I had everyone in the kitchen take a sniff. It's wine, no doubt about it. And I think he's half-smashed when he gets there. Lauren's attitude was generally live and let live, but Herb had made fun of her tie-dyed Crocs that day and it really burned her. No, her footwear did not look or smell like moldy cheese. In fact her feet were much drier in Crocs than when she wore clogs.

What about the others? asked Kristin.

I don't think so. Palmer was nodding off but I don't think he brought anything with him. As far as Lauren was concerned, Palmer was harmless as an old sheepdog. Always polite, always having something nice to say about her meals, unlike Arthur and his wisecracks. She wouldn't rat out Palmer if he were shooting dope at the table. Or Arthur, out of respect for his age if nothing else. But Herb was too much.

Thanks, Lauren. We'll take it from here.

Lauren stood to take her leave. Don't get me wrong, she said, pausing with her hand on the doorknob. I like old Herbie.

As do we all, said Kristin.

He's not a bad guy, really. I feel kinda sorry for him.

I know. It's a tough situation.

As soon as Lauren was out the door Jacqué whispered, He can't keep doing this. Our reputation is at stake. There was no need to add I told you so.

Kristin wondered if that was genuine concern or one of Jacqué's digs at her decision making. She didn't want to speculate about what was discussed at Jacqué's private meeting with Scott something. If Kristin's management style had a weakness—if that's what you wanted to call it—it was because, she reasoned, it was more a therapeutic approach than the utilitarian models taught in business schools. Yes, Herb had a drinking problem and yes, he refused to accept that fact and yes, he got mad and pushed back when anyone brought it up. But no surprise there, it was all just part and parcel of his illness. She was no hall monitor let alone a cop. She wanted to remind Jacqué these were still adults they were dealing with. On the other hand she didn't want to be an enabler. She knew how easy it was to fall into that trap when you wanted to help people. Rules were rules and she had to be fair to the rest of the residents. Yes, a very delicate issue.

Kristin? I said we're going to get a reputation here.

I heard you Jacqué, said Kristin. Just thinking I want to be fair to everyone. We have to consider both sides of the equation. If we make an enemy of Herb or, god forbid, have to kick him out, how much mischief could he do to our reputation from the outside?

It doesn't matter, said Jacqué. He'll do more harm if he stays. Remember the time he called for Lou when he was so smashed he couldn't pee? And he's getting worse. It's past time we got rid of him. He's bad for business.

Now Jacqué's talking tough, thought Kristin. What's she trying to prove? Jacqué would do backflips to recruit the Unabomber if it made the census look better. So much for 'building and cultivating relationships'.

So what are we going to do here? said Jacqué.

I'll have a talk with him, said Kristin.

Again?

It's called due process, Jacqué. 'Due process' sounded good to Kristin, like she knew what she was doing. That should shut Jacqué up and buy her some time. Temporize long enough, Kristin believed, and things have a way of working themselves out. 'Denial: What's the Problem?'

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Preparations for *The First Emperor* were going smoothly. Arthur followed through on his promises. He arranged for the Greendale bus on short notice and got tickets for everyone, made easier by the fact it was not a popular production with local opera buffs. Davis accepted a flat fee for his services instead of an hourly rate. Sophie was as good as her word with the money. But on the day before the broadcast, not more than ten minutes after Herb allowed himself to indulge in some serious optimism to psych himself up for the next phase of his grand scheme, the phone rang with a call from his eldest son. To ask how things were going. To mention he happened to get a call from the Greendale administration. To report they said something about alcohol in the dining room. Something about past warnings, and the very real possibility—they were so sorry it had come to this, everyone was so fond of his dad—of Herb's lease being terminated for cause if he didn't stop. They wanted me to talk to you, said Rob, and try to straighten things out without making a big deal out of it. So what's with your drinking anyway, Dad?

That's really none of your business, said Herb. I don't know why they dragged you into it. Besides, it's no big deal.

I didn't want to get dragged into it, said Rob. But I don't want to see you kicked out, either. I thought you stopped drinking.

I don't have a drinking problem. And if I want to have a little wine with my meal that's my own damn business.

But there's obviously some kind of problem, said Rob. With Greendale, anyway.

They're full of shit. Now get off my back, will you.

Here we go again.

Go what again?

Nothing, said Rob. I'm done. I told them I'd talk to you, against my better judgment. But that's it. No more. Do whatever the you want. Just don't come to me when you're out in the street. Bye.

Good-b...

Herb stormed downstairs to the executive suite, past Kristin's executive assistant before she had a chance to utter a word, straight into Kristin's empty office and flopped into a chair. Her assistant paged Kristin to give her the heads-up, leaving Herb alone this time. Kristin had no interest in confronting him. She pattered around the memory unit for a while and paid a visit to the kitchen, waiting for the all-clear before returning two hours later when Herb had finally given up. He went back to his room for a cocktail hour that was more generous than usual before attempting dinner without the contents of his water bottle.

Everything set for tomorrow? asked Palmer as Herb arrived at their table a bit unsteady on his feet. Palmer had taken no part in preparations for *The First Emperor*. He was just happy to go along for the ride.

You're damn right they are, he said, pounding his fist on the table. Herb was clearly off his vibe. If everyone does their part for a change, he shouted, looking around the table, we'll be fine.

What's with you, Herb, said Flo, raising her head like a turtle out of its shell. Someone poke a stick in your cage?

For your information, Florence, said Herb, sometimes I don't even know if this cage is worth it. All this work just to stay here? In this dump? Maybe we'd all be better off someplace else.

Sophie didn't know quite what to say. She gave him a pained look that contained a long history of insecurity. But Herb had just about had it. Tired of carrying the load for everyone else, tired of all his exertions being taken for granted, sick of everyone sitting around waiting for him to wave his magic wand and make things happen, sick of all the people who wanted to tell him how to live the little life he had left. They were all chumps, fools, idiots, and had no appreciation for what he was trying to do for them. Even the Greendale administration, dumb as posts, had no idea he was trying to do something that would actually help their business. In fact, he deserved a cut from ElderPartners for every paying resident he kept in the place. Like an agent, a senior-living broker. Say, he reflected, forgetting about Flo and her comments. Hold the phone. That's not such a bad idea. He should go over Kristin's head and take it straight

to those stiffs in Nashville. One line of business feeding the other. Slick, if he did say so himself. He'd have to follow up on that. Herb took a deep breath and settled back in his chair, surveying his companions at the table. I'm just having a bad day, he said, that's all. Tomorrow we're off to the theater. On our way to the finish line. I can feel it. We're gonna score big. All we gotta do is follow through.

Sophie relaxed a bit and dug into her salad. It wasn't her money she was worried about.

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Nothing seemed to bother Palmer much these days. Not so his son, Henry Palmer Sturges IV. The son, with financial power of attorney, had moved the father, Henry Palmer Sturges III, back to New England from Hilton Head when III's wife, IV's stepmother, died. HPS III was not doing well down there. His personal hygiene left something to be desired. And in what seemed like a sign of true grief, he lost his passion for golf, though it had little to do with his wife's death—club selection confused him as he approached the green, paralyzing his game. His golf partners' sniggering humiliated him. But he lost his zest for a lot of things, like eating, and settled into Greendale without complaint. The only thing he insisted on was keeping his car, which he did despite the son's misgivings. His one bedroom unit was sparse but tidy. His daughter-in-law decorated it, arranging old photos in a collage on the wall. Weddings, kids and grandkids, vacations at the beach and trips to Europe, his college baseball team, Lieutenant Commander Sturges and his minesweeper in Newfoundland during the war, his parents fading in sepia tones. The structure and routine in his life at The Commons was a blessing, as he was prone to lose track of things like the fact it was a Met Opera day. He'd been distracted all morning by a phone call with some news. Funny how with so little to do he had so many things to think about. It was hard to keep them all straight. He bumped into Herb in the lobby on his way to lunch.

Where the heck you been, Palmer? said Herb. The bus leaves in fifteen minutes.

Really? Today's Saturday?

All day, pal. Shake a leg. We've had enough snafu's. Herb walked away muttering something about amateurs.

Palmer forgot that everyone was going to the first sitting for lunch before they left for the show. He hurried back to his room to change. He couldn't go in a sweatshirt, but his khakis and sneakers would be fine for a matinee. Instead of afternoon casual though, he opted for his old standby—a pair of wingtips, a white button-down shirt and a blue blazer. It didn't matter that the shoes were dusty and the shirt collar a bit frayed, the blazer fit him remarkably well. He might be overdressed but not by much, and he if he was going to err he preferred it be on the formal side. Who knew what the new dress codes were these days and who cared, certainly not Herb's target demographic showing up for the Metropolitan Opera in HD. After all, he was going to see a costume drama.

In exactly fourteen and a half minutes Palmer was seated on the Greendale bus, still distracted. It wasn't hunger, though he was getting hungry now and wished he hadn't missed a meal. It was that thing that happened earlier in the day. Something about family. His father? He looked out the window at the blank sky. Was it a phone call from his father?

May I join you? Dot was standing in the aisle bundled in her winter coat.

My pleasure, Dorothy, he said. Please do.

She took the empty seat beside him. When we didn't see you at lunch, she said, we thought you weren't coming. Did something happen?

Yes, and it occurred to him what had. The phone call. A baby girl. That was it! He was a great-grandfather. Very curious, he thought. Surprising even. He'd never imagined himself a great-grandfather. How did that happen? Could he really have lived that long? It seemed like only yesterday he was a young lawyer with his whole life ahead of him, strolling to work at his office in Hartford, composing limericks for the boys at the country club. At the club he was known for his limericks as much as for his long, straight drives and steady putts. How did that one go? *There once was a doll from Poughkeepsie...* Something like that.

I'm a great-grandfather.

Really? Congratulations, said Dot. That's wonderful. Boy or girl?

No. There once was a dish from Poughkeepsie.

A girl, said Palmer.

Who could flap her hot lips like a gypsy.

A little baby girl, said Dot. That's so nice. What's her name?

If you act like a jerk. Was that it?

Palmer?

I'm not sure.

If you act like a jerk, then what? Or maybe it was, if you don't snap your cap.

I bet you're tickled pink. A great grandfather.

While she's gumming the works? That has to be it.

If you act like a jerk

When she's gumming the works

I hope they bring her to Greendale soon. I'd love to see her.

She'd tell you you're strictly from Dixie.

She'd tell you you're strictly from Dixie.

Who would tell me? said Dot. Tell me what?

Nothing. Sorry, Dot. I was thinking of something else.

Dot seemed to understand. I'm sure you have a lot to think about, she said. By the way, you look very nice. There's nothing like a blue blazer on a man.

Palmer stared out the window again as the bus started off. He never really cared much about clothes as long as they fit him and the occasion, clothes that wouldn't draw attention to themselves. He wore much the same thing to his office every day for thirty-four years. The king of the one room he surveyed, unlike his home, which if it was a castle felt like it was under siege, hence his hours at the country club and on the golf course, winter getaways to Key West with his pals. His wife was such a nervous Nelly, who wouldn't seek female attention out of town or even at his own club? Maybe he could have treated those ladies better, some of them anyway, but he had legitimate needs. No, that's just an excuse. He should have treated them all better. A flush of shame made him inch away from Dot. It wasn't the sex or even the infidelity that bothered him, it was the deception. The self-deception. The whole time thinking he

was such a gentleman. His so-called conquests. What was wrong with him? Why had he been so selfish? Because he couldn't see what he was doing, that's why. A moral blind spot, him of all people. And you couldn't blame Miriam for her moods really, she wasn't well. A perfectionist. The world could never meet her demands, and as the world failed her she withdrew. That was a social liability of course, which in his circles translated into a business liability as well. His precious career as a successful executive, needing to feel so important. Not that it ever occurred to him to leave her. Someone had to care for Miriam, or at least make sure she was cared for. So now she was a great-grandmother. That would give her one more thing to worry about. He felt a tap on his shoulder.

Palmer, you with us? It was Herb. Even with Palmer's diminished sense of smell he caught the scent of booze and chewing gum on Herb's breath.

I'm on the bus, Herb.

That's the spirit, said Herb, patting him on the back. How 'bout a stick of Juicy Fruit? He held out a pack of gum for Palmer.

No thanks, said Palmer. Chewing gum was strictly forbidden in the Sturges household.

Dot?

Thank you, Herbert.

Dot took a stick, tore it in two, put one half in her mouth and the other in her purse. Palmer watched her chew with a strange fascination.

It's all coming together, said Herb, swaying with the motion of the bus. We just do our job and it's off to the races.

Herb, you have to sit down, said Bob the driver. It's state law, buddy.

Davis and Kyle were waiting for them in the lobby of the movie theater with microphones and recording devices sequestered under their clothes as best they could. Palmer surveyed the milling crowd. His demographic, his peeps. It could have been a reception at his club or a Trinity class reunion. He was feeling quite at home in his blazer. With the words of his Poughkeepsie limerick still in mind he began to wander through the crowd, thinking he might run into an old acquaintance or two when

Kyle took him gently by the elbow and guided him back to the Greendale group for his assignment. Herb was holding forth in discrete whispers as Davis passed out the equipment.

What's this thingamajig? said Palmer.

A sound meter, said Davis.

And this here dingus, said Arthur.

A digital recorder, said Kyle.

Just push 'record' when the music start, said Davis. This button here. Then push stop at intermission. That's all there is to it.

Arthur, you on the trolley? said Herb.

All the way, said Arthur.

Palmer?

Palmer gave a thumbs up. Everything's jake, Herbie.

Ladies?

A-OK, said Dot.

Then let's get to it, said Herb. Places, everyone.

Kyle escorted Palmer upstairs to his seat on the right side of the balcony. Once settled Palmer surveyed the room with the sound meter held firmly in his lap, trying to remain alert but hampered by the hunger that was starting to gnaw at him. He hoped he could get some kind of snack at intermission. The wait dragged on. He had to fight a drowsiness induced by the steady murmur of the audience rising up to him like the whine of cicadas. He recalled his missing lunch and the phone call he'd received that morning. What was it again? His mind returned to a freshly laid groove of memory, still shallow but deepening. His great grand-daughter. And what was her name, Dot asked him. Not the dish from Poughkeepsie, the new baby. They told him something. Morgan? Chelsea? Actually there once was a real dish from Poughkeepsie, a Vassar girl he'd dated. She didn't gum up the works though, quite the opposite unfortunately. A bluenose. Pretty, though. What was her name? Meredith? Something like that. Finally the house lights came down and with it, like the wizard declaiming behind the curtain, the order to silence cell phones booming through the hall so loud and sudden he startled awake. A great grandfather. The idea, strange as it was, kindled a faint glow in

his heart, a spark of tenderness for all newborn babies coming into this bollixed up old world. But from them all, his new descendant included, Morgan or Chelsea or whatever her name was, he felt as remote as if looking at them through the wrong end of a telescope. Everyone, it seemed, kept moving farther far away and was receding ever further, as if the space of human relations kept expanding like the universe of heavenly bodies until, given infinite time, the distance between everyone would be infinite as well. Then what? Meanwhile, back in the early days of this densely packed sublunary world, he hadn't been quite fair, had he. To Harry or to Miriam. He could have been more of a family man, he had to admit, less the corporate attorney. He could have spent more time with his wife and son rather than hanging around the office or the club reciting doggerel. He didn't have to send Harry away to school and leave Miriam more alone than she was already, even if Miriam did enjoy her seclusion and Pomfret was a Sturges family tradition. He said it was for Harry's sake, for his future prospects and all that hooey, but he knew it was for himself. Then one fine day Harry's off to Princeton and that's that, your son's grown up and there's no second chance. The irreversibility of childhood. Or parenthood for that matter. Maybe he was something of a perfectionist, too. Maybe he had been too hard on Miriam all those years for something he didn't like in himself. After all, the poor kid never had the chance for a quality education, which made her seem so refreshing and down to earth, so unpretentious, exotic even, after all those bluenose Vassar girls whose idea of intimacy was talking about the right things. Talking, lawyers do enough of that. Well, tough luck. Spilled milk. That's the breaks.

The screen was down, the broadcast began. Palmer knew there was something he needed to do. Who was that colored boy in the aisle waving at him? Kyle? Making some gesture with his finger like pressing a button. Pressing a button? That was it. Palmer pressed the button on his sound meter and Kyle gave him a smile with a thumbs up. Of course. That's why he was here watching opera. To help. So Herb, Arthur, Flo, and Dot could afford to stay with him at Greendale. But why did they have to resort to such a shady operation? What happened to longterm care insurance, folks? Steadier habits would have spared them this nonsense. True, Arthur had a decent policy that reached its lifetime max two years ago. That was too bad, actuarially speaking. The others should have done a better job of planning ahead, but Palmer was

still happy to pitch in. Not like he had much else to do. Come to think of it, maybe there was. He could start composing limericks again. And why not? The Commons was as good a place for material as any. There was Nina, for starters. He knew he'd be a bit rusty, but so what. *There was an old lady from Greendale*. Easy peasy, that. The big screen caught his attention for a moment. Who was that young woman backstage? Renee what's-her-name, the one Arthur's always taking about, welcoming everybody just like their own Renee at Greendale. Nice gown. *Dada dum dada dum da female*. Something like that. Have to fill it in. Artie's too stiff for this kind of thing, but Herb would get a kick out of it. *Dada dum dada dum dada tale*. Or *tail*. Or maybe *Yale*.

The music began and the numbers on the sound meter jumped. Placido Domingo as a Chinaman singing opera in English? Didn't make sense. Palmer never trusted the Chinks anyway. He always thought opening China was Nixon's biggest blunder, a million times worse than Watergate. He was sure some Chinese people were very nice, not that he had known any, but the Chi-Coms were a treacherous bunch. And then there was Ike, a Republican and a military man to boot, totally spineless when it came to sticking up for Formosa. The opera he'd like to see would be called 'Unleash Chiang', complete with a stagecraft spectacle of mushroom clouds over the mainland. The Joint Chiefs had it right fifty years ago. Now this? The recurring certainty of the world going to hell in a hand basket riled him to the point where he forgot his hunger and his grandchild. But what's the point? Why was he getting so worked up? Don't blow a fuse here, he told himself, it wasn't worth it. He didn't need a stroke over this piece of highbrow Chi-Com agitprop. Not my circus, not my monkeys, thought Palmer, as he tried to relax and concentrate on his rhyme scheme. Let the fools fall for it. He wouldn't be around to see the inevitable disaster. Let his great grandkids pick up the pieces if they were lucky enough to find any pieces left.

*There was an old woman at Greendale
Who thought that she still was a female.
When the elevator closed,
She pulled down her hose,
And said she liked young men from Yale.
And attempted to show off her tail?*

That's sadly the end of my tale.

Ba-da-boom.

Palmer? Wake up Palmer, time to go. Kyle was having an anxious moment as he bent over Palmer's slumped figure in the emptying theater. He slipped the sound meter from Palmer's lap and gently shook his shoulder again. Palmer? This time Palmer opened his eyes. Show's over Palmer, said Kyle. Good job. Time to go home. He helped Palmer to his feet and ushered him downstairs.

The Commoners rendezvoused in the lobby like tired party goers returning from a scavenger hunt. Mission accomplished. Herb looked spent but pleased. Three hours of the strangest garbage he had ever heard, but according to Davis they'd gotten what they needed. They all filed slowly onto the bus. Dot took her same seat next to Palmer for the quiet ride home.

That was nice, don't you think? she said. I loved the costumes.

Palmer nodded. He didn't remember much. Loud drums. Strange harmonies. Songs that seemed as if they didn't know how to end. He'd gotten his snack at intermission and managed to sleep through the entire second half. Outside it was growing dark, a sad winter twilight, but they'd be back in plenty of time for the second sitting and dinner as usual.

I don't know, said Palmer. Too much of that Chinese hoo-ha.

Oh well, said Dot. It's good to get out once in a while.

True, said Palmer, thinking what an exhausting experience the whole thing had been. Thinking, *there was a nice woman named Dorothy.*

At dinner the next night Herb gave an upbeat assessment of their outing. Congratulations team, he said, raising his glass to toast them. We did it. A home run. Now we're sittin' pretty. He took a big gulp of his 'water'. All systems go for the big score, so let's bring it on home. They had six weeks before *Eugene Onegin*, plenty of time to get ready. Six more weeks with the Greendale meter running.

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Vince, ElderPartners VP Northeast Region, noted Jacqu , was nothing if not well-dressed. Loafers gave his outfit a casual slant, but she knew they must have cost as much as his fashionable suit. She estimated he was in his late thirties, a youngish man still making his way up the totem pole. Not all that good-looking though, but the clothes helped. Would she date him if they were not working for the same outfit? Definitely not. Kristin by comparison, sitting next to him at the table, looked parochial even in her pinstriped suit. It didn't help that she was more nervous than usual. Like when the marketing rep showed up she'd overdone the makeup, which was unfortunate because Jacqu  would be the first to admit that Kristin was attractive enough without it. Too bad she was out of her depth in these situations, thought Jacqu . Kristin was perfectly good at operations—Jacqu  would grant her that—but had trouble seeing the big picture. She was too involved with the residents, the strength and Achilles heel of her therapy background no doubt. Jacqu , on the other hand, was ready to rock with the big picture.

I know Scott went over the focus group results, Vince began, brisk and business-like. Jacqu  liked his voice. There was something boyish about it, but different, like maybe he was Canadian or something. So there's no need to rehash that. I'm reaching out here to give the 30,000 foot view and leave you with some key take-aways. Bottom line: ElderPartners sees a sea change coming in the senior care industry.

You mean, said Kristin, arching an eyebrow, we have to skate to where the puck's going to be?

Uh oh, thought Jacqu . Sarcasm was not Kristin's forte. She should know it never goes over well in the workplace. Especially from women. Especially with guys. Or was she over-interpreting? When was the last time she'd heard sarcasm from her boss?

Score! said Vince, shooting a hand over his head to signal a three-point basket. Question: how? Answer: deep dive in the data. He rubbed his hands in obvious relish of deep data dives. Demographic and life style projections, long term of course. We're

not talking old school actuarial tables here. No, no. Much more. Big data on spending habits, personal income, family resources, disabilities, hospitalizations. Food, recreational, entertainment, and spiritual preferences. Granular data. You with me? Actionable analytics. Now we have a robust model of geriatric consumer behavior for today, tomorrow, and decades to come. Proprietary, of course. Not quite at the molecular level, but actionable. Ha, ha.

The flat expressions on the faces of the two women listening so intently did not bode well for his little joke.

He continued, Not yet anyway. Our ElderLab's working on that, adding another ha, ha! that had no more effect than the first. Any questions?

The women shook their heads. ElderLabs, thought Jacqu e? God forbid, was there going to be some biochemistry in her future?

So with a new predictive model to guide us, we've laid out the ElderFutures roadmap with a new set of KPI's. I'll be going over those with you in some detail. All our product lines have been reimagined for next generation customers. In other words, it's a true paradigm shift in assisted living. Memo to the competition: So sorry, ElderFutures is coming to a facility near you.

Vince, obviously pleased with himself, and with paradigm shifts, leaned back in his chair and waved his hand in a strange gesture meant for emphasis.

Jacqu e took it all in like she was in church, her head nodding with ever greater amplitude as she listened. His shoes notwithstanding, she wouldn't be caught dead on a date with this guy although the Canadian thing might be interesting, but now she'd give her eye teeth to be part of his executive team. It's so exciting to hear from thought leaders, she said, genuinely moved. We've always been very customer-centric here at Greendale—wouldn't you say so, Kristin?—but there's a limit to how impactful we can be on our own. LifeSavings didn't have the bandwidth to move the needle. It's like they were so down in the weeds. She glanced at Kristin. That's why the blue-sky culture at ElderPartners is so refreshing. OMG, ElderFutures. I love it!

Well fasten your seatbelts people, said Vince, venturing a smile for the first time since he began. Because Greendale—in fact all our ElderPartners facilities—are going

to have to pivot on a dime. We need to leverage our synergies like now. Being first to market is mission critical here. The whole system is being incentivized around that.

I'm totally onboard, said Kristin, unsmiling. But we don't want to lose sight of our core competencies. She couldn't help wiggling her butt for emphasis, not that anyone could see it.

Of course not, said Vince, but maybe we need to look at those with a new set of eyeballs. When you really drill down, some of them may not be in alignment with the ElderFutures roll-out.

Roger that, said Jacqué. We have to be mindful of our customer journey here in Greenbury. Assisted living is so hyperlocal. When we ramp up we want to really make it pop.

Exactly, said Vince. But, spoiler alert. Before we deploy more assets to Greendale we have to be sure we've built consensus here. It's all hands on deck time. He looked at each of them in turn as if the gleam from his contact lenses was sure to drive their engagement.

So maybe we should dialogue a little around that, said Kristin. Like what the focus groups are telling us. Why don't we unpack the data and see what's really going on, shall we?

Look, said Vince, leaning back in his chair with a hint of annoyance. We know this is going to be disruptive. We're breaking things, that's the point. We expect some pushback. Especially from acquisitions that are still new to the ElderPartners family.

I'm not pushing back, said Kristin, I'm just thinking of the larger ecosystem. We do more than provide hospitality services. We...

Whoa, said Vince, stopping her with outstretched arms like a traffic cop. Maybe we have our lines crossed here. Nobody cares more about the optics than ElderPartners. But negative growth is not an option. We've been cutting Greendale some slack because, you know, you're still getting used to the system. You've done some great work with Mind&Spirit Care, by the way. A model program. You guys could be rockstars. At the end of the day we want all our products to be first in class. But you haven't monetized it. That's the take home message. Your delta for the memory unit

and the facility as a whole has not been moving in the right direction. It's time you broke down some of the old silos around here.

Silos, said Kristin, lowering her voice to where it almost choked off, are not part of Greendale culture. Ask anyone, my door is always open. And I assure you we are totally focused on the bottom line. To be perfectly frank, the price tag that went along with your new product lines was counter-productive. Our residents...

What Kristin is trying to say, said Jacqu , jumping in to save Kristin before she finished what might be a career-limiting statement, is that maybe it would help the rollout if we curated the new products more specifically for our local clientele. Right Kris? That will give us our USP. It's something we've been talking about.

Kris' expression was very dark.

Vince pushed back his chair and sat silent for a moment, perplexed it seemed with a momentary hesitation, as if wondering if quashing this seeming challenge right then and there would be seen an overreaction. He finally sat up and slapped his hands on the table. Why don't we take this offline? he said. I'll be out of pocket for a few days, but ping me next week and we can circle back to this. OK? We need to move on. I want to go over your KPI's.

Jacqu  thought that overall the meeting had gone quite well. For her at least. Kristin's issues were not hers. Truth be told, the last thing in the world she wanted was Kristin's job. She was dying to get out of Greenbury any way she could, bent on landing somewhere, anywhere, hipper and more colorful—which would not be hard—while she was still young. And she was dying to find a place full of likeminded business people with whom she could thought-partner, which might be a little harder. A more target-rich environment for a potential life-partner wouldn't hurt either, with a future as a power couple earning real money. ElderFutures sounded like just the ticket. So maybe she'd swum out of her lane a little, so what? Let Kristin be pissed. No shame in my game, she told herself. YOLO. She had to show Vince that someone at Greendale wasn't stuck in the past.

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What does that mean, “Save Spain from Marxism, vote Communist”? asked Rosemary.

I have no idea, said Jacqu . What made you think of that?

Just something in Arthur’s room. An old pamphlet lying on his desk.

Doesn’t make sense to me.

Me either.

— — —

...

I love you, too.

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Kristin wasn’t sure how pissed she should be. She did know she tended to bend over backwards trying to give people the benefit of the doubt. Was that a sin? But maybe it was time to set firmer limits, on herself as well as others. She and Chuck were getting ready for an early bedtime. She was exhausted after her day with Vince, and Chuck had an early start at his construction site coming up. Was Jacqu  trying to help out or throw her under the bus? Chuck was always her reality check.

I just don’t know what to make of it, said Kristin as she slipped on a tee shirt and running shorts. She second guesses me with the residents. She has her own little meetings with ElderPartners. Now she’s grandstanding for the regional VP. You

should've heard her, like auditioning for a Broadway show. Talk about over-acting. I couldn't understand half the things she said.

She doesn't have to worry, said Chuck. She'll get by on her skin.

On her what?

You know. Her minority status.

Come on, Charles. She's a little over the top, but no need to go there.

You don't think she'd play that card? How many directors of color do you think there are in the ElderPartners system?

I have no idea.

Think diversity initiatives. She has you at a disadvantage.

No, she doesn't. Maybe it's unfair, but ElderPartners has to keep the preferences of their customer-base in mind and their preferences are very old school. It's all about filling slots. You think they're going to jeopardize that for some phony diversity initiative?

Don't fool yourself, said Chuck. They way they discriminate against white people these days. You should see all the jobs they give to minority contractors. By law.

That's the government, Chuck. You hate everything they do. I don't think ElderPartners cares one way or the other. They just care about the money. LifeSavings was the same way, only maybe not so much about the money. Or maybe they were, just not as good at it. We're all just people, you know. Kristin got in bed and pulled the covers to her chin.

OK, but I'm warning you, said Chuck. Don't be surprised when she gets your job.

The only way she's getting my job is if I quit. Which I have no intention of doing.

Chuck turned off the light and slipped into bed in his boxers. Kristin wondered what he was thinking as he lay beside her with his hands clasped behind his head. It's not like he was prejudiced, she mused. Well, maybe a little. But he was only trying to look out for her. How secure was her job, really? She felt a brief flutter in her chest and a tightening of her neck. When the next moment Chuck rolled to her side of the bed he met a limited reception.

Good-night hon, said Kristin, turning to give him a quick peck on the lips. I think you're very sexy. Chuck moved closer in a kind of snuggle embrace. She felt a bulge against her thigh through his shorts. We'll fool around real soon, I promise. She gave him another quick kiss with lips closed tight and tongue held firmly in place. I love you, she concluded. He rolled back to his side of the bed with a grunt of acceptance, giving her butt a good squeeze on the way. When Kristin finally dozed off she was recalling Vince's words about ElderFutures and paradigm shifts. The key performance indicators were going to be a tough reach. Was that the future she wanted to be part of? She had two weeks to put together Greendale's improvement plan. It looked like she could kiss her bonus good-bye, and this one would be a wide, wet, open-mouth kiss. So big deal. In the scheme of things it didn't really matter. Or maybe it did. A little. But she hoped Chuck wouldn't be too disappointed. No, he'd be okay. He was her anchor. What was she worried about? Her ego, her lesser self, was getting the better of her. Just let it be, she told herself as she finally drifted off. All shall be well, she recited, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.

Eugene Onegin, said Sophie over lunch, is not one of my favorites. A pathetic little story. I prefer something with a grander sweep.

Whatever, said Herb. We still have to get it right. Then we'll be ready for the Figaro thing.

Yes, *The Barber of Seville*, said Sophie. Hardly a grand sweep. But at least it's amusing.

Herb's familiarity with *The Barber* came strictly from Warner Bros. He could picture Bugs Bunny conducting at the Hollywood Bowl, and Sylvester lipping his Figaros on a backyard fence. Oh yeah, he said, it is amusing. Elmer Fudd and his cue ball head worked over by Bugs in *The Rabbit of Seville*.

Sophie gave Herb a long look across the table. He's so fair complexioned, she noted, blue-eyed and blond—at least he must have been when he had hair—though he'd assured her there was no German in his ancestry, just Welsh and Dutch. He could have lied, of course. He did have a tendency to stretch the truth, and he could be a bit coarse at times. Why did she like him? she wondered. Was it only because he was so unlike all the men in her family? Which was so clichéd but still reason enough. Or was it because she felt sorry for him, the way you'd feel sorry for a kid who tried too hard to make friends by showing off. Always trying to impress, and never taking advice from anyone. In other words, a fool. But they were all fools on this ship of old fools, some cuter than others, some with a bit more flair, each headed straight for their own little iceberg. There was a flower display in the lobby that morning for Nina. An ambulance had come for her in the middle of the night, and that was the last they saw of her. The middle of the night. That's when they come for you here, too. But music was her salvation, not that she was particularly religious. She observed the High Holy Days, of course. Not that she was particularly musical, either. It wasn't long after her family settled in the Bronx that her father started giving her piano lessons, and it became obvious when he slammed the fall board on her fingers, having run out of what little patience he had for her mistakes, that she did not have a future as a musician. Yes, her father could be mean. People talk nostalgically about the extended family, but when the *pater familias* is a tyrant it loses its appeal. Nuclear was fine with her.

It's decadent, coughed Flo from her wheelchair.

What is? said Sophie.

Opera, said Flo.

You always say that, said Arthur. So why do they make such a big deal out of it in Cuba?

Because it's open to the people, said Flo.

Sure, said Arthur. Because the people need some escape from their misery. The more decadent the better.

Escape from what? Decent health care and education?

From Big Brother.

I'm the one who needs an escape from big brother, said Flo, her neck straining with each breath.

Ha! You love Big Brother.

Even though she didn't quite get what they were bickering about, Sophie found the exchange amusing despite her anxiety over Flo's health. Sibling rivalry after all these years. And something to do with their old political beliefs, obviously. She'd run into her share of street-corner Marxists growing up in the Bronx, and later at CCNY. Though with the Cold War coming on when she was in college, it was less fashionable than it had been ten years earlier. And to her father the refugee, the immigrant businessman, Marxists were loudmouth vermin just one step below fascists. She hated politics, a sentiment she shared with Herb. Herb's approach to life, as far as she could see, was to put on a good show, make a ton of money, and have as much fun as possible doing it. It was time she let herself go and had some fun of her own. Who cared what her kids thought? She'd been a dutiful wife and a decent mother, and enjoyed both roles well enough. No complaints, but that was then. Now they could just kiss off if they had a problem with her fooling around a little. Platonically, of course. Probably. But maybe she was getting ahead of herself, though she suspected something was up with her son and daughter. They were both coming for Sunday dinner and as far as she knew there was no holiday, birthday, or anniversary to celebrate. They said they just wanted to drop by. All a bit suspicious, not that she wouldn't be delighted to see them. And maybe Flo should turn up her oxygen. She didn't look so good these days, especially when Arthur got her riled up.

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Halley and Ted made their way to Arthur's table on their second-sitting lunch rounds. As Ted's bulk loomed over Flo hunched in her wheelchair the conversation, never too brisk to begin with, stopped completely.

You ready for the big storm? said Ted, no longer bothering to ask about the meal when Arthur was present, despite the ElderPartners requirement.

What big storm? said Palmer.

I like snowstorms, said Dot. When it snowed in D.C. it was like a holiday. Everyone was out in the streets.

Flo rolled her eyes.

Looks like this one could be bad, said Ted. That's what they're saying, anyway.

It don't make no difference to me, said Arthur. I'm not going out. And last I heard, Greendale had generators.

Sure, Artie. We'll be okay, said Herb, as long as people can make it to work.

Some staff are sleeping over, said Ted.

Great. Tuna sandwiches for dinner, said Arthur.

Arthur, you're an optimist, said Ted.

And don't forget, said Halley, wagging her finger. After the storm. Valentine's Day. We want your wedding pictures, everybody. Just give them to Renee at the front desk. Last year we had such a nice display we want to do it again. I'm looking at you, Arthur. She started to give his shoulders a gentle message that made him cringe the instant he felt her touch.

A wedding picture? thought Arthur as he limped his way to the elevator. Last year he couldn't find one, or maybe didn't want to. As a rule he didn't like photographs. They only captured the moment. As a painter, as an artist, he felt there's something false about that, something dishonest. But he'd been thinking of Dot, and thinking about Dot made him think of his wife, until he was unsure which one he was thinking about, not that it mattered. When he got to his room he lay on his bed examining the portraits he'd painted. Yes, Dot did resemble Marie a bit. Her mouth and chin. Or was it just his imagination? The portrait of his wife in a white cloche hat, he remembered, was painted from a photo. He still had it in a scrapbook somewhere. And his wedding album? Should he even bother looking? Why?

Here, I found something. Arthur leaned on his walker by the desk in the front lobby waiting for Renee to get off the phone. No new flower displays, always a relief.

He glanced out the entranceway. No sign of Ted's blizzard. So what was Ted taking about? He just make stuff up, like he did with his cooking.

Hi Arthur, said Renee. What brings you to this neck of the woods?

Arthur reached in a pouch hanging from the walker's crossbar and pulled out an old framed photograph.

Arthur, you found it! Let me see.

He gave the photo one last look and handed it to Renee as if relinquishing his private thoughts. Her eyes widened with delight.

Arthur you're amazing, said Renee. Just look at that handsome couple. She called to two nurses aides who were chatting in the hallway. Ladies, come look at this. Can you believe it?

Arthur went sliding toward the dining room. Remember to come by tomorrow and see the display, Renee called after him. We'll put yours right in the middle. Beautiful. We have more pictures than last year. And wait till you see the flower arrangement.

He waved to her without looking back and continued down the corridor. It was tough going. Halfway to the dining room his legs gave out and he managed to collapse in one of the chairs that lined the wall. While he waited for his strength to return he nodded at the slow procession of walkers and wheelchairs that crept past him on their way to lunch, greeting each passer-by by name. Herbert spotted him from the back of the queue and took a seat at his side. Herb was still a decent walker when he hadn't overdone the self-medication.

Why do they bunch up? said Herb. I hate lines.

Me too, said Arthur. It takes them longer to set up every day. Another enhancement we're paying for.

Well, come on. They're letting people in.

Hold on a minute, said Arthur. My legs gave out.

Again? said Herb. You should see a doctor about that, Artie.

I did. The back surgeon said I needed an operation. My cardiologist said it would kill me.

There you go. Old age ain't no place for sissies.

She got that right.

They sat until the hallway emptied, then Arthur decided to give it a go. He rocked forward and gripped his walker with all his strength. His legs sagged a bit, wobbled, but held. Steady now. If they went, he knew, it wouldn't matter how much money he had in the bank or how many marbles he had left, he'd be kissing Greendale good-bye for good.

Ready for dessert? Kyle stood by with pen and pad at the ready.

An easy order. Spumoni for everyone. He didn't even bother to write it down.

Arthur was more morose than ever, despite the prospect of his favorite ice cream. He almost cringed when he saw Ted and Halley heading toward them right on schedule, joking and prodding as they stopped at other tables along the way. Herb and Dot didn't seem put out. They never did. They gave their usual bland compliments on the food, but Arthur had little to say one way or the other about salt-free fare or Ted's false weather alarm.

I saw your wedding picture, Arthur, said Halley, moving in for a shoulder rub. What an awesome bride and groom! And I have Sophie's and Herbert's, too. We're going to have such a special Valentine's Day. And don't forget the wine and cheese reception. Flo, Dot? We don't have anything from you. It's not too late.

No thank you, said Dot. I'd rather not.

What? said Flo to Arthur. What's she talking about?

Wedding pictures, said Arthur, trying his best to endure the pressure of Halley's fingertips.

Wedding pictures? I threw out my wedding pictures. Years ago.

It wasn't the happiest marriage, said Arthur.

Oh, said Halley, loosening her grip. I understand. No problem, Flo. But everyone's still invited to the reception. Three o'clock. Wine and cheese. It's going to be awesome.

Since when is Valentine's Day just about husbands and wives? said Herb.

Since we moved into this place, said Arthur.

Dot gave Herb what might have been a wink. With her drooping eyelids it was hard to tell.

Hearts were everywhere in the Greendale activity room that afternoon—on candy, balloons, garlands, floor decals, napkins, paper plates. A young man with an acoustic guitar played early Beatles tunes in the corner. Herb was already on his second glass—plastic cup rather—of Rosé by the time Sophie came down, fully rouged.

They found cigarettes in Flo's room, said Sophie.

Great, said Herb. One of these days she's going to blow herself up or burn the place down. Here, try this stuff.

Dot came up to them with her diet soda. Have you seen Arthur?

He's in his room, said Herb. He said he's not feeling well.

The eastern half of the state managed to escape the worst of Ted's Valentine's Day blizzard. Large swathes of the country though, from Ohio to Georgia to Maine, were shut down earlier in the week. Temperatures in town still hovered below freezing but the sun was out and roads were clear. Rachel and Peter, Sophie's daughter and son, had no trouble getting to Sunday dinner as planned. The first thing Sophie noticed was they came without the grandkids. That raised questions right off. The kids weren't feeling well, the parents said. They were lucky to find a sitter. It was flu season, and they didn't want their children responsible for a Greendale influenza outbreak. Disappointing, nonetheless. Sophie was more interested in her grandkids than in either Rachel or Peter. But even though she got her flu shot on schedule as she did every year, it was hard to argue with their excuse. It was true. Kids were walking virus cultures, cute little death machines for doting octogenarians.

I hope you two didn't bring anything, she said. They had no cough, no sniffles, Sophie noted after careful inspection. Still they chose to eat at their own table apart

from the other 'Commoners' for the sake of infection control as much as privacy. The table was tastefully set with flowers and a white tablecloth. Both entrees, the veal piccata and the halibut, were quite good. There were chocolate eclairs for dessert. Ted was duly informed what a nice dinner it was. The residents seemed, at least to the families visiting, to be getting their money's worth. Well cared for, anyway.

Mom, we need talk about a few things, said Rachel as they lingered over a cup of coffee.

We do? Like what? said Sophie.

Not here. Let's go to your room.

So something was afoot, as Sophie suspected.

They retired to the living room of Sophia's cozy unit and arranged themselves face to face for the coming discussion. Sophie couldn't help but think the worst. Was someone getting divorced? Did someone have cancer?

Well, here we are, said Sophie. So what is this about? You're being very mysterious.

We need to discuss your finances, said Rachel.

That was the last thing Sophie expected. Her finances had never been an issue. Why, she said, what happened? I can still afford to live here, can't I?

Of course, said Peter. You're fine. It's just that we don't understand some of those checks you wrote. Like to this Operantics LLC. Over four thousand dollars.

Oh that, said Sophie. It's just a small investment.

In what?

In opera. A little company that sells opera recordings.

It seems fishy to us, said her son. We're afraid it might be some kind of scam.

Come now, said Sophie. I know the owner personally. He's a very nice man here at Greendale.

We wanted to talk to you about that, too.

What's there to talk about?

This nice person, said Rachel. Herbert? He seems to be very friendly with you lately.

That's right, said Sophie, annoyed by the implication. We're good friends. You've met him. What does that have to do with anything?

It's just, said Peter. How well do you know him, Mom, really? And what's he doing with all the checks you're writing?

All I know, said Sophie, is I enjoy his company. He's an interesting person. And I'm not the only one investing in his little venture. A number of very respectable Greendale residents are involved.

Look, Mom. Here's our concern, said Peter. He pursed his lips and glanced at the floor a moment, a man embarrassed by what he was about to say. It's like, he continued, when people are living by themselves. Without a partner, I mean. It's only natural they look for companionship. We understand that. But he hasn't asked you to... These things can happen in places like this, you know...I mean, you're not thinking of...

What we want to know, said Rachel, losing patience with her brother, is has there been any talk of marriage?

Sophie hesitated a moment to make sure she heard them right. Talk of what? she said.

Marriage, said Peter. We were just wondering if you and he might've talked about, you know, getting married or something.

Ah! So that's all it is, said Sophie. You silly, silly children. You think Herbert's after my money and there won't be as much left for you. Well put your little minds at ease because I haven't lost mine. He has never mentioned it, and I have no plans to marry anyone.

Good, said Rachel. Her relief was palpable. That's all we wanted to know.

We're only thinking of your welfare, Mom. Please don't take offense, said Peter.

I'm trying not to, said Sophie, but it's rather hard. I do plan to have a good time while I can. And I'll spend my money any way I please. There'll be plenty left for you, so I don't want to hear any more of this nonsense. Let's just enjoy the afternoon together, shall we?

It was time for *Eugene Onegin*, courtesy once again of The Metropolitan Opera Live in HD. Arthur had been looking forward to it for some time. Tchaikovsky was okay in his book, but it was the prospect of seeing Renee Fleming play Tatiana that excited him. What a doll. He tried to press his enthusiasm onto Dot, who only gave him an ambiguous smile. He was miffed that he'd have to pay attention to his recording tasks rather than simply letting himself go, immersing himself in the performance the way he'd experienced *The Magic Flute*.

The Operantics rendezvoused with Davis and Kyle in the theater lobby as before. They all knew the drill. Davis handed out their portable devices and sent them off to seats he'd assigned for the best sound mix. He was still in the lobby going over arrangements with Herb when two police officers appeared, holding a brief conversation with an older woman by the ticket window. Herb, half soused and pleasantly so, having fortified himself with a few extra snorts before boarding the bus, wondered what on earth could have brought the local police to an opera matinee.

I have the distinct impression, said Herb, hyper-enunciating each word, that those two officers of the law are looking in our direction.

No shit, said Davis. They be checking us out. Stay cool, Herbert.

An usher and the two uniformed officers, a policeman and policewoman, walked up to Davis as if Herb wasn't there.

Can I see your ticket? the usher asked Davis.

Davis showed him his ticket.

So you're an opera fan? said the male officer, eyeing Davis' hip hop attire.

I like all kinds of music, said Davis.

That's real nice, said the officer. You know that recording devices are strictly prohibited, right?

I ain't recording nothing, said Davis.

What's that under your shirt?

That's my business.

That's our business, too. We're going to have to search you. Step outside, please.

Hold on there officer, said Herb, slipping between them. I can vouch for this young man. He's with me.

Nobody asked you to vouch, sir, said the policewoman. Please stand back. She turned to Davis. Let's go. Each officer took Davis by an arm and escorted him out of the theater to their squad car, bent him over the hood and patted him down.

What's this? said the policeman, taking a small device from Davis' pocket.

A sound meter, said Davis. It don't record.

This yours?

Of course it's mine.

Where'd you get it?

Radio Shack.

Do you have a receipt?

Receipt? You crazy? I bought it a year ago.

We'll have to check this out downtown.

Herb caught up with them as they were loading Davis into the squad car.

What's going on here? he demanded, losing his boozy nonchalance.

We're taking your friend downtown.

On what charges?

Possession of stolen property.

That's bullshit! yelled Herb, slurring his words as much from outrage as alcohol. Come on, Davis. We're going. He made a clumsy move to grab Davis's arm, but Davis saw him coming and dodged away.

Stand back, sir, or you're coming with us, said the policewoman.

This shit happen all the time with these muthafuckas, said Davis, trying so hard to check his anger he forgot to code switch. Get the fuck outta here, Herbert. The officers cuffed Davis and shoved him in the back seat. Take care of business, y'hear? he shouted as the door of the police car slammed shut.

Arthur watched the whole thing unfold from the lobby. The search, the arrest, and Herbert weaving his way back to the theater. What a mess. He was tempted to say to hell with the whole crazy business and dump his recorder in the trash.

You okay? said Arthur.

I'm fine, said Herb, almost shaken back to sobriety. Hurry up and take your seat, Artie. It's showtime, for god's sake.

So Arthur slid his way inside and took his seat. He looked across the room and spotted Dot dozing on the other side. She looked so peaceful and alone there, like she was perfectly fine all by herself wherever she might be. Kyle was in the aisle trying to get her attention, which reminded him of his assignment. He felt in his jacket pocket for the recorder. What the hell, he thought, concealing the device in his lap as he hit the start button. Things may be all balled up, but if this was the end of Herb's scheme it wouldn't be through any fault of his.

Two days later Arthur caught up with Herb for a private chat in The Commons' sitting room. A freezing February rain beat against the windows as if someone was pelting the glass with BB's. A fake fire in the fake fireplace gave off an imagined heat. Herb looked up from his magazine as Art fell into the chair next to him. So what did they charge him with? asked Arthur.

Herb glanced at Renee's desk in the lobby before answering. The coast was clear. Unauthorized operation of a recording device in a motion picture or live theater in the third degree, he whispered. Section 275.32.

THAT'S BALONEY, said Arthur

Artie, keep it down, said Herb, as Renee, he imagined, pricked up her ears. Section 275.32 is just a violation, he continued, leaning closer to Arthur. They tried to get him on a 275.15, manufacture or sale of an unauthorized recording of a performance in the second degree, but it wouldn't stick. That's an A misdemeanor. It would've cost us a pretty penny, not to mention jail time for Davis. Christ, we didn't budget for this crapola.

So that's it, eh? said Arthur. He paused thoughtfully and looked at the fire. Game over. It was a nice try, Herbert. Off to the nursing home. *C'est la vie, mon ami*. By the way, from what I saw you're lucky they didn't arrest you for obstructing a police officer.

Game over? Oh ye of little faith, said Herb, spreading his arms in mock supplication before raising them in defiance. We're just getting started, Artie. The recording worked out fine. Better than fine, wait till you hear it. Those boys know what they're doing.

But how can we finish the job? They're on to us.

On to Davis, said Herb. Not to a nice bunch of honkies from the old folks' home. I'm afraid Kyle's out too, at least at the theater. No way we can chance it with another black kid. Herb seemed to be thinking out loud. But we've had enough practice. I think we can handle it by ourselves now.

Honkies?

Honkies, Arthur. Ofays. Protective coloration. That's our edge. They won't see us coming.

After lunch Arthur inched his way upstairs with Herb to listen to the newly mixed *Eugene Onegin* tracks. Kyle, working the computer in Herb's living room, took off his headphones and swiveled to greet them. Hey Arthur, he said, check this shit out. Arthur set his walker in the corner and took a seat on the other side of Kyle from Herb.

Is it true, said Kyle, handing Arthur a set of headphones, you used to be a Communist?

A WHAT? said Arthur, shouting to be heard over the high-pitched squeal of his hearing aids as he removed them to don the phones.

A COMMUNIST.

A COMMUNIST? WHAT ON EARTH GAVE YOU THAT IDEA? said Arthur. I WAS A PHARMACIST. Arthur was still shouting, though the squealing had stopped.

Herb told me that, said Kyle. Right, Herb? Something about going to that Spanish thing when you was young.

No, that's Flo, said Arthur, back to his normal speaking voice. I never liked Communism, or Communists.

Flo? said Kyle. I thought she was a teacher.

You told me you were over there, said Herb. In Madrid or someplace with the Reds.

Yeah, but it was Barcelona with the anarchists.

Same thing, said Herb.

God no, said Arthur. The Communists were a bunch of saps. The American ones, anyway.

Anarchist? Phew, said Kyle. Like everybody going crazy and throwing bombs and shit? That was you? Arthur, excuse me for saying this, but you don't look like the type.

What type? said Arthur. And where'd you get that baloney? I don't mean about me, I mean about everybody going crazy. They teach you that in school?

Yeah. Y'all carrying them black flags and everything. It's kinda cool.

Anarchists were a bunch of terrorists, said Herb. Foreigners. Wops, mainly.

I was born right here in Greenbury, said Arthur. And I wasn't a bomb thrower, I was a libertarian.

The hell you say, said Herbert. I'm the libertarian here. I love this country. Anarchists were trying to blow it up.

Society seeks order in anarchy.

It what? said Kyle.

Nothing, said Arthur. Let's hear the opera.

So Flo was a Commie, said Herb. My, my. No wonder she doesn't like men.

Arthur felt Herb's comment unworthy of a response. He strapped on his headphones, eager to leave old politics behind. When the music started he shut his eyes and listened. His smile grew wider with each song. Renee Fleming, what a dame.

Herb gave Kyle a thumbs-up. Mitt me kid, said Herb, I think he likes it.

Kyle gave Herb a fist bump. Look at him, said Kyle. Sure he do.

Only two weeks to go before *The Barber of Seville*, so why did everyone seem to be drifting away? It was as if now that showtime was at hand no one could be bothered. Was it just his imagination? Herb tried his best to vibe up the Commoners, but his cheerleading at the dinner table fell flat. Only a few mumbled responses, heads down avoiding eye contact. Were they ill?

Then Dot summed it up. Why make such a big deal out of it all the time, Herbert? she said, raising her eyelids in a gesture more concise than any shoulder shrug. It's not like the world is coming to an end.

Meaning what? Herb wondered. He was overdoing it? Easy for her to say from her retired world of congressional make-believe. When's the last time she had to pump people up? And sitting across from her, Arthur just grunts and nods. When's the last time he disagreed with Dot? Flo, down the table, still fiddling with her nasal prong. One day she's going to strangle herself on that tubing and it'll serve her right. Palmer's off on his own planet, and even Sophie is acting strange. What a bunch. When's the last time they took a chance on anything?

So Herb went back to his apartment and opened a bottle of Bacardi to while away the afternoon. He'd been at this juncture before, too many times—the letdown, the brooding, the rum—and he was pissed. What was the point of depending on other people? Christ on a crutch, in the end they always disappoint you. He wanted to kick himself for thinking this time would be different. After his second drink he decided to bring a nice bottle of Bordeaux to dinner and let it rip. Screw the white wine spring water dodge. What was there to lose, really? In this dump? Ha! Screw you, Kristin Pizzutto, and Halley's little dog too. Fortunately for his future at Greendale, a few drinks later he was snoring in his armchair and missed the evening meal altogether. He woke to loud knocking on his door. It was Yolanda dropping off a sandwich. At least the technical team was still on the job.

Sophie asked me to bring you something, said Yolanda, standing there in her street clothes.

Herb stared at her from the other side of the doorway, bleary-eyed and muddled as his Mojitos. Is that a new tattoo? he said, unsteady, pointing to the left side of her neck.

No, same old one, said Yolanda.

A black rose. Very nice.

You like it? she said, turning to the side so he could get a better look.

The death of love. The love of death.

It's for my kids' father. And I think it looks pretty, too. Can I get you something else?

No...not really. Thank you, Yolanda. Herb was about to invite her in for a Cuba Libre, but fortune smiled on him in its strange way once again and he couldn't hold the thought long enough.

When next morning Herb awoke, or came to, too late for breakfast, he was exhausted from a night of fragmented sleep, money worries, half-dreams, arthritis pain, heartburn, muscle jerks, recurring memories of shameful acts committed eons ago (if at all), self-loathing, and his fear of a painful cancer death, all superimposed on a general undifferentiated dread. In other words, he was hungover. Oh, well. He popped an antacid and two ibuprofen, washing them down with a glass of tomato juice well past its sell-by date. This too shall pass, he said to the cadaverous reflexion staring back at him in the bathroom mirror. Until it doesn't. Of the jumbled mess he'd made of his cognitive processes, one thought still managed to stand out. Sophia. He couldn't afford to lose her. The others could come and go, but without Sophie onboard all would be lost. He'd come to rely on her for more than just her money, her opera knowledge, and her silly girlish enthusiasm. He'd come to rely on her, he realized as he fought a wave of dizziness and nausea, for her presence. But why? Because she seemed to appreciate his company? His schtick? He turned on the TV and lay down on the sofa, trying to sort it all out through the cloud that lay on his bruised synapses. His schtick was pretty darn good though, he had to admit. Kudos to Sophie for having the good taste to appreciate it. If he could only pull this thing off, he thought, if he could just

make this one last score. His head began to swirl again. A sour taste erupted in his mouth. He sat up slowly and there in front of him on the screen was Anbar province, dry as toast, flat as a board. Now that's one sad looking place, he thought, lingering on the video image of Humvees snaking through the desert. Wherever the hell it is. For a moment the Metropolitan Opera seemed as far away. Then he noticed he was still in his clothes from yesterday. Good thing, he thought, looking on the positive side of last night's debacle, I didn't make it to dinner with a bottle of wine. Bad move, that. He stripped off his clothes. Bracing himself on the walls and furniture with each step, he made his way to the safety of the bathroom's grab bars for a nice warm shower and a few choruses of *Moonlight in Vermont*.

Clean and clothed, Herb revived enough to test his balance in the hallway. Not bad, he concluded, all things considered. He wandered gingerly downstairs a bit too early for lunch, avoiding any sudden head movements, and decided to wait in the front sitting room. He entered to the sound of familiar voices—Dot, Sophie and Flo deep in conversation that seemed to stop the moment they spotted him. They waved him over nonetheless.

We were just talking about you, said Dorothy.

Uh oh, thought Herbert, outnumbered. It was too late to make a graceful exit, though it would have been unlike him to pass up an audience, hungover or not.

We missed you last night, said Sophie. And at breakfast. We were hoping nothing happened to you.

Not when we're so close to the—Flo paused to cough and take a deep breath—to the grand finale, she said, wiping her chin with a tissue.

You look rather peaked, Herbert, said Sophie. Aren't you feeling well?

I'm perfectly fine, my dear, said Herb. He gave her a salute and a curt bow before dropping into a chair. Just needed a little time to myself. I took a sandwich in my room last night. This morning I was going over the marketing plan and lost track of time. How are you ladies doing? I am so pumped. Just one week to go. I can't wait. Jaws will drop around here when they find out what we pulled off.

But Herb, said Dot. Isn't this something that, you know, you said we should keep to ourselves?

Absolutely. I mean, jaws would drop if they knew.

It's the bees' knees, giggled Sophie. Isn't that what you call it, Herbert?

Right, Sophie. The ants' pants.

There was commotion in the hallway. The first sitting crowd were filing out at last. The four of them rose instinctively to take their place in line while the dining room staff rushed to clear and set the tables. The three women made a circle around Herb as if to guide him along as they chatted.

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They're doing what? said Kristin, brushing a loose strand of hair from her face.

Upgrades, said Jacqué. Jacqué's hair stayed right where it was.

The two women were on their way to the Kountry Kitchen to judge the Krazy Kookie Kontest.

Ten million dollars' worth?

Something like that.

And we can't even get a new roof.

River Terrace, another ElderPartners acquisition in Mangunet County, was getting some upgrades.

How do they rate? asked Kristin.

I don't know. I hear they're expanding the kitchen and adding a new activities wing. With a pool.

A pool? In AL? That doesn't make sense. I'll call Bill Beltzer, said Kristin, and see what I can find out. Strange, I saw him last week at the association meeting and he didn't mention a thing. Who do you know over there?

I used to date their CFO.

Bingo.

It didn't end well.

OK, un-bing that. What about their marketing director?

Don't know. They just hired someone new.

Perfect. So go over and welcome him to the neighborhood.

Her.

The bake-off contestants were stationed around the Kountry Kitchen's circular tables in front of plates piled high with their creations. Their names and the names of their cookies were printed in large Gothic letters on signs that Halley placed on little stands. Snickerdoodles, whoopie pies, kiss cookies, snowballs, macaroons, even tassies. Not a humble chocolate chip or oatmeal raisin in the bunch. Serious baking. The room smelled of ginger and nutmeg. Every year the competition seemed to get more fierce. Kristin looked around and waved to the seated confectioners, resigning herself to an extra workout or two in the coming weeks as she began to appreciate the amount of sampling she was about to perform.

It's time, said Halley, quieting the room with a blast of fanfare from her laptop. But first give yourselves a big round of applause, everybody! Yay! Greendale's Fourth Annual Krazy Kookie Kontest is about to begin! Judges, are you ready?

Thumbs up. Ted, Lou, and Lauren stood at the other end of the room, pads and pencils in hand.

Then off we go, said Halley. And may the best cookie win.

Something's not right here, thought Kristin, not thinking of the contest as she made her way around the tables. River Terrace, friend or foe? She bit into a whipped shortbread cookie, the calorie meter on her tongue registering off the chart. She forced her mind back to the cookies. That, at the moment, was her job. And she would do it damn well.

Very nice, Betty. Even better than last year, if that's possible.

More butter, said Betty. That's the key.

So why the hell did ElderPartners want to upgrade River Terrace in the first place? Kristin wondered, wiping a crumb from her lips. It seemed like a white elephant to her.

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Saturday morning, March 24. The big day at last. Arthur hardly slept thinking of all that was riding on the afternoon's events, although causality was hard to assign as poor sleep had been his norm for the past forty years. He sat up and looked out his bedroom window through the reflected light of yet another blue hour. There they were, the oaks scattered on Greendale's parklike grounds, large brown sticks whose tips swayed in the breeze. His old friends. What were they saying? Above them the sky was clear. Thank god, he thought, we lucked out. A mild day in a month where anything goes. There was enough to do without worrying about the weather. Plus, he reminded himself, they were on their own this time. No Davis, Kyle, or Yolanda holding their hands. Let's get it over with, he resolved, one way or the other, addressing his wife through her portrait on the wall opposite his bed. Funny how she was always right there as if she never left. Eight years? That's nothing. A blip. He might as well be waiting for her to get home from her bridge club. He was still careful not to speak to her out loud, of course, even when alone. Dead is dead, and telepathy worked just fine. He knew her responses without her having to say a word. This morning, for instance, she gave him her blessing as he slapped his walker down the hall on his way to the dining room. She seemed as excited as he was. He wanted to be sure he got it right, and so did she. Which begged the question, was it worth all this trouble? Because, he thought, struggling to get into the elevator before the doors closed, given the choice he would rather not be bothered with any funny business Herbie or anyone else might cook up.

Everyone was in the dining room but Palmer.

Not again, said Herb.

You can't count on Palmer, said Flo.

He's just a little slow, that's all, said Dot. But sometimes he forgets.

I'll make sure he's here for lunch, said Yolanda, pouring Arthur's coffee. The first sitting, right?

Arthur took a good look at Herb. Herb was subdued, almost grim. But to Arthur's relief, Herb's eyes didn't seem more bloodshot than usual. A little yellower, but

maybe it was the light. He had long harbored the suspicion that beneath Herb's bravado—and despite all his scheming, suasion, and hard work—there lurked a compulsion to self-destruct. And usually at the last minute, taking others down with him, a suspicion that was plausible enough given Herb's history. Arthur could guess a few reasons why, not that it negated his charm. Come what may, Herb was still the guy you'd like to have on the bar stool next to you.

This is so delightful, said Sophie. I feel like a little girl going to the movies.

I wish it was the movies, said Flo.

Arthur watched Dot take each bite of her oatmeal with thoughtful deliberation, or maybe it was a triggered memory of someone else, and held his tongue.

They gathered back in Herb's apartment after breakfast. Davis and Kyle checked the equipment one last time.

Everything look good on this end, said Davis. You have a problem at the theater, y'all call me. Know what I'm saying?

Artie, you got any quarters for the pay phone? said Herb. Arthur began to dig in his pocket when Herb held up the flip phone his son gave him a few months ago. Just kidding, Artie. It's time I learned to use this thing. Here, watch this.

Herb dialed his home number and the house phone rang.

Son of a gun, said Arthur. Just like the science fiction story he'd read eighty years ago.

Let's see how this stuff fits, said Kyle. Arthur wore an old houndstooth sport coat that sagged at the elbows, its pockets not quite big enough for the equipment Kyle tried to stuff into them.

We got to strap it under your shirt, said Davis.

The women had no problem fitting devices in their handbags, and Flo had a good-sized pouch strapped to her wheelchair for good measure. Davis walked them through the recording drill, reviewing each button, knob, and meter on their machines. The proper levels, the cues, the timing. One take was all they got.

Keep the recorders hid good, said Davis. And keep the mics out of sight, but don't cover them up.

Herb and Sophie, you got the headphones. What do you say if they ask what you doing? said Kyle.

I say it's my assisted listening device.

Good, Sophie.

Arthur, what about the recorder?

My colostomy bag.

Right. Or your insulin pump. Whatever. Just keep it medical and make it sound personal.

What about Palmer?

Yolanda went to get him.

Now listen up everybody, said Herb, rising off the couch and rapping a champagne flute with a spoon to get their attention. There are a few things I want to say before we get this show on the road.

The chatter in the room settled down.

When all eyes were on him, Herb continued. We're not doing this just for the money, you know. Okay, we are doing this for the money—and believe me, a nice chunk of change it's gonna be—but we're doing this for something else, too. And what would that be? R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Our self-respect. You with me? We got to show Greendale, we got to show ElderPartners, we got to show our families, we got to show everybody, we're not just a bunch of saps here. 'Cause that's what they take us for. Nobody gives us credit for bupkis. Just stick a bingo card under our nose, hand us a brownie, and we're happy, right? Nobody thinks we have the smarts or the moxie to pull off something like this. Well, nuts to them. I don't know about you, but I'm steamed up. I'm sick of being treated like a dope. I'm sick of feeling stuck behind the eight ball every time our bills go up. We're taking back our lives here. You with me? We're in the home stretch now, so let's make it to the finish line. In other words, don't screw the pooch. That's all I'm sayin'.

Arthur had a bad feeling. Memo from Spain—in the long run, things don't go well when it's one man's show. And it always had to be Herb's. But in the short run...who knows?

Palmer, shepherded by Yolanda as promised, made it down to lunch with enough time to spare for some quick personal instruction from Davis and Kyle. He was attentive, if more sedate than usual. No tie today, just the blazer with an open collar. The Commoners loaded onto the Greendale bus in good order, all well fed. The day was bright and surprisingly calm for late March. Crocuses scattered specks of color on the Greendale grounds. Daffodils, shooting up, had yet to bloom. If not quite spring, at least it was not quite winter. The ride was smooth and pleasant enough. There was no need for talk, merely looking out the window was enough to pass the time. Even Herb, sitting next to Sophia, had little to say. It wasn't tension. It was as if they were merely taking the bus to another day of work. They made good time to the movie theater, all according to plan.

That's the guy who fingered Davis, said Herb to Arthur, pointing out the usher at the other end of the lobby. You see any police? Herb kept his head down, pushing Flo in her wheelchair to give himself a little extra cover.

No, said Arthur. Coast is clear.

Okay, you know what to do.

Piece of cake, Herbie.

They still had plenty of time to use the washrooms before scattering to their seats. When the curtain rose they were all comfortably settled with empty bladders and small electronic devices, primed and ready to go.

The whole production of *The Barber of Seville* took less than three hours, intermission included. No arrests, no napping, no need for panicked phone calls to Davis. A perfectly charming Met performance, if they had been at liberty to relax and enjoy it. The ride back to Greendale was as subdued as the ride to the theater, but with the sun now low in the sky and a deeper chill in the air. They hadn't realized how tense they'd been. There was a touch of sadness along with their fatigue. Not that there'd been any snafus. All in all, it was a remarkably successful outing. They were like a tired family returning from a long and pleasant weekend in the country, knowing how fleeting these moments were even as they took them for granted. Herb put his gloved hand on

top of Sophie's and patted it softly. We did good, he said. Sophie nodded. She seemed far away and, like him, fading with the twilight.

When he arrived home, making his way one dangling leg at a time up the gently sloping side ramp to Greendale's front entrance, Arthur's relief began to take a darker turn. He was spent. His body ached from head to toe. He knew he couldn't face a Saturday dinner in the Greendale dining room. His age was too much with him, and had been most of the day. Bootlegging, pirating, it was all the same. Even if the recording actually worked out, what were the chances it would sell? He paused for a moment by the automatic door to catch his breath, looking into the quiet lobby at the young receptionist who worked the evening shift on weekends. She knew nothing of this geriatric fantasy born of desperation, this hustle cooked up by an old drunk. It was just a foolish game to pass the time, distracting them from what? He was grateful he made it to his room without collapsing. That evening he nibbled half a chicken sandwich and a cookie brought by Kyle, changed his colostomy bag, and curled up in bed with his wife's voice in his head telling him not to worry. He tried not to think about Dot. He'd see her in the morning. And for how long after that? Two more months, maybe three, he figured. Then adios amigos. He and Flo would be out the door and so would she. The idea of social workers in his future was humiliating. The idea of needing anyone's help was humiliating. His future? Ha! A hundred years to end up like this. A century of what? It was not hard to imagine a different world.

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Here you go, said Davis. Best I can do under the circumstances. He burned his final cut of *The Barber of Seville* onto a blank CD and tossed the disc to Herb. Davis had been mixing all week—equalizing, compressing, balancing, filtering—and he was spent. So was the Operantics checking account.

The disc slid into the computer like a coin in a slot machine. So this is what it all comes down to, thought Herb, pits on a five inch metal wheel. He and Sophie clapped

on their headphones like test pilots ready for takeoff. Herb gave Davis the all clear. Let there be music, he said, waving his arms like a conductor. The first strains of the overture brought a smile to his face. They listened closely, their eyes fixed on waveforms dancing on the computer screen before them that might as well have been Mayan script. I don't know, Herbert, said Sophie, pulling the headphones around her neck after they'd listen to the first aria. The performance is perfectly good, but the orchestra sounds muddy. Opera lovers are finicky, you know.

Can't be too finicky with a bootleg, said Davis.

What's good enough for the Met is good enough for me, said Herb. It's not like Davis has the NBC studios to work with. It is what it is, my dear. The main thing is to get it out there fast and cheap. Kyle, fire up the presses. I say we go with it.

Davis said a little prayer to his atman. Herb had talked him into taking a percentage of sales in lieu of his fee. Sophie's financial backing was on hold while some legal issues regarding her estate, brought by her son and daughter, were settled in court.

Sophie was at her painting class, so it was just the boys in Herb's apartment. Arthur had dropped by to see how things were going. He had to admit, he was pleasantly surprised by the final mix. Recording, if nothing else in this god-forsaken world, had gotten a lot better in the last hundred years.

Orders are coming in, Artie. Just like I told you.

Even so, said Arthur, fingering a CD he took from a stack on Herbert's desk, I don't see how it's enough to keep us in this place for long. Just one performance? How many of these can we sell? Arthur's suspicions always increased in proportion to Herb's optimism.

Got that covered too, said Herb. We put *Eugene Onegin* out there with *The Barber*. Davis did a yeoman's job pulling it together from the test run. A little rough, but

it's still the Met. And we're starting to move some of our old pirated works. Halo effect, Artie. When you're hot, you're hot. We've bundled some together with the live recordings as special packaged sets. What a hoot. We have orders coming in from Brazil and Dubai. Are we locked and loaded, or what? Like I said, shooting fish in a barrel.

Easy, Herb, said Arthur. I can do the math. It only gives us a few more months here. Our money's still gushing out like water from a fire hose with all these new charges.

Tut, tut, my friend. Not to worry. Now we have a little breathing room till we come up with something new. So how 'bout a drink? Got some nice Martell XO that's just the thing. I'll pop on *Onegin* for you. You always liked that doll, what's her name?

No thanks, said Arthur. Cognac gives me heartburn. By the way, you seen Palmer lately?

You know, said Herb—raising his brandy snifter to the light for a moment, bringing it down to his nose and sipping—some days you see him, some days you don't. Palmer drifts in, Palmer drifts out.

He's doing a lot more drifting these days.

So I've noticed, said Herb. He doesn't seem to care about the business anymore. Not that there's much for him to do and he doesn't care about the money. I think his son wants to move him to that River Terrace place. Wants him closer so he can keep better tabs on him or something. So which came first, I don't know.

What can you do.

What can you do. But no big deal. It's not like he can't afford it.

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Ben, sitting at his table by the kitchen, was known throughout The Commons—by residents, staff, and even the families of residents and staff—for, among other things, eating next to nothing. And now he ate even less. A few vegetables, some rice

now and then. He gave up meat as a young man, and dairy in his later years when ice cream tasted so sweet it burned his tongue like chile peppers. Water, mint tea, and occasional orange slices rounded out his diet, as if he'd learned to draw most of his nutrients from the air. How far past the century mark he was, only the Greendale files could say. Directly across the room, under the front windows, sat Arthur and the rest of the bootleggers. Each day he watched them come and go with a certain interest, a certain pleasure even, as if watching birds build a nest. It was clear to anyone who paid attention they were up to something, a common undertaking of some sort. Whatever it was, conspiracy or game or prank, despite their murmuring and agitation, they seemed to be having good time at it, unlike the women at the hen's table to his right (not that Ben referred to it that way), that for all its commotion seemed only bent on maintaining a sense of propriety. And throned in the seat of respect he held for the past eight years, almost his mirror image, even Arthur seemed engaged. So more power to them, as far as Ben was concerned. Ben was enjoying the day as well. Shadow and light, the sounds of the kitchen staff, the feel of his water glass, his luncheon companion Marge, and his own thoughts still rising from some deep mysterious well, were constant objects of curiosity and occasional wonder. Thoughts (were they even his?) that were like time-travel in a movie that flashed forward and back, or maybe it was around in a circle. He was also feeling terribly weak, as if his muscles, down to their last nubs, had outlived their usefulness and were about to quit on him once and for all. Strength, he knew, was an illusion, as was weakness. As was his age. As was lunch. And Marge's color. And maybe the past as well. Especially the past. It didn't matter much that he couldn't move, because wherever he happened to be was perfectly okay. And there was someone taking care of all that, this illusion of being somewhere. His son had spoken with his doctors. He'd be leaving Greendale soon. Where to? He'd like to know, not that it mattered, but he had a pretty good idea. To his son's house. To his death actually, the greatest illusion of all. And about time, too. Why all this fuss about arranging hospice? He wasn't suffering. But if it made his family feel better, then it was all right with him. He was about to take a sip of water from habit, but stopped to wonder why he should when he wasn't thirsty. He wasn't much of anything. He was merely light, light as air.

Hey Ben, said Ted, passing by on his way back to the kitchen. Can I get you something? Dessert?

Ben smiled. He liked Ted, but had no idea what Ted was talking about. Ted rarely made sense.

Marge? How about you?

Yolanda's bringing me some tiramisu, said Marge.

Excellent, said Ted. Good choice.

When the tiramisu arrived, Ben watched Marge feel across the table for her fork as if her ebony fingers were sentient creatures. Marge usually passed on dessert, but when she did go for it, it was clear she savored every bite.

The evening aide knocked on Palmer's door—three sharp taps with an iron clapper that rang down the hallway like pistol shots. With the TV blaring inside she knew she had to make them loud to be heard. She waited a minute, then rapped hard with her knuckles. Still no answer. She tried the door. It was locked. She knocked again, waited another moment, and when once again there was no answer took out her key and unlocked it. Protocol for safety checks. She entered quietly, stopping just beyond the threshold.

Palmer?

It was dark inside. The air was stale, as if no door or window had been opened in days. The lights were out and the shades were drawn. There was an old man smell of musty sheets and clothes than needed washing. The TV flickered in the corner of the living room casting shadows on the wall.

Palmer? Everything okay?

The aide knew instinctively the apartment was too quiet despite the sound from the TV, having come upon her share of Greendale residents down for the count. She almost bolted for help right then and there, being a bit superstitious about these things,

but managed to calm herself and go about her job. She crept around the corner to the bedroom and poked her head in, primed to call 911. And there he was stretched out on top of the bed, lying on his back with his arms folded across his chest, fully dressed in his blue blazer and khakis, a repp tie and wingtips. Resting peacefully for a few minutes, it would seem, before going out for the evening. Going out for the evening?

Palmer? You coming to dinner?

It would not be the first time he had to be woken up for a meal. She almost expected it. Then she noticed the pallor of his face and hands. It was not the typical whiteness of most Greendale residents at the end of the New England winter, it was the doughy pallor of clay. On the bedside table were three empty vials, with pills and capsules scattered on the bedclothes and carpet. She felt his fingers, like ice, and her shriek stuck in her throat. It was horrible, after she phoned the front desk, having to start chest compressions on a corpse, but that's what they told her to do. Protocol. His chest was rubbery, his thin lips livid. The revulsion of it stayed with her long after she left Greendale for a hospital job. Nights in maternity care, she could still feel the chill of Palmer's lips and smell the odorless stench of his death.

No surprise, the medical examiner refused Palmer's case. The funeral home spirited him away late that night when none of the Greendale residents were about, rolling his shrouded remains down the empty hallways to their waiting van as discreetly as they could. His doctor wrote 'myocardial infarction' on his death certificate as cause of death, as good a guess as any if you knew nothing more. His photograph, holding a golf trophy from his country club, was displayed for a several days next to a large bouquet of flowers on the table in the front lobby. The family held a private service after his cremation. A grandson, recounting Palmer's life as husband, father, attorney, business executive, naval officer, golfer, and composer of limericks, said, looking back, he'd never realized his grandfather had such an amazing life. His ashes were buried beside his wife's.

It was not a good day for Greendale's executive director. The cost of heating oil had just gone up, their corrective action plan was due, and the state had just announced a site visit. Now this nonsense.

Close the door, said Kristin. She had summoned Rosemary to her office first thing. Before Rosemary had a chance to take a seat, Kristin came to the point. I'm very disturbed by what staff are saying about Palmer's death.

It was hard to fluster an old nurse. Rosemary sat down and took a moment to straighten her uniform, unhurried and deliberate, as if to give Kristin a chance to get a hold of herself. The aide thinks it was suicide, she said.

That's ridiculous, Rosemary.

I wouldn't be so sure. She said it looked like he planned it. The way he laid himself out like he was lying in his coffin. And all the empty pill bottles.

Okay, an accidental overdose maybe.

Three different bottles? That's hardly an accident, said Rosemary. And why in his dress clothes? There were other clues too, you know. He was so withdrawn lately. Maybe if we'd paid more attention we would have known something was wrong.

Stop speculating, snapped Kristin, a tone she immediately regretted. She was not a snapper. She was really snapping at the state inspectors, but of course you can't do that. You can only snap at your own staff, and even then within limits. If you were the kind of person who snapped. The bottom line, said Kristin more calmly, aware that alienating your nursing director before a state inspection was probably not a good idea, is we'll never know what really happened. If the death certificate says heart disease, that's good enough for me. He was ninety-one, for god's sake. It could have been anything.

It wouldn't hurt to review our risk assessment protocols, said Rosemary. More depression screening. That would be the prudent thing to do, just in case.

Just in case? Just in case what? There's no just-in-case here. We are not drawing attention to this. Tell the aide she is absolutely forbidden to use the word suicide. As is everyone else, for that matter. We have enough rumors floating around this place.

Right, said Rosemary. So what about depression screening?

Okay, fine. Go ahead with your screening. But stop the suicide talk. We have units to fill.

Then you should have no objection to suicide prevention.

From the purely business point of view Rosemary's logic was hard to argue with. True enough, they now had another empty unit to fill, suicide or not, though it would have happened anyway. Kristin got word that Palmer's family was transferring him to River Terrace. Maybe that's what made him so depressed, she thought. It was depressing her. And what was going on at River Terrace, anyway? She'd heard more about that place in the past month than she had in the past three years. There was a lot of buzz at the association about their new 'amenities'. And why wasn't Bill Beltzer returning her calls?

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When at breakfast next day Flo heard news of Palmer's death, her first impulse was to reach for a cigarette. She had none with her of course, and even if she did it wasn't as if she could light up in the middle of the dining room. Though she might have. She skipped her cup of decaf and hurried back to her room. She may have been rushed, but she was not careless. She turned off her oxygen concentrator, removed her tubing, and took two long puffs through the spacer of her metered-dose inhaler. Only then did she wheel herself to her coat closet and grab a new pack of Marlboros from the carton she kept covered with an old sweater. From there she proceeded to the window, opening it a crack before lighting up. What a relief. Like finally letting go of a door she'd been holding shut tight. She coughed and spat into a tissue. Palmer had never meant much to her, so why was she shaking? She finished her cigarette without answering that question and lit another. Because of Helen? Because all deaths traced back to Helen? All deaths were Helen's death, and Helen's death had been her death. What did she have left, really? Not kids. Or too many kids if you counted her students.

Helen had wanted kids. Flo was too devoted to her 'cause' to bother with parenthood. Then one day, what do you know, it's too late. She said she was being realistic but she knew, even then, it was mere selfishness. And her cause, her politics, turned out to be the cruelest joke of all. Then there was her brother, as alone in the world as she was for totally different reasons and just as pathetic with nothing left to show for it, plodding on purely for plodding's sake. You could call it stubborn, but she called it fear. She tried to take a deep drag on her cigarette, but her lungs were such inflated balloons that inhaling didn't do much. She was dizzy, and shaky, and felt a bit better overall. As far as she was concerned, Palmer's life was even more pointless her own and suicide only fitting for such a waste. True, she had managed to tolerate him. But like him? No. Or maybe yes, a little. Reluctant as she was to admit it, maybe a little because of his unflinching courtesy and even his annoying laugh. The company man in the grey flannel suit, but they were all products of their time one way or another. How could it be otherwise? So this is where all your politics gets you in the end. Everyone expiring, beyond hope of rescue, in the same tiny life raft in a vast and empty sea. She puffed away.

There was a knock on the door. Flo was not in the mood for company. Another knock and this time she heard her brother's voice.

Come in, she called. Door's open.

Arthur shuffled into the room on his walker. Over his sister hung a cloud of smoke tinged blue by the light of the window, blue like the faint circle around Flo's lips. She looked at him blankly, struggling for breath. The window sill and floor beneath it were sprinkled with ash.

Flo, you trying to kill yourself?

It took him several minutes to get the oxygen going and the prongs back in her nose, then what seemed like an interminable wait before she perked up.

I came by to give you some good news, said Arthur. There's money coming in. Can you believe it? We pulled the damn thing off.

Sure, to hear Herb tell it, said Flo.

No, I mean it, said Arthur, reaching in his pocket and holding out a check. Look. This is real. This is yours.

Flo took it and read the amount, then read it again. That'll help, she said, handing it back to Arthur. Turning to look out the window, she knew Arthur would take care of it the way he always had since moving her from California, paying her bills, giving a detailed accounting of every transaction for her inspection. She coughed weakly, barely rattling the phlegm in her windpipe. She thought Helen would have liked Arthur if she'd ever gotten a chance to know him. Palmer not so much.

You just get to know somebody, said Arthur, turning at the door for a last word on his way out.

That's right, said Flo.

You should throw out those cancer sticks, said Arthur, without looking back this time.

Don't bug me, Artie, said Flo. You have your freedoms, I have mine.

Mom, I'm here Mom.

I'm still here.

Mom?

So what are we going to do with Palmer's money? asked Sophie.

Herb looked at her across the table like, are you nuts?

I would think it belongs to his estate, she said.

Whatever their respective opinions on the subject of the late Henry Palmer Sturges' share of their ill-gotten gains, the remaining Operantics held their tongues as a new server circled the table with their lunch orders.

I don't think we need to do anything right now, Arthur whispered, though the server was gone.

Sophie had been thinking about what to do with Palmer's share since Herb distributed the first checks. There were agreed upon percentages, but nothing written down that she knew of, let alone anything resembling a legal document. It hardly seemed necessary when Operantics was a harmless fantasy. She always assumed Herb would do the right thing, whatever happened, which was a sound assumption open to vastly different interpretations.

I assume his son is his executor, said Sophie.

Sophie's position with her own son and daughter had improved somewhat since Herb began repaying her financial advances, though his other advances were still a matter of concern. A family breach had been opened, a deep long-standing fault line come to light that would be difficult to repair. Despite their apologies, she realized now there had been a plan afoot to question her mental competence. How sharper than a serpent's tooth. The two of them would just have to cool their heels if they thought they were going to control her or her money. She, too, could do the math. Another five, ten years at Greendale with its inflationary spiral? No, she wasn't giving it away quite yet.

What's the big deal, said Herb. I don't think Palmer's heirs are hurting. He had assets up the wazoo. We're talking chump change from the CD sales.

That's not the point, said Sophie.

Did his share stop accumulating when he died? asked Dot.

What do you mean accumulate? said Herb. What difference does that make?

It could keep going to his heirs. I want to know what happens if I pass away, said Dot. I wouldn't mind leaving something to my grandkids.

Dot has a point, said Sophie. We need to clear this up.

The point, said Herb, and the only point, is to keep us all at Greendale. Right, Arthur?

Arthur blinked a few times and looked at his soup. I have to think about that, he said. But not right now.

Too bad Palmer's gone, said Flo. We could use a good lawyer.

No one knew quite how to take Flo. Even her most straight-forward statements had a ring of sarcasm, hinting at a dual message that denied what it affirmed. It was hard to know if there was any real meaning, beyond paradox or contradiction, to any of Flo's utterances, or if all her words simply cancelled themselves out to an ironic and emphysematous silence.

I know what we need to do, said Herb. For Palmer and for us. A road trip.

How we going to do that? said Arthur. A road trip, he assumed, was another one of Herb's little fantasies.

Herb pulled a set of car keys from his pocket and dangled them over the table. In Palmer's Lincoln, he said.

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Flo waved good-bye from the lobby as they left for the parking lot—Herb and Sophie, Arthur and Dot, two elderly couples off for a Sunday drive. Dot helped Arthur fold his walker and store it in the trunk, then bracing himself on the fender he managed to limp his way to the back seat. There was plenty of room inside—Palmer liked his comfort. A frayed bucket hat from his Hilton Head country club lay on the dashboard, and a faint cigar smell clung to the upholstery. Sophie found a year old lectionary and a Book of Common Prayer on the passenger seat. She slid them reverently into the glove compartment. Herb eased into the driver's seat.

How did you end up with Palmer's keys? said Arthur.

Herb looked at Arthur in the rearview mirror. I borrowed his car, he answered, to do some shopping.

Shopping for what?

Take a guess.

Without a license?

I know how to drive.

You don't have a license? said Sophie. You never told me that.

The engine started right up. Herb put the car in gear and started backing out. You never asked, he said. Keep a lookout on your side, I can't turn my head that far. The car seemed to pick up speed of its own accord, hurtling toward the barrier behind it. He slammed on the brakes.

Seat belts everyone, said Herb as they recoiled from the jolt. Getting my sea legs here. Don't worry, I'll be fine when we're out of the lot.

It was a big car and by no means underpowered. Once they were on Greendale's front drive the Lincoln wanted to leap forward. It took Herb a minute to get used to the quick grab of the power brakes, but the jerky movements smoothed out by the time they hit the main road.

Where should we go?

Let's take a drive along the river, said Dot.

Great idea, said Herb. I know a place we can get a decent Bloody Mary. He looked at Sophie. Or mimosa.

The road curved along the south bank of the Sebequanash, giving a glimpse of the opposite shore through a line of budding trees. The swollen river was starting to ebb as the spring snow melt ended.

The light is beautiful today, said Dot.

See that baby? said Herb, pointing to a motor yacht traveling with the current. I'm gonna get me one just like it, only bigger.

Herbert, please keep your eyes on the road, said Sophie.

They'd gone only five miles when Herb pulled into the parking lot of a small restaurant set on pilings over the water.

This is it, said Herb.

Herb, with his usual charm and a twenty dollar bill, finagled a table with a nice water view. He ordered his Bloody Mary, Sophie her mimosa, Arthur a glass of red wine and Dot an iced tea.

To Palmer, said Herb when the drinks arrived. Always the gentleman.

They raised their glasses. To Palmer.

Wherever he may be, added Herb. They drank and entered their separate thoughts.

So why do you think he did it? said Sophie.

Did what? said Herb.

Did what he did. You know. The so-called accident.

He was tired of it, that's all, said Arthur. He wanted to move on.

Tired of what? said Dot. He just had his first great grandchild.

All the more reason, said Arthur.

He must have been very depressed, said Sophie.

I don't think so, said Arthur. I don't think so at all.

I'll tell you what I think, said Herb. I think I'll have another Bloody Mary. He signaled the server.

They sipped their drinks in silence again, watching the waves flow past half in sun, half in shadow. A pair of kayakers paddled along the shore. Across the river the yards were dotted with flowering trees, magnolia and crab apple.

He had three years at Greendale, said Dot. It goes by fast.

They realized they didn't know Palmer very well. They realized they didn't know each other very well. How could they? There was far too much time to account for. And when you got down to it, why should they? What would that accomplish? But they were together on the river for this one moment on a lovely spring day, thanks to Palmer and his ten year old Lincoln Continental. And they were still together at Greendale, for the moment, on what was bound to be their last cruise.

You know what I want? said Arthur. French fries. A big plate of French fries with ketchup and lots of salt.

Go for it Artie, said Herb.

When Arthur finished his fries, Sophie and Dot their salads, and Herb his third Bloody Mary, it was well into the afternoon. The river flowed on, tinged the same rich blue as the sky. Sophie was falling asleep. Herb was having trouble standing up.

I had to drive home, officer, said Herb, only half-clowning, 'cause I couldn't walk.

Arthur held out his hand and Herb plunked down the car keys. Dot, said Arthur, you can do the honors.

I don't know, said Dot. It's been a while.

It's either that or call a cab, said Arthur. You're the only one in any shape to drive.

Please Dot, said Sophie. You can do it.

Like riding a bike, said Herb.

Then if you insist, said Dot with her sleepy smile. I'll give it a go.

Arthur knew the way. He joined Dot in the front seat to guide her back to The Commons. Luckily for them, traffic was light. They lurched onto the road and crawled back home. The big Lincoln floated into its parking place like a boat in a slip, slamming the wheel-stop as if it rammed the pier.

Dot sighed, turned off the engine and set the parking brake. Sorry about that. Did the tires blow out?

Don't worry, said Arthur. Palmer don't need 'em.

Give me those. Herb reached over the front seat and grabbed the car keys. He insisted on keeping them for one more trip to the store. After his errand the following day he handed them over to Lou, who passed them on to Kristin, who held them in her office for Henry Palmer Sturges IV, who came with his wife the following Saturday to collect his father's effects.

The reason Bill Beltzer never returned Kristin's calls was that Bill Beltzer was history, gone in the blink of an eye. River Terrace had a new Executive Director in Corey Chapman, straight from the Boston area, who was quick to extend an invitation to his local ElderPartners colleagues. Kristin and Jacqué set out for the other side of the county a few days after Easter, the first pleasant day of spring after weeks of chilly rain. Spring showcased River Terrace. The grounds dwarfed Greendale's five acres. Kristin had forgotten how long the winding drive was from the entrance gate to the front door. It seemed there were landscapers everywhere—trimming, planting, spraying, mulching—and construction crews at work on the far side of the main building.

I guess they really are putting money into this place, said Kristin.

Jacqué, gazing about through a new pair of prescription sunglasses reflecting the blooms of forsythia as they passed, could only smile and nod.

Corey came to greet them at the reception desk and escorted them to a private dining room where his marketing director had brunch waiting. He was tall and square-set, comfortably fitted in a blue business suit, projecting the easy confidence of a man who'd been an accomplished athlete or graduate of one of the nation's service academies. In his case, the Coast Guard.

It finally dawned on Kristin, sipping coffee from River Terrace china in the oak-paneled room, what league she was playing in. Even the trip to Vegas, the high priced consultants, the marketing VP, the regional VP, had not managed to impress on her the vast sums of capital at work in the ElderPartners national operation. Now she was listening to someone who had guzzled the Kool-Aid, holding forth on growth opportunities in assisted living as if they were ordained by some deity. A man, as far as she could tell, who knew far more about aging accounts than aging human beings. She felt like a village shopkeeper plunked down in the midst of Wall Street. ElderFutures, it appeared, was launched and well underway.

C'mon, I'll show you around, said Corey.

It looks like you're doing some serious upgrades, said Jacqué.

Oh, you know, said Corey. Keeping up with the Joneses.

As they toured the new construction—two swimming pools, one indoor and one out (aqua-therapy said Jacqué, water aerobics said Corey), an expanded kitchen, a theater complex, a fitness center—Kristin couldn't help but joke, Where are you putting the golf course?

Corey didn't laugh. Actually, he said straight-faced, we have plans for a driving range and putting green behind the outdoor pool. But that's Phase 2. Jacqué caught Kristin's eye and mouthed, Phase 2?

Kristin asked to see the memory care program.

Not much going on there, said Corey. It could probably use a makeover though.

I'm more interested in your Mind&Spirit Care rollout than the physical plant, said Kristin.

Oh right, said Corey. The herbs and stuff. Let me call the manager.

A minute later the manager escorted Kristin to the memory unit while Jacqu e trudged ahead with Corey and the marketing director to look at some new promotional material they'd designed.

This is only my second week, said the manager, a former ER nurse. I have to admit I'm not up to speed on Mind&Spirit Care yet. All I know is that it's losing money. Corey says it's the law of diminishing returns or something. Kind of sad but, you know, how much can you do for these folks? Realistically I mean, besides keep them safe and clean, and try to keep their families happy. Now that's a challenge. Anyway, at my age it sure beats the night shift in the ER. So how's it going over at Greendale?

Kristin wasn't sure how to answer. One option was to scream and run out of there holding her head to keep it from exploding. That was tempting. Instead she could only say, Fine. We're doing just fine.

That's what I hear, said the manager, swiping her ID badge to unlock a side door. Corporate said you have a model program going on there. I'd like to visit if it's all right with you. We'd appreciate any efficiency tips you could give us. The metrics, you know. Inside, Kristin saw little she would describe as either mind or spirit. But the flat screen TV in the lounge was huge, the hallway was spotless, and the River Terrace woods outside the large windows of the dining area looked like a tidy arboretum.

After her visit to the memory care program Kristin had seen enough. No more talk of metrics or paradigm shifts. She dragged Jacqu e away from her counterpart and a heated discussion of focus groups, thanking Corey for his neighborly hospitality.

I don't get it, said Jacqu e, as they drove the winding road along the river. What's the point of cutting into our market share?

Maybe they're growing the pie.

How do you grow it? There are just so many old folks around.

Kristin was out of answers, relieved to get back to the familiar halls of Greendale. Be it ever so humble, she said as they pulled into her parking space. She was beginning to gain an appreciation of the beast that was lurking on the horizon, but did not have a name for it yet. There was something about River Terrace, and Corey Chapman, and a driving range, that was creeping her out.

Arthur's birthday was only a month away. He looked across the dining room, scanning the other tables as was his habit from day one. Ben's seat, he noted, was empty and had been for a week. But there was no word of any ambulance, no photo and bouquet in the front lobby, not even a peep from Renee. Marge was in her same place eating alone now, her white folding cane set against the back of her chair as always. At the next table sat Betty, surrounded by her retinue and a new hen he didn't recognize. Cluck, cluck, as always. Dot's seat was empty as was Herb's—she late as usual and he, who knows. And Palmer's, of course, was no longer even Palmer's. Always the money, he muttered, balling things up. Just put a pile of money on the table and watch how funny people get. Even so-called principled people, let alone someone like Herb. And Herb was certainly acting funny. He had a new wardrobe, fashions that would look ridiculous on a man half his age. He was taking Sophie to lunch at the most expensive restaurants in town, overtipping everyone in sight. It was hard to get a straight answer from him about anything these days, let alone their CD sales. It's like he'd been on one long toot since the money started rolling in.

Seems to me, said Sophie from the opposite end of the table, you're the oldest person at Greendale now, Arthur. Congratulations.

Arthur grunted. He'd forgotten he was not alone. Sophie's hair had a fresh silver tint like she had just come from the beauty parlor. The oldest person at Greendale. Why had he never made a point of getting to know Ben? Some subtle competition maybe, or his innate shyness. Her congratulations seemed obscene somehow under the circumstances. You seen Herb lately?

No, said Sophie. He didn't come down to breakfast.

Someone needs to check on him.

He doesn't seem to be his old self these days, said Sophie. I don't know why. Especially with the business doing so well.

Arthur had planned to spend the afternoon watching *Tosca* on his new DVD player, but instead of getting off the elevator at his floor he followed his own suggestion and kept going up to Herb's place. There, no surprise, he found Herb sprawled half-seas over on his couch in front of the TV. A stack of CD's looked like they'd been knocked off his desk and lay scattered on the floor. His trash can was filled with empty bottles.

So *mon frère*, what brings you up to my den of iniquity? said Herb thickly, unwilling or unable to sit up.

The accounting, said Arthur.

Herb struggled to his elbows. Pennies from heaven, he said. How can you account for pennies from heaven? I wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth if I was you, old pal.

Since when did this business turn into a gift horse? said Arthur.

What's with you, Artie? Don't blow a fuse.

I just want to make sure everything's on the up and up.

Herb laughed, choked, gasped, coughed, and cleared his throat with a sip of his scotch. That's funny, he said, finally sitting up and muting the TV. His face was flushed, his eyes watery. Now hear this. It's my operation. The up and up? The up and up is whatever I say it is. So get lost with your accounting. You wouldn't be in this dump anymore if it wasn't for me.

Says you, said Arthur, looking around at the mess in Herb's apartment. We'll talk when you sober up.

Get off my back, chump. I've paid everyone what's coming to them. You, your weird sister, Dot, Sophie. Even that sambo Davis. Every red cent. Herb fell back on the couch and closed his eyes, still muttering.

What was the use? Arthur knew when to take a powder. He went down to his apartment, put on the *Tosca* DVD and promptly fell asleep in his recliner. As the music played and *Tosca* struggled to escape her fate once again, he dreamed he had to catch a train, but was running late. He tried to pack his clothes as fast as he could, but they wouldn't fit in his suitcase no matter how he folded them. He couldn't find his money or his wallet. He raced outside. There were no cabs on the street and he started

to run down the sidewalk with his bag. The more he tried to hurry the farther he fell behind, until it was clear he had no chance of getting to the station on time. But he kept on rushing just the same, realizing he had no idea where the train was going, or why he had to catch it in the first place. He had similar dreams all his life.

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Dot studied the figure in the mirror on her bedroom door. Who is that? she wondered. She laughed because the woman looked very much like her, only much older. All things considered though, not bad for an old lady. Whoever she was. She appreciated the woman's features, her complexion, her clothes and nicely colored hair. It was getting late, but she wasn't sleepy yet. I know that's me, Dot told herself and laughed again, though she wasn't totally convinced. She slipped into her pajamas and lay back on her bed, forgetting to take the pills that were set out in the pill organizer on the bathroom counter. She didn't really sleep anymore, just dozed lightly in and out of a twilight state that wasn't unpleasant for the most part once she had given up, years ago, the idea of getting a good night's sleep. She let herself drift wherever the flux of her brainwaves took her. Among the flotsam that emerged—odds and ends of the day, the soreness of her hands and legs—there would often surface, for no apparent reason, the memory of some distant act with an attendant sense of guilt. Repetitions of scenes which evoked the same reactions, the same regrets each time, still remarkably clear, some even more intense with time. Things she never told a soul. What could she do? It wasn't as if she could simply excise them even if she wanted to. For better or worse they had to be endured, but she wondered why her happier moments were never as vivid. The pattern was always the same. A moment to see herself in the offending act, to imagine the other person's injury, to feel a stab of shame or regret, to grasp how it altered the image she had of herself in her waking hours. Sometimes it was merely a slight to a friend. Why did she remember these trivialities seventy years later? But there were others things like her daughter's ruptured appendix, a bellyache

she ignored to attend a fundraising party. And much vaguer scenes from her drinking days whose images, mercifully, were never fully formed. She did not wish to know what they would be even if she were able to reconstruct them. Scandals and cover-ups? Criminal acts? Bad choices and worse. Your best friend's husband, or acts forced on you by someone you once admired. She was not religious and had stopped believing in sin, but she did believe in mistakes—certainly the ones that hurt her, and as she grew older, the ones that hurt others—if not forgiveness. Least of all self-forgiveness. The ones that hurt others would never change. What good does self-forgiveness do for them? That's when she would toss in her twilight sleep, feel the pain in her hip, hear the creak and hum of the building, see the occasional flash of ambulance lights as another Greendale resident was carted off to the emergency room. As for herself, she cared less and less.

That night her thoughts were pleasant though, like the feel of the comforter she pulled to her chin. Not to worry about the money, Arthur said. So she wouldn't worry about the money, not that she had worried about money much before, but it was nice to know that someone like Arthur was kind enough to care about it for her. The way he looked after Flo, she admired him for that, and then there were his visits to her in the hospital. And how did he manage to keep his mind so sharp? She could tell he liked her by the little courtesies he showed. It was hard to know if he had ever been a good-looking man, but for many women, she knew, that was not a big deal. It was part of her superficiality to go after the good-looking ones. It was funny how the more power they had the more handsome they seemed, especially after a few drinks. Congressmen and millionaires, or was it billionaires. She realized she'd forgotten to take her pills. It didn't seem worth the trouble to get out of a warm bed just for that. But maybe she should—those annoying phone calls they made to her daughters about her 'forgetfulness'. Half the time it wasn't even forgetfulness. She just didn't feel like taking a handful of pills twice a day when she felt perfectly fine. Felt better without them in fact, a little less dizzy, a little less fuzzy-headed. Like those Mil-tinis so long ago, which didn't help her blackouts any. Miltowns, quite the thing. Comedians even joked on TV about the fun they had with America's new party drug. She still had her steady walk and the fullness of her hair, if not her daughters' forgiveness, and she would not forgive herself either

because that would be too easy. There were no get-out-of-jail-free cards now like there were when you were young and your desires justified your means. She'd forgotten so much already, why not her mistakes? Because that would be cheap. She was wrong more times than she cared to count, but she would not be cheap. She would take her medicine.

She sat on the edge of the bed for a moment to steady herself. So yes, maybe she was cheap a few times. So be it. The nightlight guided her to the bathroom where she took the pills and a good look at her face in the mirror. How did this happen, she wondered? How did this woman get here? It was all too strange. Some nights she wished for nothing more from life than a good eight hours sleep. And to think she once took it for granted like a law of nature. You have no idea what's coming down the pike, straight at you. Something about the whole deal was not right. Not that she was complaining.

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Renee had an urgent message for Kristin. Kristin's executive assistant put her right through.

There are some, uh, people here to see you, she said. From her desk in the lobby Renee could see their van idling by the entrance.

I'm kind of busy right now, said Kristin. Can't this wait?

I don't think so, said Renee. It's like, the FBI.

It's *like* the FBI, said Kristin, or it *is* the FBI?

Oh, it's definitely the FBI.

Lucky for Herb, he was sprawled in an ICU bed under a bank of monitors on the alcohol withdrawal pathway hospitalized for his 'rule out MI' when Federal agents swarmed into Greendale with their search warrant. After piling out of their government van in a pack of blue windbreakers, foregoing body armor for the white shirts in which they tackled white collar crime, the lead agent was kind enough to stop by Kristin's

office and inform her of the raid just as, before racing out, she applied a quick touchup to her lipstick. Without even asking to see the warrant she accompanied him to Herb's floor with the key, assuring them there was no need to draw their guns as she unlocked the door and let them in.

Kyle, at the desk, swiveled to face them. What the fuck?

Keep your hands where we can see them, yelled an agent as the team rushed in. Don't touch a thing. They pounced on the computer, frisked Kyle, boxed all the CD's and any paper records they could find, upended Herb's bed and every drawer in his apartment, pawed through the empty liquor bottles in his trash, and departed through a line of reporters and videographers from the regional press now camped out on Greendale's front lawn.

Thank you for your cooperation, said the lead agent to Kristin on his way out. I wouldn't delete anything from your computer if I were you. Have a nice day.

Kristin hastened to her office for an emergency phone call to the ElderPartners corporate attorneys. The obvious question: What's our liability here?

You don't say a word.

Understood.

Refer all inquiries to us.

Of course. Gladly.

That fucking Herbert, said Kristin, slamming down the phone. Damage control, she said, pointing at Jacqu . She knew what Jacqu  was thinking. She would have hated Jacqu  for being right, if she were the kind of person who let herself hate.

It's actually kind of cool, said Halley, when you think about it.

Kristin had not been aware, until that moment, that she and Halley lived on different planets.

The story, said Jacqu , lowering her voice, pressing her palms together and holding her fingers thoughtfully to her lips, is an elderly former concert promoter trying to relive his glory days in his second childhood. In his mind it was all a game, something like, say, bingo. We play up the supportive atmosphere at Greendale and the fun people have here.

Supportive of what? said Kristin, wondering if she was the kind of person whose mind could snap. Crime?

You know what I mean, said Jacqué.

I think it shows Greendale is a fun place, said Halley.

Halley, said Kristin. Shut the fuck up.

Wow, you guys really made the news, said Chuck that evening, watching video of men and women with FBI stenciled across their jackets loading boxes in a van parked by the familiar sight of Greendale's main entrance. He took another pull at his beer and stretched out on the sofa. Congrats, hon. Biggest thing in town since that explosion at the power plant.

It's not a joke, Charles.

Chill out, baby. Nobody died, did they?

Kristin did not find the results of their internal investigation all that cool or the atmosphere at Greendale all that supportive. If it came out that the reason for a geriatric bootlegging ring was increased fees by the facility's new owners, the story would be hard to spin. A conspiracy hatched in the dining room right under her nose. She couldn't believe Arthur, of all people, was involved, along with the folks at his table. Herb she could see having a booze-addled fantasy, but Dorothy, Sophia? What the fuck were they thinking? Among other things, it sure put a damper on plans for Arthur's hundredth birthday party. And if anyone started talking about Palmer's death as a suicide, that would be the last straw. Then there was Kyle's involvement, which as an employee was a little dicey for the corporation. Kristin checked with HR, and HR with legal, and Kyle was gone. At least there was no evidence the executive staff or anyone else—Bob the bus driver keeping very mum—knew the Greendale van was transporting residents for illegal recordings of Met operas, and no charges had yet been filed against anyone. I can do this, Kristin told herself with each yoga stretch. I can still do this.

Herb wasn't back at Greendale yet, though all his tests for heart attack were negative. To compensate for a clean set of coronary arteries he had a rough time in alcohol withdrawal. After spending several days in critical care with a seizure or two, he

was packed off to a nursing home for 'short term rehab'. Kristin needed serious legal advice to figure out what to do with him. The PR implications were not good no matter what she did, let him stay or kick him out, and she always hated double binds unless, as a therapist, they were something interesting her clients faced.

We can't talk here, said Herb, gesturing toward his nursing home roommate on the other side of the curtain. Sophie looked at him quizzically for a moment, then nodded to show she understood. He was not happy she was visiting him under these circumstances but was curious to hear any news she had from home, legal or otherwise. He was bored. He was listless. And the sedatives they gave him three times a day made him feel stupid. He hated feeling stupid, and was afraid he'd sound stupid, but that wasn't why he was unhappy. There was a loud grunt and the honking sound of flatulence from across the room. A fart, thought Herb as they hurried out, is just a sigh from the other end. They went down the hall past the nurses station to the common room and found a quiet empty corner.

I can't go back to Greendale, said Herb.

Don't say that, said Sophie, placing a finger to his lips. This isn't the place for you. You look like you're getting back to your old self.

That's exactly why I can't. I'm still my old self.

I don't understand you, Herbert.

They paused while an obese young man in an oversized wheelchair passed them on his way toward the TV, rolling the wheels forward while his feet skimmed the floor, as oblivious to his surroundings as if he were sleep walking. Herb watched him with a painful fascination. A man without a vibe. It was him in the wheelchair.

It wasn't like Herb to admit failure, least of all to himself, and most of his life he had a sufficient supply of spirits on hand to support that habit. Along with his current feelings of dullness and stupidity there was also the feeling, chemically induced or not,

that he didn't care any more. He was in a nursing home, but he didn't care. Sophie looked nice, but he didn't care. He might be going to prison, but he didn't care. He hadn't had a drink in weeks, and he didn't care about that either. He still did care, however, that the final success of his life was being wiped away, that the government was making sure he did not go out with that last big hit. It was the repetition of a pattern that was all too familiar, and would remain forever unexamined. The only difference was, this time he didn't even care enough to put the blame on someone else, not even the Jewish competition.

Same as it ever was, said Herb. Can't catch a break.

Sophie gave him a look of understanding he could never have guessed she possessed. You shouldn't feel sorry for yourself, she said. What you did was not a failure. It was a noble thing.

He regretted his last words. He was not angling for victimhood. He did not want to be patronized or, least of all, pitied. Especially by Sophia. No, he said flatly, gazing past her. It was a scam. I shouldn't have dragged you into it. Just another one of my crazy pipe dreams.

Nonsense, said Sophie. You didn't drag me, I jumped in. You think I didn't know what I was getting into?

You knew the risks?

Of course. It was obvious. Not just the money, the legal ones too. The money risk was never a problem, and what were they going to do to an old lady? How would that make the Met look, putting someone like me, an old opera lover, in jail? Or Arthur, on his hundredth birthday?

Okay, thought Herb, re-taking her measure. He was not used to underestimating people. How are the others doing? he asked.

The same. What did you expect? You better come back soon or you're going to miss Arthur's party.

I need a good lawyer.

We all need a good lawyer, said Sophie. And a good plumber, and a good tailor.

I'm very tired, Sophie.

Then get some rest. That's why you're here.

Sophie walked him back to his room, saluting the staff as they re-passed the nurse's station, down the dim corridor crowded with linen carts, medication carts, Hoyer lifts, past his snoring roommate, and saw to it that he was settled comfortably in bed. Then she went to the nursing home administrator to see about arranging a private room.

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When ElderPartners counsel informed Kristin that the Metropolitan Opera would not be bringing any civil action against The Commons at Greendale, against Herb or any of the bootlegging crew, Kristin locked her office door and dug deep into her desk for the drawer with chocolates. She did not feel like having a good cry, or opening a bottle of champagne. She only wondered, what's with this nonstop bullshit? She'd survived the norovirus, the focus groups, a possible suicide, the opera scandal. She knew she could do the job for ElderPartners if she had to, but was beginning to long for the boring old days of LifeSavings Inc. Maybe she wasn't as slick as she thought. At least things were calming down. So why had she been summoned to Nashville next week? She found some candy kisses and tore at the foil. As long as she was going, she'd make clear to them what Greendale needed. More staff, facility upgrades, fewer consultants for sure. In other words, parity with the likes of River Terrace. She still wasn't sure what to do with Herbert. There was always the possibility the Feds would bring criminal charges against him, though at this point the chances were pretty slim. He was detoxed, he was in rehab. Maybe it was worth a shot at taking him back. Jacqué would object, but Kristin didn't need another hassle. The local press had made more a joke than a scandal out of his little venture—Greendale's 'Senior Scamsters', the 'Over the Pill Gang'. If everything would just get back to normal for a little while she could take that cruise with Chuck or just go lie on a beach somewhere. Screw it, she could leave Jacqué in charge. What could Jacqué do to her after everything that's happened? Sometimes you just have to let go.

Her phone buzzed. Halley to see you, said her secretary. There was a quick knock on the door. Halley was still in her gym togs from morning chair exercises.

Got a minute? said Halley.

Of course. My door is always open, said Kristin unlocking it. Come on in. What's up?

It's Arthur, said Halley. He says he doesn't want a party.

For God's sake, why not?

'Cause Flo's in the hospital.

No surprise. Have some chocolate. Kristin sighed and tossed Halley a kiss.

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Kristin flew to her Nashville meeting first class. They put her up in an elegant room at the Hermitage Hotel. At last, thought Kristin, all the crap she'd been through was starting to pay off. In the morning a town car was waiting to chauffeur her to ElderPartners' corporate headquarters. A blond assistant, tall and slim in her peach blazer and matching pencil skirt, met Kristin at the entrance and escorted her to a conference room on the twelfth floor with a great view of the city and the river. Vince, her regional VP was there, as was Scott something the marketing guy, the COO's executive assistant whose name she didn't catch, and Corey Chapman. Corey Chapman? What was River Terrace doing there? They all shook hands, commented on the stunning view, drank coffee, and made small talk around a plate of untouched fruit and pastries, waiting for the COO to make his appearance and start the meeting. Despite her pampering and the opulence of the setting, it began to dawn on her that something did not feel right. If she was in store for a promotion or reward of some kind, why wasn't there a little more levity in the room? They were all treating her with the circumspection of a family member at a wake. Everyone rose when the COO walked in, which was strange enough in itself. A short man with owlish eyes and a sober look, he cut an unimpressive figure. He had a reputation for being direct and business-like or,

depending on your viewpoint, abrupt and abrasive. Vince introduced him to Kristin and he pumped her hand before taking his seat at the head of the conference table.

Thank you all for coming, he said, as his assistant handed him a glass of Dr. Pepper. Especially you folks from New England. We have some important changes to announce, and I thought it best we do it here in person. He took a sip of his drink looking first at Kristin, then Corey. You all know we've started rolling out our ElderFutures initiative. I can't tell you how much is riding on this. Maybe Wall Street can, but I can't. Actually, Wall Street won't. Not yet, anyway. It's in wait and see mode. We haven't seen the change in our share price yet that, frankly, we expected. They want to get a better idea how we're going to handle things. So fair enough. Here's what we'll show them.

He cued his assistant. Shades closed over the floor-to-ceiling windows, a screen lowered on the near wall, the lights went down, a projector switched on. The future of assisted living, announced the COO, as the large screen lit up. Cruise ship amenities. He pushed his chair to the side to better watch the promotional video with the others. Smiling seniors in the casino. The full service spa. Educational lectures. A range of fine dining options. Top flight entertainment. On site medical care 24/7. The latest in-room monitoring systems.

It's a luxury cruise ship docked in your own home town, said the COO. Now who in their right mind wouldn't want to live out the last chapter of their life in a place like that? All aboard, I say. The presentation ended, the lights were up, and he was back at his place at the head of the table. Too good to be true? Not with ElderFutures. It's happening right now. There's only one problem. Vince, what would that be?

Actually there's two, said Vince. Redundancy and economies of scale.

Actually, said the COO, they're the same problem. And that, folks, is why we're here today. Vince, back to you.

Vince, Senior VP Northeast Region, placed his hands on the table and cleared his throat. Kristin tried to look attentive but her eyes were drawn to his Adam's apple bobbing in his neck like a cork. Reviewing the demographic projections, he began, the staffing needs and infrastructure requirements, and our potential market share, it's now clear that something's got to give. ElderPartners can support only one facility in

Mangunet County, and the facility best positioned to meet our needs for ElderFutures is River Terrace. Simple as that. So we'll be phasing out The Commons at Greendale over the next twelve months. He clapped his hands on the table and glanced at his boss.

Everyone else looked at Kristin.

Kristin, said the COO, we know this is tough news. But we know we can count on you and your team to get the job done. You'll be reporting to Corey—you two have met, right?—to move this thing along as cost-efficiently as possible. Scott will be working with—is it Jacqué?—to handle our relations with the Greenbury community during this process. We need a smooth transition here. I'm sure you understand.

Kristin looked out the window. The hills of Nashville were very green. She looked back at the people around the table. They were nodding. It was all very interesting. Everyone was playing their part perfectly in character, but what part should she play? It had only been a matter of seconds, but she had already absorbed the impact of the announcement and was on the verge of accepting it like a simple change in the weather. Then she realized she was expected to say something. She raised her hand.

Can I say something?

Of course, said the COO, leaning forward as he reached for a croissant. The room was quiet except for the overhead hum of a small fan cooling the projector bulb. Outside, behind her, the sun glinted amber off the windows of the downtown office towers, and the Cumberland sparkled a brownish blue.

We've had a few bumps in the road at Greendale, said Kristin, straining to keep her voice clear and steady. I'll be the first to admit that. But things are turning around. Expenses are down. We aced our state inspection. You know there are no charges against the Greendale bootleggers, right? The Met, the Feds. They dropped everything.

The Greendale bootleggers? said the COO. Who are they?

Kristin brought news of Greendale's closing back to Greenbury with a small bonus and a heavy heart. Heavy not for herself. If anything, she felt relieved, liberated even, as if she were waking from an odd dream. For the staff. For the residents. Although maybe she was being overly sensitive about the staff. Jacqué was chomping

at the bit to get out of there. Rosemary should retire anyway. Given River Terrace's expansion, Halley could probably transfer, along with Lou. Ted had already given notice. He found a job in Reno when he was there on vacation visiting his sister. Half the servers and aides could probably transfer as well, and the rest were, well, collateral damage. Friendly fire. There would be anger, grief, and loss. There would be token severance pay and job counseling. But the residents. That was a different story. She didn't know what would happen to them, although River Terrace was holding a few spots. If they could afford it.

It was Scott, a month after the Nashville meeting, over one of many working lunches in the cluttered Greendale conference room, who mentioned in passing that, according to some old emails he was sorting through, ElderPartners originally bought Greendale for the sole purpose of limiting local competition and consolidating operations.

It was a fire sale, said Scott. Too good to pass up. They got it for a song.

In other words, said Kristin, they planned to close it from the get-go?

Just thought I'd clue you in, said Scott. Looks like it was nothing you did or didn't do.

Kristin didn't quite buy that, but she wasn't surprised. Nashville, she had learned, was a very funny place.

I got these cards off the internet, said Halley.

'Happy 100th birthday! With 100 years of priceless moments under your belt, your heart must be full of joy. You deserve every precious memory.'

Not bad, said Jacqué.

Or, 'Wishing you many more years of good health, overwhelming happiness, amazing grace and perfect peace of mind. Happy 100th birthday!'

Not sure, said Kristin. That ‘many more years good health’ part sounds a little weird.

OK, then how about, ‘May your special day be filled with sunshine, smiles, laughter and love...exactly what you’ve brought to the world for 10 decades. Have a very happy 100th birthday.’

Nice, but not Arthur. Let’s stick with the first one, said Kristin. Jacqué and Sophie agreed.

100 candles on the cake?

Of course.

A letter from the President?

That might not go over so well, said Sophie. He’s not crazy about the President.

Didn’t we do that for Ben?

No, his family did.

What about a scrapbook?

I don’t think we could pull one together.

Then a time capsule, maybe. Or, like, a ‘100 years ago today’ collage.

A collage. That’s good. Let’s check that out.

Arthur likes to talk about a big labor trial out west around the time he was born, said Sophie. Big Bill Hayward, and some miners’ union.

Never heard of it, or him, said Jacqué. But if that would make Arthur happy, I’m sure we can come up with something.

I don’t know about bringing up a labor trial right now, said Kristin. Let’s try to keep it light.

OK then, wait till you hear this. It’s perfect. Halley read from her notes. His birthday numbers, 6, 7, and 1907, reveal that his Life Path number is 3. It represents vision, imagination and joy of living. He possesses a great talent for creativity and self expression.

Perfect, Halley. We can go with that.

There’s the photo display, of course. And all those paintings in his apartment. We could display some of them in the activities room.

Right. The portraits of his wife. Excellent.

And the music?

Opera, of course, said Sophie.

That's a still a touchy subject, said Kristin, but yes. And we should ask Herb if there's any other kind of music he likes. You know, Louis Armstrong, 'What a Wonderful World', that kind of thing. Something more American.

Sophie, you can choose the opera.

I'd be happy to.

And colors? What are we going with?

Black and gold.

Why black and gold?

It just is.

When they'd chosen the banner, the balloons, the flowers, and the menu, all was set.

I don't know how much longer I'll be here, said Dot. My daughter wants to move me to...to where she lives.

There's still some money left, said Arthur. What's the rush?

It's not about money. She wants me closer.

So why all of a sudden?

I don't know. I thought she didn't want to bother with me.

They paused, not knowing what else to say.

I heard Herb's coming back, said Arthur.

That's nice, said Dot. I'm sure he wants to be here for your party.

Oh God, that thing. I almost forgot. I don't want a party. I hate being treated like a relic.

Don't be silly, Arthur. It's your day. Go ahead and be a relic. It's worth a celebration.

I wouldn't mind celebrating with you. I don't care about the others.

There's Flo.

Flo's a pain in the neck. I should have left her in California.

Dot laughed. Don't say things like that about your sister.

I wish we could go out somewhere Dot, just the two of us. A nice quiet dinner. That's all the birthday I want. To tell you the truth, I'm tired of everyone else. A hundred years later, and people act just as crazy and stupid as they did the day I was born.

And why wouldn't they? But you've had some good times, right? Even here at Greendale, with Herb.

Maybe. But Herb is one of the biggest fools of all. He still loves a system that screwed him every chance it got, all his life. Doesn't have a clue. I think his brain is pickled.

I wouldn't know about that. I think I've had a nice life mostly. The problems I had I made for myself.

If only it were that simple, said Arthur.

They paused again with nothing to say.

I'm going to miss you, Arthur. You've been more than a good friend. You've been a

A what, Dot?

I don't know how to say it.

That's okay. I don't know how to say it, either.

I told my daughter about you. I told her not to worry, it was purely platonic.

Arthur thought for a moment what that meant.

Arthur woke dressed in his clothes from the day before. His shoes were off and his legs were covered with a quilt, though he couldn't remember how it got there. He raised his head just enough to see his portrait of Marie hanging on the opposite wall.

She was still there, averting her eyes. He'd slept well, which was strange. Too well. He forgot to make arrangements to see Flo. That bothered him. He hated slips like that. He must remember to see if the bus could take him to the hospital after lunch. He'd better get there today, since his birthday was tomorrow. He closed his eyes and lay back on the pillow, regretting now that his photos and paintings would be on display exposing them to the comments of strangers. He pictured Marie's body full and firm in her wedding gown. The camera captured that. Her lips too, full and firm. He summoned the memory of his desire for her and how it filled his days. He tried to feel it again, sexual desire, even a trace, but there was nothing. No warming of his blood, no tingling in his nerves. He tried to imagine it and had more success. He could picture her young body, and imagine the touch of her hand and her breasts. But he couldn't feel the memory. He couldn't recall what real desire felt like, he could only recall its power, the power that affected so much of his life, that colored his waking thoughts, until when? Was it still there when he painted the portrait hanging in front of him, with her fullness gone and her skin pale and creased? Yes, he thought so.

And for what, exactly? For a son and daughter who died before he did? No, it didn't have to be for something else. It was for itself. Yet it was strange to feel nothing after such power. Such nothing. Not that he missed it. Do you miss food when you're not hungry? But he was curious to return for just a moment to remember how it felt. With his wife. Or with Dot. How it might feel, how it might have felt. Sure, why not with Dot? Just one moment for old times' sake with either of them—a widower's, an old man's quaint notion on his birthday. He remembered Flo in the hospital and suddenly feared he might be too late, telling himself once again that sometimes you don't get a second chance for these things. He went to swing his legs off the bed. They wouldn't move. He tried again, but nothing happened. They lay there disconnected, as if someone had set two logs against his hips. He was puzzled. Did they simply refuse to move, or had he forgotten how to move them? He tried to think through the process for moving legs. There wasn't much to it. They simply moved when you moved them. Maybe if he waited. Maybe if he fell asleep, when he woke they would move again like they did yesterday. But he couldn't sleep. Maybe it had something to do with his clothes. He loosened his belt and undid his shirt. He waited. Still nothing. Turning on

his side and curling his torso inch by inch across the bed, he managed to bend far enough to grip his thighs. He rubbed and squeezed them as best he could. He slapped them, and when they didn't respond he pushed them. They were stiff and heavy, and hardly budged. He tried again. They wouldn't move. He couldn't remember what it was like to move his legs.

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Arthur's stretcher rolled out the front door into the bright light of a June afternoon, making its way down the entrance ramp to an ambulance waiting at the curb. Above him bobbed the bearded chin of the EMT framed by the fresh young leaves of his old friends, Greendale's oaks. He shut his eyes against the sun's brilliance, but its glare pierced his lids. He turned his head for a last look at the building and saw the blurred outlines of Halley and Renee waving from the vestibule. The Greendale bus was parked next to the ambulance. As they hoisted him into the ambulance bay he caught a glimpse of a woman in a wheelchair being lowered from the bus to the pavement, tethered to an oxygen tank. Flo, he tried to call, but could only muster a hoarse whisper. He smiled faintly and tried to wave, forgetting that his hand was strapped to his side. He mouthed a silent apology for not visiting. Hunched over, Flo's eyes were fixed on the ground as they wheeled her into the building. Halley welcomed her in the lobby with a yellow rose and led her past Arthur's birthday display. Flo raised her head for a moment, nodding weakly as her eyes rested on the center photo, on Arthur's bride with her wedding bouquet.

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Ready for dessert? Devon, the new server, stood by with his arms clasped behind his back. No pad and pen for Devon, no delays writing out each order. His memory was sharp, and he trusted it. He took accounting classes at the community college.

Flo swiveled her head toward the sound of his voice. You got any ice cream?

Of course Flo, said Devon. What kind would you like?

Pistachio, said Flo, wheezing. She had barely touched her mac and cheese.

Pistachio for Flo, said Devon. And for you, Sophie?

Spumoni, said Sophie.

Sorry, Sophie. No more spumoni.

Sophie looked across the table at Herb and feigned a little pout. Then pistachio, she said.

Two pistachios...Herb?

What kind of ice cream do you have? asked Herb. His face was flushed and his eyes a bit bloodshot.

Vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, and pistachio, said Devon.

Pistachio, said Herb, winking at Sophie as he took a sip of the special spring-water he'd poured in his glass.

And Carl? Any dessert?

Carleton was a bit confused by the choices. He had joined them from another table, taking Palmer's place when the census declined. There were only enough Greendale residents left for one sitting per meal. I'm not sure, he said. Can you check back with me?

Of course, Carl, said Devon. No problem.

Marge sat sightless next to Ben's old chair at the table by the kitchen. She had barely touched her food. The hen's table was empty, disbanded after Betty left for River Terrace. The new chef, Luis—Ted's replacement when Ted left for his Reno job taking Lauren with him—strode over to chat. Luis was the sous chef at River Terrace, on loan till the Greendale shutdown was complete. How was everything? he said. How'd you like the mac and cheese?

Everyone nodded but Flo.

Very nice, Luis, said Herb, reclining in his chair and patting his belly. Just one suggestion. You might try broccoli spears instead of stewed tomatoes. For a little variety.

OK, Herbert, said Luis. I'll make a note of that. Mac and cheese with broccoli for Herb.

Halley, wearing an elf's hat as she make her lunch rounds, followed directly on Luis' heels. Everyone ready for the Christmas party tomorrow? she said. There's caroling in the game room this afternoon. Egg nog and cider. Herb, we need your tenor. The college kids will be there.

Egg nog? said Herb, but declined to commit.

They ate their ice cream in silence. When she finished, Flo laid her spoon on the table and announced, without looking up, Arthur always said the mac and cheese was better at the hospital.

By Valentine's Day The Commons at Greendale was empty, two months ahead of schedule. Kristin and her team had done their job well. The building and grounds were up for sale, with Greenbury College showing interest. The local media ran feature stories on the new amenities at River Terrace. ElderFutures was on track, as reflected in the ElderPartners share price. After he was hospitalized Arthur went to a skilled nursing facility on the other side of town. Herb and Sophie managed to visit him a few times before The Commons closed. When it finally did, Flo joined him. In six months their assets were gone and they went on Medicaid. It hardly snowed that winter. For three months the streets of Greenbury were slick with sleet and freezing rain. Kristin and Chuck got a last minute deal on a three week cruise from Miami through the Panama Canal to Hawaii, covered by her severance pay. She had a new job waiting for her when they got back. The salary wasn't much—grief counseling for Mangunet Home Health

and Hospice—but it came with decent benefits. She felt lucky enough. Her family would still have health insurance.

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Look. There, out the window.

See them? In the tree, across the parking lot. Their tails are fluffed up. That's because it's cold.

Yes, come in.

See the frost on the windshields? That's how cold it is. They're funny, don't you think? Just like monkeys the way they run around. There they go again. See? In the tree.

Now who are you?

I don't know where people come from these days. They float in, they float out. Like ghosts.

Linda? You're Linda?

They smile at me and jabber away. Blah-blah. Jabbering ghosts, bobbing in and out. Where do they come from?

Who? My daughter, Linda?

You seem like a nice person. I like nice people you know, kind people. You don't make much sense though. All these questions. How was breakfast. Have you been outside. What do you mean, outside? What do you mean, breakfast? Silly.

My memory's not so good these days.

Those things out there. They like nuts, you know. Those small nuts, you know the kind. What are they called? There they go again, playing like little kids. Round and round the tree. I could watch them all day. Round and round.

See them? You know, those...We had a hamster when my kids were young, with the little wheel and the sawdust in the cage. You know...

Was it a hamster? We had guinea pigs, too.

I'm going somewhere?

It went round and round. What were their names? Those kids? I know but they must be grown by now. Acorns. That's right. That's what they're called. Mighty oaks from little acorns...

You look familiar. Yes, of course I know you. You're my oldest.

What are you doing here?

Yes, I am glad to see you.

A lot like monkeys. They're...

Squirrels. Of course they're squirrels. What else would they be?

Look at them out there.

Playful, aren't they? We had a hamster with the little wheel and the sawdust in the cage.

Their tails are all fluffed up because it's cold. Look, there's frost on the windshields.

We're going somewhere? You said that. Where?

I'm perfectly comfortable here. I don't feel like going out.

Why?

Nobody tells me anything. I know your name. It'll come to me. It's...It doesn't matter. I know who you are.

No, I'd rather stay here.

I love this house. You all grew up here. I said to myself the day we moved in, this was the place I want to live for the rest of my life. Doris is my sister you know. She always made a point of saying that her kids had their own bedrooms but she was always like that since I can remember. I'd do something and she'd always try to make it look less than what it was. Sisters will do that. It's natural, I suppose. That's why I never liked visiting her and you kids thought it was silly but you don't know all the things she said. Things about you. I could stand her saying things about me, she did that since we were kids. But not you. I draw the line there.

My sister was not a nice person. That's right, Aunt Doris.

I never forgave her, you know why? She never apologized.

Did you know she used to hide my clothes?

And mother would never believe me. She always took Doris's side because she was such a good liar and said I must have forgotten where I put them.

Yes, I'm coming.

I know, grab the handles and

Now what?

Rock back and forth. Here we go. Push.

Where? Is it cold out?

I used to like the cold. I loved my first pair of gloves. Real gloves, not mittens. I ran outside to show them off. In the snow.

My what? Oh, that.

They were special.

I don't need a... what do you call it? A higher level of something. Of care. I'm fine right here.

I need my gloves. It's cold out. Now where did I put them?

Where did you say you live, honey?

It was small, but I loved that house.

Denver? That's nice...I am too? In Denver?

Appendix A

Greenbury: A Town With A History

(from the Greenbury Historical Society website)

The land on the western bank of the Sebequanash River where Greenbury now stands was originally home to the Mangunt Native Americans (also spelled *Mengundt*, *Manngut*, and *Mangunet*). The first European record of the region was made by the Florentine explorer Giovanni Verrazano in 1524, who referred to it as 'a land heavily wooded, with abundant ticks and mosquitoes'. There was little further known contact until the arrival of the Dutch explorer Adrian Bloch in 1610. From his discovery of native symbols resembling crucifixes, Bloch suspected that French or perhaps Portuguese expeditions had preceded him and attempted to convert the natives to 'papism'. At the time the first European traders appeared, the Mangunt were part of the group of tribes in the Sebequanash Valley under a single chief named Towbeag. At first the Mangunt traded exclusively with the Dutch until the crew of a West India Company ship kidnapped a group of Mangunt women, intending to sell them in Suriname. While the crew were drunk, a raiding party led by Towbeag helped the women and a small group of Africans to escape, setting fire to the ship. The fire did little damage and the Dutch sent out their own raiding party the next day that, failing to find the escapees, killed two Mangunt boys fishing in the river. In retaliation the Mangunt killed a French priest and formed a trade pact with representatives of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. A smallpox epidemic soon broke out among the Indians which greatly reduced their numbers, and the English purchased large tracts of Mangunt land. In 1662 plans for a colonial settlement were drawn up by the General Court. The first permanent white settlers in the area arrived in 1664 from Plymouth Colony, traveling up the Sebequanash River with ten sheep, six horses, four oxen, a negro slave, and two cannon. On September 11, 1664, the General Court established the town of "Mangunet". Shortly thereafter, Chief

Towbeag died of measles in the town stockade, awaiting trial for the slaughter of a settler's cow that, he claimed, had destroyed his corn patch.

In 1671 the new settlement was renamed 'Uz', a name meant to indicate that life was often a trial for the early Puritan colonists. Clearing land and tending farms in the rocky soil of New England required constant labor, along with constant prayer and meditation. Law, too, was often harsh among them. Offenses legally punishable by death in the colonies included witchcraft, blasphemy, cursing or smiting of parents, and incorrigible stubbornness of children. Uz was spared the depredations of King Philip's War largely through the exertions of the colony's Indian allies. Despite their tribulations, by 1686 the Puritans owned all but 300 acres of the former Mangunt territory. In 1709 the name of the town was changed to "Greenbury".

When the Kanapes, traditional enemies of the Mangunt, arrived in the Greenbury area in the latter half of the seventeenth century, conflict with the local Sebequanash tribes was inevitable. The Mangunt referred to the Kanapes as "weasels who walk on two legs." Towbeag hoped that the colonists would intervene on their behalf, since disease had weakened their ability to resist. The English, however, refused, citing the need for an alliance with the Kanapes to pursue their trade war with the Dutch. Over time, in the years before his arrest, Towbeag was forced to sell off most of the Mangunt property. After his death the remnants of the tribe joined with Native American bands in the Hudson River Valley of New York, and eventually removed to Wisconsin where their descendants reside on a reservation that is a major tourist attraction and casino in the Green Bay area.

In 1734 the Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards preached an extended version of his famous sermon 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' from the pulpit of the second Greenbury Meetinghouse, sparking a religious revival that spread throughout the Sebequanash Valley. The following year, widespread despair over belief in their certain damnation led to a rash of suicides. Even worse for the religious community, a group of youths was found sharing drawings from a midwife's anatomy book. The ringleader claimed he 'didn't care a turd' about the church or its ministers and disappeared from town, but the majority of his companions confessed to lewdness and

disrespecting the authority of the church and were fined sums that nearly bankrupted their families. The money was put to good use in building the third meetinghouse, which still stands at the north end of the town square.

During the eighteenth century Greenbury grew into a prosperous New England settlement. By the time of the American Revolution it was a thriving river port with one-third of its citizens involved in the slave trade. The first enslaved Africans were brought to the town in 1668 from Barbados. Among them was Jane Whetson, a young woman who learned not only to read and write in the home of her master, a Greenbury minister, but mastered several classical languages as well. Her book of Latin verse was published first in London and, after her death at the age of 27, in Paris. By 1756 Greenbury had the third largest population of enslaved Africans in the state—518 slaves to 4,536 whites, worth a total of nearly \$140,000 at that time, or approximately \$30,200,000 in 2005. Most enslaved people in Greenbury were subjected to the milder conditions of domestic work rather than the harsh demands of plantation life, and the enlightened attitude of its white Christian citizenry eventually led the state to abolish slavery in 1848. In the years leading up to the Civil War the city was active in the abolitionist movement. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, Frederick Douglass traveled through Greenbury incognito on his way from Washington, D.C. to his home in Rochester, NY. Greenbury was an active hub on the underground railway, and members of the town's tight knit Quaker community were often fined and jailed, and occasionally tarred and feathered, for feeding or sheltering runaway slaves.

Greenbury patriots actively supported the colonists' struggle for independence. While Greenbury was spared British occupation during the Revolutionary War, the Royal Navy's blockade greatly reduced Greenbury's shipping trade. Nonetheless, the maritime expertise of Greenbury citizens contributed to the war effort as well as to their own fortunes. At least 16 privateers were authorized by the General Assembly to plunder and seize English ships. The property and goods of Loyalists fleeing to British-controlled territory were confiscated and auctioned to help finance the purchase of goods for the Continental Army. Greenbury's stores of pewter contributed raw material

for ammunition and its farms supplied food, all purchased by the quartermaster general at market rates. Greenbury also contributed considerable manpower to the war effort, including many of its enslaved persons. The service records are incomplete, but the enumeration of September 1, 1776 shows 588 Greenbury men on the militia rolls and 202 men in the Continental Army. At that time the total number of Greenbury men between the ages of 20 and 70 was 947. Elihu Webb, a resident of Greenbury serving with Benedict Arnold in the fall of 1777, kept a daily diary that chronicled his and his comrades' drinking during the Battle of Saratoga. After the British surrender, their company escorted 128 British and Hessian prisoners to Hartford. With money 'liberated' from their charges, Webb describes how they made the rounds of local taverns before being jailed by the sheriff and sent to rejoin their regiment at Albany. Other than occasional raids on coastal villages, Greenbury and its environs did not experience any direct military engagements.

Like many New England towns, industry was an early part of Greendale's economy. One of the earliest iron forges in the state was established at the outlet of Lake Potabesett in the hills to the west of Greenbury, in 1767. The forge supplied local needs and the early shipbuilding industry that developed on the banks of the Sebequanash River. Capt. Jerome Byrd was a master ship builder in Greenbury after the Revolutionary War until his bankruptcy and suicide in 1839. Captain Byrd was also the owner and creator of the Newcastle Screw Dock Company, a dry dock facility for ship repairs that was eventually destroyed by arson. Shipbuilding was given a brief boost during the War of 1812 when the British burned an American fleet captured at the mouth of the river. Interest in ship building in Greenbury steadily declined thereafter, due to the difficulty of larger ships navigating upstream. The knowledge gained in forging and casting iron, however, was later used for the manufacture of door knockers, waffle makers, boot pullers, meat grinders, iron grates, iron stoves, and curling irons.

In the period when the town had its maritime ambitions, Greenbury merchant traders pushed unsuccessfully for the clearance of sunken hulks obstructing the lower reaches of the Sebequanash River, and sought the creation of Docklands County in

1785. While some locals preferred the name Tiber County to indicate the area was well-situated to be the center of a vast new American empire, the name Docklands was chosen with the intention to make Greenbury the head of a world-class river port much like London. The same persons also established the Docklands Turnpike (now Route 186) to link all the settlements on the western side of the Sebequanash with the goal of creating one long port. The port's rapid demise, however, began in the early nineteenth century with strained American-British relations and resulting trade restrictions which led to the War of 1812. The Embargo Act of 1807 devastated Greenbury's maritime commerce and the industries supported by it. Many Greenbury citizens, having lost their livelihoods, migrated west to the Ohio Territory. Despite the naming of the county, the port never recovered. In 1821 the county's name was changed to Mangunet. However, the city distinguished itself in the war effort, as Greenbury's Captain William Stratton made an heroic stand on the shores of Lake George before fleeing. During this period, Greenbury became a national center for the manufacture of spoons. Numerous pewterers in the area supplied the majority of spoons to the United States Army during the War of 1812. After the war the once lucrative spoon business passed on to the rising spoon centers of Vermont and New Hampshire.

In the nineteenth century Greenbury became a center for bell manufacture so renowned it was nicknamed Clapperville. The first factory was constructed in 1808 by Barton Williams on the site of the old Mangunk reservation, which is now the Indian Hill cemetery. During the 1800s, thirty firms were said to have built and run shops, or small factories producing bell and bell related products. Bell-making continued to grow during the 1800s with firms utilizing the water power of the Potabesett Stream. During the Civil War numerous coffin trimming concerns lined the small waterway, and historic mansions built with coffin trimming fortunes are a feature of the town's historic district. Some firms changed focus over time, such as the Wonkus Mfg. Co. which started first making bells, then later coffin trimmings, and still later bell toys. Coffin trimmings had a brief resurgence during the influenza pandemic of 1918.

The bell companies that dominated the economy of Greenbury continued to flourish, and a significant number of large fortunes were made until the horse and buggy era gave way to the age of automobiles. A series of violent labor disputes

prompted several firms to move their operations southwards. Two firms—N. N. Hill Brass Co. and Dong Bell Mfg. Co., continued into the 1960s. They survived by changing production from metal bells in the 1800s to bell toys after the turn of the century. The last original bell shop, operated by the Jamison Brothers, was razed by fire on May 27, 2002, but continues in full operation in a new Greenbury location. A number of factories closed while remaining structurally intact, but are unavailable for adaptive re-use due to the presence of toxic substances at levels that resist remediation. Other mills, which were remediated or did not contain toxins, have been converted to condominiums, offices, stores, and other small businesses. They are currently being promoted by the Mangunet Chamber of Commerce as attractive sites for micro-breweries and small tech firms.

Greenbury played an active role in the American Civil War. Colonel George Whitson, the scion of a prominent Greenbury family descended from Puritan settlers of the original town of Mangunet, fought bravely at Antietam where he died in action in 1862, killed by friendly fire while rallying his scattered troops to resume their uphill charge of an entrenched Confederate line. Another casualty at Antietam was Major Robert Phelps, a promising pharmacist educated at the Woodcock Institute in Greenbury, who died in a dysentery outbreak during the Federal retreat. The popular Civil War marching song "Georgia's Our Supply Train" was written by Robert Clay Clark, a Greenbury native who became the town's first high school band master.

As was true throughout New England, Greenbury entrepreneurs were early adopters of the American system of manufacturing. By the latter half of the nineteenth century manufacturing had become the mainstay of the city's economy. In addition to bells, products with finely made metal parts such as clocks (Wilbur, Crittendon & Co.), and typewriters (Soundless Typewriters) were produced. It was briefly the home of the pioneer automobile manufacturer Eisenstadt Horseless Vehicle Company until its bankruptcy in 1907, brought on by lawsuits stemming from a series of patent violations. Parker Wellington, an engineer and founder of Soundless Typewriters, bought the old Eisenstadt factory in 1909. Wellington called typewriters "poems in

mechanism" and thought all technological advancements should be used to further the arts and sciences, and for the pursuit of world peace and human happiness, "...if civilization is to endure". He was once asked what developments he thought the future held for typewriters. Wellington offered the following answer concerning the relationship of writing machines and the newly developing means of communication: "Will automatic writing machines someday both write and receive such messages with guarantee of accurate transcription? Will the ether waves of radios mystically touch and guide my writing machine keys, inspired from afar by friend, associate, correspondent; and may I return messages to them in this way?" There were also several machine tool & die manufacturers in the city, as well as a factory producing latex gloves and condoms.

Greenbury in the nineteenth century became a regional center of culture and education, producing its fair share of artists and musicians. 1831 saw the establishment of Greenbury College, which was to become one of the area's preeminent liberal arts institutions. The college replaced an earlier school on the same site, Woodcock's's Apothecary and Military Institute, which moved to Morton, New Hampshire when it was denied a charter by the state and later became the Morton Academy of Dance. The two main buildings of the original school still stand on the college campus. Composer Henry David Waddington was born in Greenbury in 1864. After music studies in Europe in his youth, he developed a successful dry-goods business in Chicago where he composed 20 light operas in addition to hundreds of songs, orchestral works, sonatas and ballets. In his autobiography he claims he patterned his works after his idols Gilbert and Sullivan, and was inspired by the tonalities of John Philip Souza. In painting and the fine arts, the Sebequanash River School had its origins in Greenbury and the surrounding countryside. Its artists became renowned in the region for their 'high thinking and low living'. These avant-garde 'Lambentists', as they were sometimes called, introduced Romanticism to the Sebequanash Valley in the last half of the century. And Greenbury was briefly the home of a major-league baseball team, the Greenbury Whitsons of the National Association, who played for one season in 1872.

After the First World War and the devastation of the Spanish Flu, Greenbury threw itself with gusto into the spirit of the Roaring Twenties. According to the *Greenbury Sentinel* there was ‘a speakeasy on every corner’, and fortunes were made by an army of bootleggers who smuggled liquor from Canada up the Sebequanash River for distribution inland. The stock market crash of 1929, and the Great Depression that followed, put an end to a decade of good times, and prosperity did not return until after World War II. Greenbury was one of two post-war sites in the U. S. Navy’s decade-long project to develop a nuclear powered airship. The billion dollar endeavor, cancelled in 1957, established Greenbury as a research and development center in the booming aerospace industry.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the once predominantly Protestant and Anglo-Saxon town underwent a demographic transformation. First Irish and German, then large numbers of Italian, mainly Calabrian, immigrants arrived to work in Greenbury’s factories and farms. Polish and other eastern European arrivals soon followed, and by 1910 the population had increased to nearly 16,000, the majority now Catholic. In the years preceding World War I Greenbury was a hub of anarchist activity and labor unrest among the region’s working class, ‘Wobblies’ who actively supported the radical policies of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Immediately following the war most leaders of the anarchist movement were arrested and jailed under the Sedition Act, and many were deported to Italy. Meanwhile, the number of African-Americans dwindled to a mere 53 persons as employers chose to hire white immigrants. As a result, in the 1920s the town’s Ku Klux Klan chapter directed most of its efforts against Catholics and Jews. Examples of Klan regalia can be seen on display at the Greenbury Historical Society Museum. Later in the twentieth century, as part of the Great Migration, more African-Americans settled in the area. They were followed by an influx of Hispanic residents—first Puerto Rican migrant farm workers who settled out from local tobacco farms, and later, after the Hart-Celler Act in 1965, migrants from Mexico and Central America. The efforts of two Greenbury College professors brought a small group of Laotian refugees to Greenbury in the early 1980s who became the

basis of a thriving Laotian community, and a similar story is true for Greenbury's small Tibetan population. Greenbury is also the home of the first Jain temple in the state, and has attracted a Sri Lankan population as well. This mix of peoples is evident in the range of restaurants Greenbury currently offers, which has become one of the most well-known features of the city. The vibrant restaurant scene now supports a thriving vegan, low-carb, non-GMO, and gluten-free community.

Appendix B

Focus Group Transcript

Syn-Age Consulting Partners, Inc.

Transcript: The Commons at Greendale

Assisted Living Services

Male Focus Group

Input sound file: Standard

Date: _____

Moderator: Welcome everyone to this focus group discussion and thank you for coming. My name is Steve. I'm from Syn-Age. We're a national consulting firm. We work with assisted living communities to help improve their products for seniors. So the purpose of this focus group is to get your opinions on the services Greendale provides. What you say here will be kept confidential. The information from this discussion will be used for analysis as a whole, your actual names will not be used. Please feel free to express your views clearly and in detail, one person at a time. There are no right or wrong answers. We're all here to share. This session is being recorded, so it would be much appreciated if all mobile devices were silenced or turned off. Any questions?

Resident 2: Do we raise our hands or can we just start talking?

Resident 5: Raise our hands? Get a load of this guy. We're not in school here.

Resident 6: What's with you? That's a reasonable question.

Resident 5: Aw, go chase yourself.

Mod: Sir, that's fine. You can just start talking. Everyone okay with that? So let's begin. What are your thoughts about what's going on at Greendale? Sure (name), go ahead. You don't have to raise your hand.

Resident 2: What is what?

[coughing]

Mod: What's going on at Greendale. In general.

Resident 3: WHAT?

Resident 2: The changes...uh...you mean the changes.

Resident 1: So you want the low down on Greendale.

Resident 2: You mean what's going on with the changes or the charges?

Mod: The changes. In general.

Gen: [aha, mmm]

Resident 4: I say If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Resident 3: WHAT?

[pause]

Resident 3: WHAT CHANGES?

[pause]

Mod: Anybody else? (pause) Okay, let's go on to the next question. What would you say you are satisfied with at Greendale?

[laughter]

[pause]

Resident 2: Most of the staff are okay.

Resident 5: Except the ones don't speak good English. I can't understand them half the time.

Mod: Right. Let's hold off on that for a minute. Let's stick with things you're satisfied with for now.

Resident 2: umm...The washing machines and the dryers...They're very...ah...convenient...Right?

Gen: mmh, yeah

Resident 6: I guess the food's okay. Most of it.

Resident 4: [laughing] The WHAT?

[squeal of hearing aid)

Mod: Hold those thoughts. We'll get to food services in a bit. Right now we're talking about things you're satisfied with.

Resident 2: They keep the building very clean.

Resident 1: Right. I ain't seen a cockroach in days.

Resident 3: A WHAT?

Resident 1: Forget it.

Mod: Okay, now let's talk about things you're dissatisfied with, or would like to see changed.

Resident 4: How much time you got?

Resident 5: I'm telling you, half the help can't speak English. I don't know what those (deleted) are...

Mod: [inter.] Sir, I have to stop you there. Let's avoid...

Resident 5: [inter.] You said there's no wrong answers.

Mod: Yes, but...

Resident 6: Just pipe down (name).

Resident 5: YOU PIPE DOWN.

Mod: Please gents, let's try not to argue. I want to give everyone a chance to talk.

[pause]

Resident 3: You just get to know people and they're gone.

Resident 4: You got that right.

Gen: uh huh, yep.

Resident 2: Some people keep wandering into the wrong apartment. I can see that happening once in a while, but all the time?

Resident 1: Yeah, like you, (name).

[laughter]

[pause]

Resident 4: Okay, I'm gonna name the elephant in this assisted living room. Moolah! Mazuma, baby! What's with the price hikes?

Gen: YEAH...[clapping]

Mod: Could you all say a little more about that?

Resident 1: You bet we can. I'd be better off at home paying full time help. If I still had a home.

Resident 5: Goddam right. I never wanted to leave my house in the first place. First the goddam judge takes away my driver's license, then my goddam kids...

Mod: [inter.] We should move on here.

Resident 2: I hear they put saltpeter in the water pitchers.

Resident 5: That's true...they...

[pause]

Mod: So how do you feel about Greendale's food services?

Resident 4: How do I feel, or what do I know? I know the food's better in the hospital.

Resident 5: The hospital? Are you nuts? All they got there is one big microwave.

Resident 4. It's true. I should know, I been there enough times.

[pause]

Mod: Anyone else?

Resident 6: Sunday dinners are good.

Resident 4: Yeah, but not enough salt.

Resident 3: Not enough what?

Resident 4: NOT ENOUGH SALT.

Resident 6: Salt's not good for you.

Resident 4: How would you know, are you a doctor?

[inaudible]

Mod: Ah, okay, there's the salt issue. Let's hear from some other people.

Resident 2: The spumoni ice cream is good. Really quite good.

[coughing]

Mod: More thoughts on the food?

[pause]

Mod: How do you feel about Greendale's nursing services?

Resident 1: The nurses are swell, that's what I think.

Resident 5: Yeah, but you sneeze they call the meat wagon.

Resident 2: That's their job.

Resident 6: What, a six hundred dollar cab ride to the hospital to cover their keisters?

Resident 5: Cha-ching.

Resident 4: You got that right.

[pause]

Resident 4: Enough with the flu shots.

Resident 5: I want to know what happened to my Viagra prescriptions.

Resident 1: Me too.

[pause]

Mod: Anything else?

Mod: How do you feel about Greendale's new spa services?

Resident 1: What new services?

Resident 5: What do you mean, spa services?

Resident 6: What is this place trying to be, Lourdes or something?

Resident 3: The nurses aide?

Mod: No, no. Hold on. I mean like massages, aroma therapy, Reiki,...The things they started last month.

Resident 3: Yeah, the manicures...pedicures...

Resident 1: The beauty parlor stuff? That's for dames. When's the last time any of us got a pedicure?

Resident 6: The podiatrist comes to cut my nails.

Resident 1: Mine too.

Resident 5: Me too.

[pause]

Resident 2: How come there's no steam room? That's what I call a spa.

Mod: Okay, next question. How do you feel about the activities offered at Greendale?

Resident 4: So-so.

Resident 2: Comme ci comme ça.

Resident 6: Mezza mezza.

Resident 5: Says you.

[coughing]

Mod: Anyone else?

Resident 1: Well...forget the sing-a-longs. Oh my god.

Resident 2: I like the painting classes.

Resident 6: We need more trips to the casino.

Resident 3: Halley's nice.

Resident 5: Halley's too pushy.

Resident 3: Halley? She's a doll.

Resident 5: What do you know? I never see you at chair exercises.

Resident 1: What's that to you?

[inaudible]

Mod: Is there anything that would make you likely to leave Greendale?

Resident 4: [laughs] Besides the food, you mean?

Resident 1: And the cost?

[pause]

Resident 3: A broken hip. It happens all the time. You break your hip, you ain't coming back.

Resident 5: That's why they should have thicker carpets.

Resident 6: Use a hip protector, why don't you.

Resident 3: Those things don't work.

Resident 6: Then don't fall, fat-head.

[pause]

Resident 2: If a certain type of woman was after me for... You know what I'm talking about. They need to screen people better before they let them in.

Resident 6: I just go where my kids put me. I don't care.

Mod: Is there anything Greendale could do to make you more likely to stay?

Resident 4: Yeah. Stop treating us like chumps.

Resident 1: And stop changing things up all the time.

Resident 4: If they got a new chef, maybe.

Resident 2: Keep your price hikes tied to increases in the consumer price index.

Resident 3: THE WHAT?

Resident 2: The consumer price index.

Resident 3: I HEARD YOU.

Resident 5: Sex. More whoopie.

[laughter]

Resident 1: Not more whoopie. Better whoopie.

[snorting sound]

Resident 4: You got that right.

Mod: We're almost out of time. Are there any more suggestions or recommendations you'd like to make?

Resident 5: Yeah, get those (deleted) outa here. If one of them....

Mod: [inter.] We can't...

Resident 6: [inter.] SHUT UP (name). You rube.

Mod: TIME OUT HERE, GENTS. Hold on a minute. Please...let's all calm down.

[pause]

Mod: That's better. Everybody take a deep breath and we'll go on. Okay? You're doing great. We're almost done here. Now, any more recommendations?

Resident 2: Keep people from wandering into the wrong apartment. It scares the bejesus out of me.

Resident 1: Who are you talking about?

Resident 2: I'm not naming names. You know who you are.

Resident 1: Aw, take a powder.

[door opening and closing]

Resident 6: They should have wine and beer at dinner. At least let us bring our own.

Resident 1: And stop watering down the drinks at happy hour. You think we don't know?

Gen: Yup, uh huh.

Mod: OK. Anything more you'd like to say before we wind up?

Resident 5: What did you say your name was?

Mod: Steve.

Resident 5: Steve, so why are you really here? And why are you recording all this? Are you spying on us or something? This is all going on our record, right? For the government? Did Social Security send you in here? The IRS? The FBI?

Mod: God, no. Syn-Age is a private company. Your answers are completely confidential.

Resident 2: Says you.

Resident 5: So who hired you?

Mod: ElderPartners.

Resident 1: So who owns ElderPartners?

Mod: um, I...I don't know.

Resident 6: I have to iron my shoelaces,

Resident 3: WHAT?

Resident 1: I SAID I HAVE TO IRON MY SHOELACES.

Resident 3: Me too.

[chairs scraping]

Mod: Okay, I think that's about all. We can wrap it up here. Thank you for your time.

Resident 6: Abyssinia.

Resident 1: When do we get our massage?

[door closing]

-End of Transcript