

Quincy and Vienna

By Craig Cunningham

Copyright © 2021 by Craig Cunningham

All rights reserved

For information about permissions, other works, and the author, visit craigscunningham.com.

"If I flip this coin one hundred times, how many times would you guess it to land on tails?"

Jack picked up the coin and made sure it was not a magician's prop, as Quincy was known to carry in those days.

"I'd be a fool to guess anything other than fifty."

"And how many times for heads?"

"Fifty."

"Good. Now we have something to build off of. But let's say that we own the coin, and everyone else pays us to flip it." He flipped the coin and let it fall directly on the table, where it wobbled to a stop. "Does it matter how it lands?"

1

Sara Guerrero lay in an abandoned alley with her legs spread and her eyes wide.

They had predicted rain, but the clouds now broke apart and a dirty moon spread its patchwork glow on the world. She had never paid much attention to the moon. Now it was the sole witness to the greatest achievement of her life: giving birth to a son. A flowered dress was balled on the muddy ground before her to cushion the baby's arrival. Sara groaned as a dying coyote. She had never experienced any comparable pain in sixteen long years of life. She reached down and pulled the baby out by its ears, seeing it was a boy and confirming the prophetic dream she had two nights prior.

Exasperated, she looked down at the boy and whispered, "Make me proud."

He was born in the back corner of the alley behind Big Jane's Funhouse, amidst the brothel cries of licentious men and on top of his mother's threadbare dress. After severing the umbilical cord with a pocketknife, Sara inspected her child through the smoke of her final cigarette. There she recognized the brush-thick hair of her grandfather, the stonehearted bastard who was murdered but had great aspirations for his bloodline. And in the child's eyes she uncovered the mystery of his patronage, seeing the crystal blue eyes resembling the one-armed card player named Quincy Ray who stole her money as she slept.

Sara took a tube of lipstick and wrote the man's name across the child's stomach. She hoped some generous soul may deliver the boy to his rightful place in the world.

"Forgive me, child," she said. "But the only place for you to go is up."

One hour later, Captain Demetrius Joyce walked onto the bloody scene during his nightly patrol through the brothel district. The stout young fellow removed his cap in honor of the dead whore. He bent down and wrapped the baby in the dress.

“Don’t worry, Quincy Ray. Now, you’re in my hands.”

*

By six o’clock in the evening, the train station was crowded with the usual array of characters Demetrius had come to expect. Regis Burnside the ticket taker with the arthritic hands shouted out arrivals and departures with genuine fury. He took upon himself the responsibility of making sure the station worked like an oiled machine, just as he had been doing since the Civil War thirty-five years prior. A steamy whistle echoed through the station as a locomotive slowed to a stop at the platform.

As always, Demetrius wore a uniform without defect. He took great pains to prepare his clothing each morning so that his subordinates might learn from his example. He shined his shoes and polished his badge with specialty oils. He scanned the station for the Victus Clan who had become experts at picking the pockets of unsuspecting travelers, and who were marked by the red sash they wore on their belts. They traveled up and down the railways, exiting the trains for long enough to snatch a watch or pocketbook before they jumped back on the line, never to be captured. In one hand he held a black club, and in the other he rocked a stroller back and forth to pacify the child within.

Demetrius bent over the iron stroller. He stuck out his tongue, causing Quincy to giggle.

“Got to watch the thieves, hadn’t we, Quincy boy?” he said, glancing up. “Yes, we had better.”

The captain poked Quincy’s soft belly. The stroller limited his abilities to inspect the station. Usually, he depended on the generous women of his church to look after the boy. The ladies of the First Baptist Church of God’s Eternal Reign

took the weekend to vacation to a country estate for their annual women's retreat to discuss the tribulations of marriage. Rather than leaving Quincy with his maniacal sister Harriet, the captain determined to look after Quincy himself.

"Move along, folks. Don't linger. Leave nothing unattended."

Demetrius slapped his club against a pole.

Everyone familiar with the station knew the secret Demetrius tried desperately to keep: he was a passive man unfit for the rigors of police duty. More than once he been seen bringing a pocket full of dried apricots to the herds of wild felines that lived between the walls of the station. The cats loved him dearly, although they hissed at all others who drew near their hideaway. Demetrius arrived half an hour early each day to make sure the cats received proper nutrition and had access to fresh water.

"Quincy, Quincy. I saved you from a life of hardship, but you saved me from a life of loneliness. There is nothing in the world so hard on a man as being alone."

He kissed his finger and touched Quincy's forehead.

Just then, the doors of the train swung open. The first passenger to depart peeled back his jacket to expose a red sash. Demetrius motioned to an officer at the other end of the station as the Victus Clansman wove in and out of the crowd. Demetrius pushed the stroller into a corner and tailed the thief across the street.

When he came back, Quincy was gone.

*

The child Quincy disappeared from that devastated community as a whisper in the wind. No one had any clues as to his whereabouts. Harriet Joyce suggested the boy had jumped out of his stroller and boarded a train headed for outer space. Demetrius had not the strength to correct her misgivings. With a shattered soul, he sought the comforts of Reverend Walter Jeremiah, who told him that the boy was in God's hands, and it would be wise to move on with his life.

In truth, Quincy wound up in the care of one Wilbur Welch, a circus worker whose wife named Darlena had become so desperate for a child that she visited a bridge each night after Wilbur went to sleep and threatened to cast herself onto the stones below. He knew his marriage would dissolve unless he provided a child. Wilbur scooped Quincy out of the stroller in a spontaneous kidnapping. He returned to the house with Quincy in his arms and found a note that Darlena had indeed decided to make the jump. She crashed through the top deck of a steamboat and landed in the coal room. Rather than returning the baby to the captain, Wilbur fled town on a horse-drawn wagon and wound up working for Chief Tonkawa's Traveling Indian Show and Circus.

Time would reveal that Chief Tonkawa was not a chief at all, but a longhaired Mexican named Julio who had been confused for an Indian so many times that he decided it might be profitable to play along. He started a circus around the lie and made a fortune. At noon each Saturday, he rode his horse named Dinky through the crowd of onlookers and cast a series of spears into hay-stuffed cowboys. The show's pamphlets claimed thirteen of Tonkawa's family members had been massacred by gringos in the winter of '84. His desire for vengeance still burned. The newspaper columnists labeled him as the most believable Indian in show business.

After dazzling the crowds with his miraculous accuracy, Chief Tonkawa retreated to the ringmaster's tent and guzzled nearly half a gallon of sour mash whiskey, his headdress and deerskin pants draped over a clothesline, and his naked body submersed in lukewarm tonic water. It was during these vulnerable moments when he ranted to Quincy that he suspected the world was coming to an end.

"Everyone ought to pack up their suitcases for the long journey to heaven. Just wait, Quincy," he slurred. "I know I've said it before, but today is the day the world comes crumbling down. Cleanse your soul. Jesus and his apostles are on the way. Riding mules if you can believe it. *Mules!*"

Quincy sat on the floor watching the ragged Mexican scrub his feet with a toothbrush. The porcelain tub sat in the middle of the tent, on the dirt floor. Tonkawa loved the tub dearly, and had tried and failed to inscribe his name on the side with calligraphic handwriting. He realized the name was unreadable, and painted a large, black 'T' instead. Sudsy water spilled over the side of the tub as Tonkawa slid under the surface and rose again, pinching his nose.

"I can read your stars, Quincy, as clear as day. My great granddaddy Ausberto taught me how to see the future."

Chief Tonkawa stared at Quincy for a long while. He pointed straight up in the air.

"You're going to be a rich man one day. But it's not gonna matter because you'll die all alone. You're the last flower of Spring."

At this, Wilbur stumbled into the tent, sunburned and irate after six straight hours of sitting on the stool by the Ferris wheel. He finally abandoned his post when a young girl popped all ten of the balloons he spent the morning inflating.

"You look like you've seen the Devil," Tonkawa said.

Wilbur ignored him in search of whiskey. Tonkawa held up the bottle.

"I was just telling Quincy here that Jesus and his friends are on the way."

"Don't dirty his brain with your lies," Wilbur said. He ripped the bottle out of Tonkawa's hand and drank it empty, belching on its completion and rubbing his nose at the sting. "I'm tired of this damned life. Every town in this godforsaken country is the same. Little kids screaming like demons and raising hell, popping my balloons every chance they get."

Tonkawa reached for the moneybox on the table next to the bathtub. He clutched a handful of bills.

"Take it. You should go buy yourself a woman. Or a man, or a monkey."

Wilbur shook his head.

"I don't want more pennies. I want to be partners. Equal shares. I been doing some thinking, and I'm the only one who knows how to run the wheel. And if it

weren't for that wheel you wouldn't have a thing. Not a damned thing. This whole carnival would disappear like a turd down the river."

"Partners?" Tonkawa sat up in the tub and squeezed the water out of his greasy ponytail.

"You heard right. Partners. With a fifty-fifty split."

Tonkawa unveiled a pistol he had been keeping between his legs in the tonic water.

"Don't fool around with me, or I'll shoot the boy dead."

Tonkawa aimed the pistol at Quincy and cocked the trigger. The gun staggered in his hand.

"Do me the favor," Wilbur said. "He ain't mine to begin with."

Had he not been so drunk, Tonkawa could have hit Quincy between the eyes thanks to his professional marksmanship. But when he fired, the bullet whizzed past Quincy's ear. Wilbur leapt into the tub with Tonkawa and clawed at his eyes. They splashed around in the water, grunting and cursing one another. The struggle was brief. Wilbur outweighed Tonkawa by nearly thirty pounds. Wilbur turned the gun onto Tonkawa's throat and pulled the trigger twice, causing the bathtub to fill with blood and overflow onto the dirt ground. The Mexican slid under the water limp and looked up at the striped canvas of his ringmaster's tent one final time before fading into darkness.

Wilbur stepped out of the tub and grabbed the moneybox and the pistol.

"Come along, Quincy. It's time to go."

*

From there, they hid in the back of a wagon and jumped out at a small town near the state line. One thing led to another. They wound up staying with a pair of Polish brothers who specialized in sheltering escaped prisoners. Quincy never remembered much about those days except that one of the brothers cooked breakfast and the other dinner, but they did not believe in eating lunch because

that special meal was skipped in honor of the third brother who once ran away from home and was never seen again. In the long hot hours between meals, Wilbur tried to learn the craft of woodworking but failed due to his inherit impatience. He cursed and flung a hammer into a cabbage patch. Eventually, the brothers suspected Wilbur of stealing the golden cross that disappeared from their mantel. A scheme was born to suffocate Wilbur in his sleep. Wilbur and Quincy escaped, only to bounce from town to town with a poker player named Erwin. The former soldier taught Wilbur how to cheat without being caught in exchange for Wilbur writing letters to his forlorn daughter back home in New York. In time, Wilbur and Quincy struck out on their own and made a living by pick-pocketing tourists in river towns.

In the summer of 1905, Wilbur had been working a club called Greenlight for nearly three months. He took Quincy along as a good luck charm. The place was anchored by an antique chandelier that was said to have belonged to a relative of Jefferson Davis. The fixture hung down from a domed ceiling, where one of the more talented whores had painted a seascape. Six tables were set aside for gambling, and three for those waiting in line to see a girl.

One special night, a fourteen-year-old girl named Marcy wandered in off the street and sat next to Quincy. She leaned over and introduced herself.

“I’m Marcy. What’s your name?”

He scratched on his ear and looked the other way.

“Is your daddy that one in the hat?”

He shook his head, no.

“I’m here looking for work. A girl can make good around here if she’s willing to work for it.”

Quincy walked halfway across the room to rid himself of her company. The whore poking around on the piano with the missing keys hissed at Marcy.

“Don’t take it personal, honeypie. I never seen a boy so sad. Every night. Damn solemn child if I ever seen one.”

“He don’t need to be rude about it.”

"I never even heard him say a word. He just sits there like a vulture on a fencepost."

"That's no way to be," Marcy said.

At the card table in the corner, Wilbur puffed on a sugary cigar and laughed at a joke about an elephant born in a basement that eventually got too big to ever get out. Quincy watched Wilbur check his cards. He slipped an ace into his hand when pretending to re-light the cigar. Wilbur glanced over at Quincy and winked. He threw a handful of chips into the pot. On many occasions Wilbur had considered dumping the boy with some nuns and hitting the road, but he figured it to be a bad business decision. After Darlena's suicide he had little direction and held on to the boy as a reminder of what might have been had the family of his dreams ever come to fruition. Plus, Quincy earned sympathy coins on street corners when Wilbur told him to stand still and hold out the bowler hat just like so.

The cards played out and Wilbur won thirty dollars and a pair of riverboat tickets for a cruise leaving that evening just after sunset. He did not ask or care where the ship was headed.

After boarding, the commodore of the riverboat announced that all who took the ride on his famous boat would experience a jubilation in their souls not easily forgotten. He could not have been truer to his word. As soon as the ship embarked, he lit the tails of three fireworks and scared the devil out of his passengers when they exploded unannounced in the air. The old greybeard uncorked the first bottle of whiskey himself and instigated twelve straight rounds of shots in honor of the Zodiac. Not a man was sober by the time the ship was pointed in the right direction.

Quincy hung his legs off the back of the riverboat. He counted the fading city lights as Wilbur danced in circles with the commodore's twin daughters. A fiddler sawed through a repertoire of tunes while standing in the crow's nest, playing toward the open river and serenading the spread of stars that had appeared only moments after sunset. Quincy had counted one hundred lights when the

commodore leaned over the rail beside him and spit a line of tobacco juice into the river.

“It’s one of those nights you never forget. You get one, maybe two, in your whole life. And that’s if you’re lucky.”

Quincy sat silent. Another city moved away from them.

“A boy like you ought to be stuffing his face with candies!”

The commodore reached into his coat pocket and handed Quincy a peppermint. Quincy unraveled the paper and popped the candy into his mouth. He had never met someone so grandiose. The commodore combed through his beard and lamented the nights of his youth when the love of his life told him that he had to choose between the waterways and her love. He never responded to her request, but sailed off into the Indian Ocean for six years of contemplation. By the time he returned to tell her that he had made his choice, she was married with three children and another on the way.

“Where we headed next? That’s the only question we all want to know. What’s on that horizon?”

Quincy neglected to answer. The commodore wondered if the boy was mute, or, perhaps an ignoramus. Suddenly, the commodore pointed into the river. A silvery glimmer reflected beneath the surface of the water.

“My Great Savior,” he said slowly. “I’ll be damned!”

He climbed the railing and peeled off his shirt, revealing a body covered in tattoos of the world’s longest rivers. He looked over at Quincy.

“I’ve learned one thing in all my wanderings. You got to be the captain of your own ship. Ignore the tides, because they’re going to change. Set your course, and sail until it kills you. So long, little fellow.”

The commodore pressed his hands together as if in prayer. He dove into the foaming wake of the ship.

Quincy waited for the commodore to surface, but he never did.

*

By Quincy's seventh birthday, Wilbur had lost all of his life savings. The two of them had been squatting in a tool shed for three weeks. Wilbur spent his days drawing up business plans. If only he could resurrect Chief Tonkawa's Traveling Indian Show and Circus! He met four real Indians from the Cherokee tribe who could take on Tonkawa's spirit but without the drunken rants from his tonic bath. All they needed were the funds to purchase equipment and a contract with the railways, which Wilbur had gone down to the coast to acquire from a magician named Julius C. Zar, who earned a fortune overseas performing in the Baltic.

Upon Wilbur's loan request, Zar kicked him in the groin and turned his Dobermans loose. The trio of ferocious dogs almost ripped out Wilbur's throat and he was only saved when Zar blew a high-pitched whistle that set them running for the kennels. Zar leaned over Wilbur's bleeding face.

"I heard what you did to my friend Tonkawa. You are done in the circus business."

Wilbur stole a bottle of sour mash on his way home and lay on the floor of the shed while Quincy looked out the window at the seagulls being fed by an old man and his wife.

"What you looking at, Quincy? What's so entertaining?"

Quincy still neglected to speak. His mental capabilities had long ago been revealed. Wilbur knew the boy to be smarter than all of the others his own age when he placed him in a county school for a short while. The teacher wrote a letter to Wilbur that same day suggesting Quincy be advanced two grade levels. He mastered advanced mathematics courses but was hung up by his underpants from the corner of the schoolhouse when the older boys found out he outperformed them. Quincy determined school to be a waste of valuable time. He broke into the teacher's home and stole her jewelry because he knew she would be busy instructing the other students. Wilbur suspected Quincy had been playing him for a fool. He threatened to feed him to king cobra snakes if he ever tried to run away.

"Hey dummy. I'm talking to you. You get over here before I bust your head."

Wilbur produced a single coin from his pocket.

“You go to town. If you spend it, I probably won’t remember. If you turn this one coin into two coins, I’ll love you. But by God’s grace, if you bring me back this coin tomorrow just as it is, I’m going to kill you and dump you in the ocean. Get on.”

Quincy nodded and left the shack. He walked up the dirt road towards town. Upon his arrival, he saw a crew of migrant workers under the direction of Mercilus Maxwell, the parade director who ordered them to place streamers from one end of the street to the other. Quincy watched as the frail man with the purple shoes scoffed at the quality of work and climbed the twenty-foot ladder to fix the streamers himself. The migrants sat under the shade trees a block away eating oranges. Mercilus lost his courage and his footing. Quincy watched the little man fall from the ladder and land on the cobblestones below with a tremendous thud. He sucked in his final few breaths at Quincy’s feet, realizing he was now experiencing the tragic end to a disappointing life. Quincy reached into Mercilus’ pocket and ravaged his wallet. He placed Wilbur’s coin on the dead man’s head, and ran away.

By the time the migrant workers came back from their break, a crowd of onlookers had gathered around Mercilus’ lifeless body. They questioned which psychopath had placed a coin on the forehead of the corpse.

“It’s a tragedy,” one man said. “We’re no better than vultures, some of us.”

Quincy returned to the shack with eight dollars. He handed the prize to Wilbur, who kissed him. Wilbur stumbled about the shack while getting dressed. He left and did not return for three days.

*

Despite the hardships, Quincy also experienced his share of joys. He once participated in a game of hide and seek. He was never found and therefore never fully understood the purpose of the game. He hitched a ride out to the Eighth

Annual Spring Revival and watched a man collapse under the weight of his sins, only to be revived and wake up speaking Chinese. He once procured a seat to watch Eugene Wilson, the puppeteer.

But the greatest joy of his life came during opera season. He watched the same performance for sixteen straight nights. He loved to see the ladies and gentlemen walking through the streets, and hear the honk of automobiles, and sniff the scent of expensive perfume lingering on the steps of the playhouse.

One night, Murphy the doorman lifted a stone he had been keeping by his feet and launched it at Quincy's head. Quincy ducked, and the stone crashed into the brick wall behind him.

"One step closer," the doorman dared. "And I'll split your skull."

Quincy rushed around the side of the building and scaled the drainage pipe. He walked along the edge of the roof until he found the place where a piece of plywood covered a hole in the ceiling. He dragged the sheet of wood aside, and peered down through the hole in the ceiling and onto the stage below. He checked his watch. The curtain opened and he took a deep breath. Oh how he wished to applaud!

A Mexican girl close to his age walked out onto the stage, kissing her hands and waving at the audience. According to the newspapers, the singing sensation named Vienna Luz had claimed the title of the eighth wonder of the world with a voice so tender that all who heard her sing were purged of their sins. No one seemed to mind that she was a Mexican.

The harmonious notes of three violins rose out of the orchestra pit. Vienna looked up at the ceiling, as was her custom to quell the nerves of performance. Just as she had for the past sixteen nights, she met the eyes of the ragamuffin boy staring back at her, and blew him a slow kiss. From the rafters, Quincy felt himself entangled in the mystical chains of first love. She moved with a grace he could not understand, and a tenderness unknown to all of his experiences. His heart beat as a kick drum, and then, he felt a rock hit the back of his head and the blood running down his neck.

Murphy the doorman fell upon Quincy before he could make an escape, and gave him such an intense pummeling to the score of beautiful music below that Quincy felt his last moments on earth, when the girl named Vienna Luz won his heart, were the best of his life.

*

After many years of disregarding the advice of his closest friends and spiritual advisors, Captain Demetrius Joyce followed a few select tips from his investigations of the whereabouts of Quincy Ray, which led him through the jaws of hardship, until he landed on the doorstep of the Jefferson Hotel on a Tuesday afternoon. He contracted delirium during his travels, but fought the effects for long enough to locate the boy. The captain asked the man selling finger paintings on the corner about the character of Wilbur Welch, to which the man replied, "He's an animal. Stay away if you know what's best."

Demetrius patted the pistol in his coat pocket. He climbed the stairs to room 301 and tapped on the door.

"Let me alone," Wilbur called out. "I already paid for the week."

"I demand an audience with you concerning the whereabouts of a missing boy."

Demetrius pressed his ear against the door. Inside he heard the creaking wood as someone walked from the bed to the other side of the room, and then a rush of water from one bucket to another. Demetrius looked down the hallway towards the stairs leading to the lobby. He recognized the bloodlust in the eyes of the haggard men lounging in the lobby bar. He could smell the destitution. In such places all things had been reduced to pleasure and survival. The doors of each room were equipped with double deadbolts. A woman sleeping at the end of the hallway murmured for help. This was no place for honorable travelers, but for vagabonds and addicts of opium. The ceiling above the captain's head was no

more than six feet tall, and he could scarcely walk without feeling the tingle of his hair skimming the exposed rafters.

He summoned his courage and tapped on the door again.

"I've suffered many hardships to come here today. I will not be leaving until you show yourself to me. This matter concerns Quincy Ray, a kidnapped boy."

Demetrius ran his hand along the barrel of the pistol in his jacket. The door whipped open to reveal Wilbur standing there with a shave towel, his suspenders hanging down the sides of his trousers. He smelled of whiskey dreams and suffered the bright red face known to those enraptured by a lifetime of carousing. Demetrius looked over Wilbur's shoulder to see a likeness of the child who once stole his heart. The boy cowered in the corner with a bruised cheek.

"Quincy, my boy."

"I'll give you one more chance to mind your own business. Or I'll mind it for you."

Demetrius knew he had no choice but to take Quincy by force. A man like the one before him could not be swayed by logic or reason. He raised a fist to express his seriousness.

"Let it be known that Quincy Ray is coming home with me, his rightful father."

"By God, he ain't."

Wilbur slugged the captain in the stomach. Demetrius doubled over in pain, but rose up holding the pistol with an unsteady hand towards Wilbur's chest.

"It doesn't have to come to this. Return my son, and we'll be on the way."

Wilbur walked forward until the barrel of the gun was pressed firmly against his chest.

"Pull the trigger, hero. Go on and put me down! Put me out of my misery, if you've got the nuts for it! Go on! Go on!"

He pushed the gun aside and punched Demetrius in the face, knocking him to the ground and sending the pistol sliding across the wood-planked floor. Wilbur used the toe of his boot to flip Demetrius onto his back. He hammered his fists into

the captain's face. Demetrius heaved with agony, swallowing blood like air thanks to the crushed cartilage in his nose.

"I done warned you to leave me alone. And look what you made me do. Now you're all busted up."

He kicked Demetrius in the ribs and felt them crack beneath his heel. Wilbur walked toward the pistol on the ground. Just before he reached down, Quincy darted out of the hotel room and picked up the weapon.

The boy steadied the gun and aimed it at Wilbur's chest.

"Quit fooling around. We ain't got time for all this."

Quincy's finger found the trigger.

"Don't come any closer. Not a step."

"He speaks!" Wilbur hooted with laughter. "Ain't that a surprise!"

Demetrius squirmed about on the ground, his head swimming with the delirium, his soul crushed under the shame of being defeated in front of the prodigal son he had devoted his life to rescuing. The woman sleeping at the end of the hall had turned over and covered her ears, screaming insanities. Wilbur placed his hands on his hips.

"Put the gun down and come inside. We'll go out and get you some licorice."

"I don't like licorice."

"Don't like licorice? That's not the way I remember it."

"I'm not staying here anymore."

"Now, I don't like your sass, boy. That don't make me happy. Not one bit."

He lunged forward to steal the pistol. Two gunshots ripped through the hallway of the hotel. The shots frightened Quincy until he realized they came from the pistol he held in his hands. Wilbur fell to his knees, looking ahead at Quincy as if he had just been robbed by his only friend, and then fell over on his side. Wilbur ran his hands over his shivering body, feeling for the wounds but unable to locate the source of the blood. A river of red made its way down the slanted hallway and finally disappeared between the cracks in the wood.

Quincy felt weightless, like he had traded in his arms and legs for a set of wings. He leapt over Demetrius' body and descended the stairs, passing through the lobby of wanderers who shrugged at the gunfire and ordered another round of booze. He then escaped into a snowy evening, destined to be a stowaway on the first train leaving the station.

The banks refused to hold his money.

Without a father, a mother, or an explanation of how he had been acquiring such wealth, they turned him back on the streets. Rumors abounded concerning the street kid named Quincy Ray. One said he infiltrated the altar boys at St. Michael's church and made off with the tithing boxes. Another, that he played a role in a bank robbery by crawling through the sewer pipes and unlocking the bank from the inside at the request of the mob boss Stu Newberry.

Quincy needed a new solution for his finances.

He purchased a shovel and ten cans of coffee, dumped the beans, and filled the cans up with the cash he had collected since leaving Wilbur. He went to the park at midnight and dug ten holes to hide the cans.

He had just covered the evidence with well-placed leaves when he heard a groan from the nearby bushes. Lying face down in the mud with his nose kicked in and his pockets turned inside out was a boy of Quincy's age and circumstance. Quincy saw a smear of blood across the boy's hand, which was missing a finger. He was heavier than Quincy by twenty pounds and sported a buzz cut. Buddy Bobbitt would forever be disfigured from the incident, when an escaped convict who went by the name Fry assaulted him in broad daylight over a disagreement about the state which produced the finest peanuts.

Quincy found a long stick and poked him.

"I got nothing else," the boy said. "Lemme die."

After nursing Buddy back to health, Quincy discovered all of their commonalities. Both lived on the streets. Neither knew anything of their true heritage. They both talked about a special girl waiting for them in some other city.

Both knew the other was lying. Quincy talked about how he had kissed this Mexican girl on the roof of a playhouse, and Buddy said it didn't count since she wasn't white. Once his blood congealed, Buddy suggested they go in to business together.

Such was the genesis of the spinning wheel.

A week later, the boys stood on a street corner next to a spinning wheel marked with twenty numbers. Quincy had toyed around with the ruse for some time. They convinced twenty passersby to bet a dollar on a number with the hopes of winning the jackpot. A gathering of men eventually surrounded the boys and waved their dollars in the air to play. The game operated by Quincy and Buddy took the city by storm. The boys moved the location each day to avoid being captured, leaving small clues to their most devoted players as to where they might show up next. They moved from the shipyard to the garment district, and from there to the clubhouse of a golf course. When the game reached its pinnacle of popularity, Stu Newberry sent five of his mobsters to crack the wheel in half and warn the boys to leave town.

Quincy disregarded the warnings.

A week later, a man stepped to the front of the crowd claiming to have won.

"Show me your number," Quincy said.

The man handed him the number and watched as Quincy flipped the card upside down to verify the watermark. By the time he realized the card was a fake, the man had brandished a blade and rammed it into Quincy's belly.

"Mr. Newberry sends his greetings."

Quincy collapsed into a concrete pillar. The man then pressed his knee into Quincy's ribs and gripped the boy's mouth with his colossal hands. Quincy felt like his jaw might crack.

"This is the last time, kid. Understand?"

Just as the man reached back to stab him again, Buddy leapt off the spinning platform with a battle cry and latched onto the man's back. He sunk his crooked

teeth into the man's neck, drawing blood. The man screeched with agony and slung Buddy into the gutter.

Quincy stumbled through an alley and towards the nearest train station.

As Buddy took the beating of a lifetime, he looked through the blood in his eyes at his friend making it to safety. He figured they were even, now.

*

Quincy reemerged with a coin forgery outfit headed by Luanne Parsons, the red-haired Irish woman who kept a small pistol tucked between her breasts. From there, he started sending letters to wealthy philanthropists and diplomats under the identity of an American mountaineer kidnapped in the Far East by men who practiced black magic and wanted ten thousand dollars in ransom money or else they would sacrifice him in a bathtub filled with venomous beetles. After his ransom campaign, Quincy worked for Mister Ivan Yves creating fake identities for felons.

It all came crashing to an end when he tried to sell George Washington's handwritten journal to an undercover police officer who had been tracking him for almost a year.

He was convicted of ten counts of illegal racketeering, dating back to the spinning wheel. The judge offered him a lightened sentence in exchange for information about Stu Newberry or the one they called Buddy Bobbitt. Quincy claimed to have never heard those names. No one plead his case. He refused the services of a lawyer and agreed with every charge read against him. The judge grunted and declared him guilty.

"Where's the money now?"

"I spent it all."

Quincy owned nothing but a tarnished wristwatch. Most of the money he had earned was buried in coffee cans in a dozen different cities. The judge sentenced Quincy to his choice of seven years of juvenile detention or adoption by an

approved family. He chose the latter. A man named Jim Crockett drove him home that day in a buggy pulled by two horses named Clickety and Clack.

*

Initially, Quincy rejected domestic life.

He attempted escape three different times during that first month, but lost himself in the woods surrounding the Crockett's estate. Jim hunted him down and brought him back to the house, cutting out a large piece of buttermilk pie and assuring Quincy that no one needed to know of the incident, especially not his new mother, Anna, who loved the boy dearly and believed he loved her equally.

In time, he grew to enjoy the company of their sons, Charles and Dale, the former a year older than Quincy and the latter a year younger. When winter came on, they took him into the woods to shoot a deer so that he would have some antlers to hang on his wall. They waited in the fort built ten feet off the ground and overlooking an oat field.

"You ever gone hunting?" Dale whispered.

Quincy shook his head, no.

"I guess you've never even shot a gun, huh?"

"Quit bothering him, Dale," Charles said. "If you don't shut your mouth we're never going to see anything."

After a long while of silence Quincy said, "One time I shot a man. Two bullets, right in the chest."

"Sweet God in heaven. Did he die?"

"I hope so."

"Was it an accident? Or you set out to kill him? You was hungry for murder?"

Quincy could not recall. He only remembered feeling like a bird. Half an hour later, he shot a nine-point buck and the Crockett brothers encouraged him to eat the heart raw, which he did. Upon inspecting the deer, they shuddered at his marksmanship, which resembled that of Chief Tonkawa in his finest hour.

He began to love the house.

The two-story estate was built in a previous century, with bright green shutters and white wood walls that needed a fresh coat of paint. A porch wrapped around half of the house. One chair faced the sunset so Jim could do his thinking. Inside, Anna made sure the home smelled of lavender. She cooked three robust meals a day and somehow found time to catch butterflies in the spring. The place sat on a hundred acres, split down the middle by a river named after an explorer who was buried somewhere on the far side of the property, and who had inspired a collection of ghost stories among the trio of brothers.

Despite Quincy's domestication and growing loyalty to the family, old habits reappeared.

When the boys said they needed new fishing poles to catch the Predator, a local catfish that weighed twenty-nine pounds, Quincy provided them. The church offering plates were missing four dollars the previous Sunday. No one noticed in time to develop a suspect. Jim knew of the boy's tendencies towards thievery, of course, but hoped for the best. He kept a close watch on Quincy's endeavors, all of which were designed for one purpose: to make money. When stripping the feed barn of rotten logs, Jim found six sacks of brand new marbles. He switched out Quincy's mattress for a new one and found twenty-three dollar bills with Quincy's name written on them in blue ink. One morning he awoke early and watched in disbelief as Quincy ventured out to the woods and raided the nests of wild geese, only to sell the eggs at the farmer's market. He heard stories from other parents of their children buying bulk candy from Quincy, some of them falling gravely ill because the candy was mixed with rocks to add volume. He confronted Quincy one Thanksgiving when a live turkey was tied to the porch. Quincy said a stranger gave it to him for free, although he could not remember the man's name or where this transaction took place.

*

Jim received a telephone call that his friend Augustus Demps was in search of a missing ring stolen in the middle of the night. He found Charles and Dale eating bacon sandwiches in the kitchen.

"Where's your brother?"

"Attic," Dale said.

"And what's he doing up there?"

"Fiddling with his pecker, for all I know."

Jim swatted the back of his head and made for the stairs. He could see the faint outline of orange light beneath the attic door. He pushed the door open.

Quincy sat on the ground with candles on each side of him. Initially, Jim thought the boy to be deep in prayer, but knew better since Quincy showed no inclination toward religious dealings of any sort. Jim decided to leave him alone until he saw the glimmer of a jewel in the candlelight.

"What's that there?"

Quincy slowly placed the ring in his trousers pocket.

"Quincy. You want to give me that ring?"

Quincy looked back over his shoulder at Jim. "What ring?"

"You know damn well what ring. Don't play stupid."

"I don't have any ring."

Jim led him outside, where he instructed Quincy to grip the porch banister and receive his lickings.

"In this family, we aren't liars and we aren't thieves. Is that understood?"

Quincy nodded. Jim's thick leather belt cracked against Quincy's bare rear.

"The worst kind of man to ever walk this earth is a thief."

"Yes sir."

"I don't want to do this, but you got to learn to be a man of character. Of principal. To be a man upright in the eyes of God."

He lashed him once more.

"Now, give it to me."

Jim extended his cupped hand.

“Give you what?”

“Give me the ring, and we’ll all move on.”

Quincy took a deep breath of hot summer air.

“What ring?”

*

Quincy trained Dale how to operate the spinning wheel.

Dale enjoyed learning the wheel business so thoroughly that he harassed Quincy on a nightly basis to sneak out of the back window and make the trip to town, where ten or twenty drunks would be guaranteed to play until sunrise. Soon after they began operating at full steam, he asked Quincy for a cut of the profits.

“No, I want a cut of your profits,” Quincy answered.

Dale took an assignment on a different corner. Quincy took eighty percent.

Charles caught wind of the criminal operation and sent an anonymous note to a police officer who attended their church. The officer wrote back to the address saying that he did not care, because his brother-in-law had made a fortune at the wheel and was taking them on a vacation. Charles burned the letter and spent the evening chopping firewood to release his disappointments. For many years Charles had felt a calling to the ministry, and so formed the dream of his life around finding a path to the pulpit. He studied scripture with ferocity. He rejected all desires of the flesh, and stomped the foot of Lucy Gray one Christmas when she placed her hand on his thigh. He fell under the mentorship of Reverend Armistice Kellison, the preacher emeritus of their church who lived up on the mountain and fueled his cancerous body with grasshoppers and prayer.

“You ought to burn that spinning wheel,” Charles said to Quincy one night as they sat on the porch watching the sunset.

“What spinning wheel?”

*

One night, Quincy heard a contestant talking about a gypsy woman who was staying in town and could read fortunes from a plate of black sand.

He asked the man where to find this gypsy, and immediately shut down the game and sent everyone home. He hustled along the pier with the wheel beneath his arm, making his way towards the rubber factory that burned down in the spring and now housed drunken bums who tried to sell half-smoked cigarettes wrapped in tissue paper to the fishermen each morning. Upon entering the dark space, he asked the whereabouts of the gypsy, and was pointed towards a space in the back sectioned off by velvet curtains.

The soothsayer sat at a table next to her plate of sand. She wore a sheer tunic that exposed the rings in her nipples. A strip of cloth was wrapped around her head. The cat in her lap hissed at Quincy and leapt away into the shadows.

"I knew you would come." She pushed out the chair across from her. "I smelled it on the wind. You, the last flower of Spring."

Quincy took a seat and removed his cloth cap.

"How does this work?"

"First, you pay."

He placed a wad of bills into a bowl on the table.

She erupted into a soft hum, staring into his eyes with a sensual magic that entered his soul like a bright light, exposing all things past and all things to come. The gypsy drew chaotic lines in the plate of sand.

"I once read of a mighty ship that set sail and never reached port, because the captain had no maps and no compass. He sailed around for thirty years before he cast himself into the ocean and was swallowed by a whale. That's you. All that sailing only to go crazy and be swallowed by a whale."

"I don't understand."

"You don't want to understand. But you understand. You will never be happy, never fulfilled, never complete, until you find her."

"Who?"

"The one you will never have."

The gypsy whistled and a man with long white whiskers stepped out of the shadows where the cat had just run. He gripped Quincy's elbow and pulled him towards the exit. Quincy fought against him.

"How am I supposed to love someone I can never have?"

The gypsy stood up from the table. Her eyes changed from green to milky white.

"You can love her. But you cannot possess her."

The whiskered man shoved Quincy through the burned down rubber factory. As he walked down the pier, Quincy dreamed of a kiss.

*

It had been almost ten years since Quincy attended the playhouse.

Anna Crockett surprised the family with tickets to see the critically acclaimed play that was sweeping across the country, titled *The Few and the Many*. She purchased matching suits for the boys, accentuated by the white leather tips on the collars of their coats. As the family walked through the doors and into the lobby, Quincy had the overwhelming sense that he was about to be chased by the doorman. As he urinated into the latrine prior to the show, he recalled that night so long ago when he had been doing the same and Murphy kicked in the door and forced his head beneath the water. Quincy freed himself by punching the old fellow in the testicles, which sidelined Murphy for three nights during the play's peak run. Murphy took his revenge on the roof. Those days had come and gone, Quincy realized. He could finally enjoy the treasures of life without being assaulted.

Wilbur Welch was dead.

The whole of his childhood had dissolved as a nightmare.

At the intermission, the Frenchman who owned that theater and poured the pride of his life into maintaining its prestige rolled out onto the stage in his customized wheelchair with the golden spokes. The lights dimmed and he sang a

few notes from the opera of which he had been the star thirty years prior in Paris, when a staircase collapsed under the weight of Bella Bellavue and fell upon him, cracking his spinal cord and disabling his legs.

The crowd applauded the Frenchman's showmanship.

"Dear patrons, I have the fine pleasure of introducing to you a surprise guest," he announced. "Here to perform during this intermission is a daughter of delight, a sister of celebration, and a friend of fame. A Mexican girl of great acclaim! I have just learned backstage that only last week this wondrous singer performed for the governor. She has graced stages across the country, and has even been offered a role in a motion picture. Without further adieu, I introduce to you Vienna Luz."

Quincy shot up out of his seat and stood erect.

Vienna walked out wearing a red dress cinched around her waist with a gown that tailed across the entirety of the stage. On the wings of the stage her mother held the tail of the dress and stood next to the Frenchman as they adored Vienna and shivered at the sound of her opening notes. Vienna's mother had traveled alongside her daughter since that day fourteen years before when the iconic bluesman Jasper King mentioned in passing that he liked the sound of Vienna's voice. Her mother took the compliment as a charge to parade the girl through the gauntlet of hardships until she came out on the other end as something so few had achieved: to be a world famous Mexican. Her husband, the late Gustavo Luz, died of a heart attack six years prior from the rigors of constant travel.

Vienna looked up at the ceiling to quell her nerves, and then began to sing a song about first love.

Quincy fought his way out of the aisle and made for the exits.

He dashed around the back of the playhouse to wait by the performer's entrance. He would never forget the way his heart thudded so many years before when their eyes met and she blew him kiss after kiss for sixteen straight nights. Even now, he felt drawn to her, as if their lives had been connected by some eternal string fastened at the birth of the universe.

He stood beneath a streetlight with his cap in his hand for fifteen minutes before he saw the alley door swing open. An older woman led Vienna outside and towards a black car waiting to take them away. He swept a comb through his hair.

“Hello, Vienna.”

Vienna looked back at Quincy. The odd boy looked nervous under the warm glow of the street lamp. She smiled as her mother pulled her along towards the automobile. She liked the wild eyes and the dark freckles on his skin. He looked mismatched, like he had been put together from leftover parts. A driver walked around the car and opened the back door.

“I used to watch you through a hole in the roof of the Paradise Theater. You blew kisses at me.”

Ms. Luz groaned. She had terrorized many young suitors by digging her long fingernails into their necks and gently telling them that Vienna was too busy for romance. She turned to Quincy.

“Vienna doesn’t associate with street boys.”

As a warning, she held up her pinky finger, which grew the longest and sharpest of her nails.

The driver took Vienna’s hand and guided her into the car. Just before Vienna disappeared into the back seat, she winked and blew a final kiss at Quincy. She did it on purpose, just to ruin him.

“Wait. Vienna, please.”

Ms. Luz murmured something to the driver as she climbed into the back seat and slammed the door closed. The driver reached into his pocket and flicked a coin at Quincy’s feet.

“Save yourself the trouble, kid,” the driver grumbled. “Damn women. They’ll break your heart, sure as hell. I know from experience. If you ever feel yourself falling for a woman, just hit that bottle son. Hit that bottle, and hit it hard.”

The car kicked up dust as it sped down the alley, leaving Quincy alone beneath the sprinkling of stars.

Quincy picked up the coin.

*

Under the guidance of Reverend Armistice Kellison, Charles picked out the seminary of his choice. When the big day came, the Crockett family escorted him to the train station. Charles said goodbye to everyone and assured Anna that he would write her a letter each week to give an update on his education. He kissed her crying face. He reserved the final goodbye for Quincy.

“That wheel’s going to destroy you. A man ought to earn his wages with sweat and blood. Not like a vulture looking for the slowest of the mice.”

“Good luck, Charles.”

Quincy offered his hand. Charles shook it, and found the object he himself had stolen many years before: Mrs. Demps’ ring. Neither he nor Quincy had ever recounted the true tale of what occurred that night, when Quincy spied the ring on a windowsill out of his reach and hoisted Charles up to grab it. Just as Charles snatched the ring, Augustus Demps burst into the room and fired a shotgun through the open window. The boys ran through the midnight woods and dove into the river. Charles struggled to swim against the current because he held the ring in his right hand and had been peppered with buckshot. Charles quickly tucked the jewel into his pocket, and grimaced at Quincy.

“To remember where you came from.”

Charles patted his pocket, nodded at the family, and handed his ticket to the attendant. He chose a seat by the window. The family saw his profile staring straight ahead in the dusty cart as a humpbacked widow took the seat next to him.

“Well, that’s that,” Dale announced. “Who’s in the mood for a corny dog?”

The family took their place in the food line.

Quincy waited until the train was completely gone. On the other side of the tracks, he met eyes with a man he believed to be dead. A crowd of travelers passed between them. The man lifted his hand to wave, crouching near a garbage bin and

finishing a ream of cotton candy. The man wore a black-brimmed hat and smiled, revealing two missing teeth.

No one could mistake Wilbur Welch.

Wilbur stood up with difficulty. He hobbled towards Quincy, forever weakened by the gunshot wounds he experienced at the hands of a young boy who he thought incapable of such violence. After that day, Wilbur spent six months on his back subsisting on vanilla pudding. A nurse in the facility declared him dead but was proven wrong when he groped her buttocks.

"You all grown up now, aren't you? I wouldn't forget that face in a million years. You ain't an easy fella to find."

"Maybe I don't want to be found."

"Time sure has been flying along. Last I saw you was six, maybe seven years ago. I'll bet you remember."

"I'm not sure."

"Oh yes sir, you thought you could kill me." Wilbur removed his hat, exposing the lost hair he had tried so hard to keep by applying an array of medical powders. "But I'm never gonna die. Ain't that the shit. The one's you want to get rid of the most are the ones who live forever."

He smiled at Quincy and stuck his tongue between the missing front teeth.

"I picked up a gig with a carnival crew, operating the wheel. I came here cause I figured we could get back to old times. We was a good pair, me and you. And there's lots of money in this town. Lots of money."

"Go to hell."

"Why you insolent sonuvabitch, I ought to box your ears for speaking to your daddy that way after all I done for you."

He gripped the front of Quincy's shirt and lifted his hand to strike. Jim Crockett jumped out of line at the commotion and shouldered Wilbur to the ground.

"What's all this about?"

Wilbur struggled to his feet on account of his wounded organs and wiped the spit that had gathered at the corners of his lips. He grunted and waved off a helping hand from a passerby. "I'm just catching up with an old friend."

"Do you know this man, Quincy?"

"I think he was trying to rob me."

Jim nudged Quincy towards the others waiting in line for corny dogs. He stood over Wilbur. "You go back to the hole you crawled out of, mister. If I hear that you harass my boy again I'm gonna toss you onto those train tracks, you hear? There won't be any need for me to telephone the police."

Wilbur stood to his feet.

"Pay attention now, hero!" he called. "That boy's a wolf. Ask him about the man he shot down in cold blood. Ask him why he can steal your pocketbook an hour before you know it's gone! Ask who he *really* is!"

Jim guided the family out of the station, well aware of the truth in Wilbur's warnings.

Two months later, they found Jim Crockett with his throat sliced open and his windpipe lying on the ground next to him and covered in fire ants. Some people thought a bear got after him, but Quincy knew better.

He placed that bitter seed in his guts and it began to sprout.

*

The world went to war with itself.

By then Quincy had become a young man and grown tired of operating the spinning wheel. An unquenchable fire for adventure and blood and naked women burned in his soul. He followed the feeling to the nearest U.S. Army enlistment office. He forced Dale to burn the wheel in the back yard and told him that he would see him again in five or six years. Then, he left that same night without packing any of his possessions.

It only took one brush with death for Quincy to relapse into his gamesmanship.

He stole a silver pot from outside the officers' tent where they dropped cigarette butts between hands of poker. Now, the pot sat on the ground in the barracks with fifteen men circled around it. They had not fought for a week. An anonymous soldier had overheard Sergeant Hester Boone discussing a strategy he had read in a book of storming a field with one troop at a time over a period of six years until the enemy became so disillusioned that they surrendered. Sergeant Hester then suggested it might be a valuable strategy in the upcoming battle, and so word spread that the river would soon run red with blood and glory.

Quincy and the others looked down at the pot in contemplation.

Tom Reynolds, of the Reynolds Horseracing Family, stepped forward and reached into his shirt pocket. He dropped fifty dollars in the pot.

"What the hell. If I take a bullet to the heart I'd rather you boys have it than the enemy."

The others added their portion.

Frank Rogers lay on the top bunk overlooking the scene.

"You in, Frank?" Quincy asked. "Searge won't know."

Frank shrugged. He lay on his side with the fifty dollars clutched in his right hand and hiding beneath the pillow. It was well known in those days that Frank butchered a cow in a night of unbridled madness. As the soldiers marched from one town to another, Frank took out his knife and attacked the cow with a primal scream. A psychologist evaluated him. Frank did not remember the incident and demanded someone explain the blood caked on his boots and beneath his fingernails. Back home, Frank made his living as a caricature artist. He feared not losing fifty dollars. But if he lost his need for money, then he surrendered his assurance that life would go on.

"I don't know. It doesn't feel right betting on dead soldiers."

Quincy bent down and picked up the pot, now filled to the brim. He had created the game after discovering that soldiers on both sides raided dead bodies for ammunition, money, and other keepsakes. So he asked everyone to contribute fifty dollars to the pot prior to a battle, and those who survived would split the

bounty. No one could lose anything. To lose first required the loss of life, and to lose life meant you had entered a place where money had no value.

“We all know what could happen out there. And let’s say I die. You think I’m going to miss fifty dollars? And let’s say you and three others live to fight another day. That’s a big pot for you to split up. I’d be happy for you to have it.”

“I have a brother back home. He’s not doing so good.”

“I got two brothers back home. And I’m going to send them a hell of a lot more than fifty dollars when this war ends.”

Quincy held up the pot to Frank.

He glanced inside at the curled bills and lifted his thin hand out from beneath the pillow, the money carefully folded.

“Maybe this one time,” Frank said.

After the war, Quincy spent another year working on a pearl harvesting ship in the Indian Ocean.

Some nights, he recalled the journey taken by the commodore of the riverboat who leapt into the water and never resurfaced. Ignore the tides, he had said, because they're always going to change. According to the commodore, that special Indian Ocean taught a man everything he needed to know. Quincy could not decide if that was true or not, and sent a letter to Anna Crockett stating that he would be returning to his homeland in four weeks, and that he would like to have dinner with her and the boys.

They met him at a restaurant overlooking the ocean.

Charles had doubled in size since leaving for seminary, and he attributed the weight gain to all of the mandatory casserole dinners his church hosted for the unreached peoples of his community. Dale's hand shook from the liquor in his blood. He insisted Quincy tell them a few war stories. Quincy picked the worst of all. A friend named Marlin Chop was stabbed in the heart by the German virgin he loved. As Marlin lay on the floor dying, the virgin set a fire on his chest and fueled the flames with the sensual poems he had written to her. Dale declared it to be the greatest mistake of his life to have dodged the draft, where he could have gained valuable experience to help him land his first job. Charles said the same, but disqualified himself by claiming that if he had gone over to Europe, his church would not be flourishing as it was and a thousand saved souls might still be astray.

"So what's next, Quincy? You eyeing a particular industry?" Charles asked.

"Not an industry, really."

"A man with your brains ought to get in on automobiles. They're making more every year. Doesn't seem like they're going to slow down any time soon."

"I don't care for automobiles."

"How about refrigeration?"

"I thought I might start up the spinning wheel, at least until I land on my feet."

Charles swallowed his macaroni and wiped his mouth.

"Pardon?"

"I could use a little cash."

"Aren't you too old for spinning a wheel on street corners?"

Quincy chewed his steak. "I have a bigger vision for it. Forget the street corners and the speakeasies. I'm going to make it worldwide. Imagine it, boys. Everyone in the world has a chance to buy into a big pot, but only one person wins. They'd be a millionaire."

"And so would you," Dale said.

Quincy shrugged.

"Maybe so."

*

He opened a small office in a dangerous part of the city, furnished with a solitary desk facing the storefront windows. He spent the first week cleaning the glass. The tile floor reflected the light coming through the windows and made the place seem large in the middle of the day, although it was only four hundred square feet, with no bathroom. He cut out newspaper stories that gave him insights into the character and nature of mankind and hung them on the wall for a reminder of how to conquer the world. Deep inside burned a savage and primitive fire that meant to consume everything and everyone who stood in his path. He bought a chair and turned it to face the sunset in honor of Jim. The door to the office came with a bell, but it never rang because no one visited. He needed

time. He purchased long rolls of tickets, and stored them in a locked drawer of his desk.

Eventually, he paid for a small square of advertising in the newspaper. A bucktoothed orphan named Lenny assisted him in his daily work. Many years later, as Quincy saw the hallucinations of his greatest triumphs and failures, he would see the vision of Lenny walking into the office on its grand opening with a trick bucket. Lenny tried to con Quincy into donating to the St. Regis Children's Hospital that was set to be built at year's end. Quincy took the bucket and popped out the round of wood wedged into its bottom where Lenny had hidden six dollars and a picture of his long-lost sister who, it came to be discovered in time, died of tuberculosis on the west coast. The hospital donation scheme turned out to be Lenny's solitary source of livelihood.

Quincy and Lenny became fast friends.

"We're selling hope," Quincy said to him on that day. "People pay us to flip the coin. They pay us to spin the wheel. But we own coin. We sit on top of that wheel. They're paying for that short burst of hope. And you can't ever pay too much for hope. Now, all we need are some good salesmen."

Lenny understood.

He disappeared for three days and returned to the office with six of the most ragtag men Quincy had ever laid eyes upon. All had spent considerable time in prison, and frequented the seediest places in the city where men would be willing to bet a dollar to earn five hundred. Each morning the sales staff came in to the office and were handed a roll of tickets to be sold by day's end. If all of the tickets weren't sold, they received no pay. Officially, Quincy employed no one. The Circus Wheel Lotto Corporation was listed as a one-man scented soap operation. When the tax collector Barnabus Feely stopped by the office to welcome Quincy to the neighborhood, Quincy handed him a bar of soap and told him it should be given as a gift to his wife. Barnabus realized the soap had been purchased at the pharmacy next door, but had no evidence to give life to his suspicions.

By day, Quincy watermarked tickets and diagrammed new markets in his notebook. Lenny reclined on the floor and told wayward stories of his hardships while living in the basement of a factory that produced instruments for marching bands. By night, they drank grape soda on the curb and looked at the empty lot across the street. Quincy promised that he would one day, right there, he would build the largest skyscraper in the city.

“A day will come when we are kings of this city. And I’m going to be the richest man in the world.”

“What would you buy with all of that money?”

Quincy had never considered it. He waved off the question.

“Oh come on. Just one thing,” Lenny said.

“That’s not the point. The worst reason to get rich is so you can buy things.”

“Then what you got me working so hard for? I’m busting my hump, boss. I thought we was in the business of making money.”

“We are.”

Lenny lightly touched the nick cut out of his ear.

“I guess it’s better not to try and figure you out. My head’s spinning.”

They sat quiet until the sun went down.

“Just tell me one thing you’d buy with all that money. I heard of a fella who bought a whole island. You could do that.”

“Sure. An island sounds nice.”

Lenny sighed in relief, even though he knew Quincy was only trying to pacify his fears. Lenny understood. Quincy had no interest in the tangibles of life. He existed only to feed the nature of his instincts, which were to conquer all things without mercy or allegiance to morality. Riches were only useful as a symbol of victory. The more you had, the more victorious you had become over the rest of humanity.

Lenny adored him.

Their friendship blossomed alongside the business. Thanks to Lenny’s fascination with baseball, they spent many of their weekends watching the local

minor league ball club, the Spiders, and were rewarded with a championship season. Lenny memorized all of the stats and created nicknames for the players which he tried to popularize with the fans, sometimes with success. During the offseason, he focused his attention on the silver screen, and criticized movies on a ten-point scale.

One evening, they took a seat in the middle of the theater and shared a tub of popcorn. As always, Lenny bought two grape sodas, which stained his teeth and excited him beyond control. He yipped when the lights dimmed, and whispered the names rolling through the opening credits, memorizing them for his personal benefit. The first shot opened on a jazz lounge. Vienna Luz walked through the crowd and took a seat next to a man with a cane.

Quincy scooted to the edge of his seat. She looked just as he remembered, but with more striking eyes thanks to the makeup.

“Woo-wee!” Lenny shouted. “Check out them hooters!”

A few of the theatergoers glared back at Lenny. Quincy elbowed him to quiet down. Those who kept up with the news immediately recognized one of the men to be Quincy Ray, the newest of the tabloid fascinations. His lottery system had been exposed after a lengthy investigation by the tax collector Barnabus Feely. The press ran six feature stories on the scandal. Rather than crushing the business, the unending editorials about the dangers of gambling accelerated profits into new stratospheres. They quadrupled sales and tripled the size of the jackpot. Quincy tasted the sweet nectar of wealth. He kept his money with a banker named Julian Graham whose dislike of gambling fell second to his dislike of nosing into other people’s business. Quincy made a single deposit and a single withdrawal each week, as he would continue doing until the day of his death.

“Some people don’t like hearing about hooters,” Quincy whispered.

After the movie they walked back to the office in the rain.

“I’m going to marry Vienna Luz.”

“Me too,” Lenny said. “Me too, buddy.”

*

Each morning, Lenny arrived with cherry doughnuts and the *Times*. He sat against the wall devouring the doughnuts while Quincy flipped through the paper to make sure no scandals had arisen concerning the Circus Wheel. One summer morning during the hottest week of the year, Quincy stared at an image on the front page of the newspaper for nearly ten minutes before Lenny asked him if he was frozen stiff. An advertisement for a Fourth of July carnival coming to town featured a photograph of the crew, with Billy T. Moore the famous contortionist featured in the center. But on the bottom right of the photograph was a man Quincy had vowed to kill.

Wilbur Welch.

“What you looking at?”

“The man I’m going to kill.”

Lenny pulled out a fountain pen.

“Should I put it on the calendar?”

Murder did not disturb him as it would most boys. He had laid witness to numerous homicides during his time on the streets. He accepted the need for death as easily as he accepted the need for life.

Quincy and Lenny purchased matching hats to shadow their faces and attended the festivities on opening night. Quincy wove through the crowd on his way to the Ferris wheel, which rose from the center of the fairgrounds and was sprinkled with colorful lights and dozens of riders. The main thoroughfare was crowded, with families making their way to the marksmanship exhibition and young men stopping along the booths to try and win prizes for their beloveds. A mime stepped in front of Quincy, pretending to be trapped inside of a box. Quincy handed him a dollar and told him to go away.

He finally stopped behind a balloon bouquet and looked to the loading dock of the wheel. where Wilbur stood ripping tickets and shouting at the children to form a proper line. He had become putrid in his old age, refusing the showers

recommended by Nelson Nelson, the owner of the circus and the one who had warned Wilbur several years before to give up the dream of resuscitating Chief Tonkawa's Traveling Indian Show and Circus. Wilbur took a seat on his foldout chair with the accompaniment of a cigarette. His leg shook restlessly. The rickety wheel spun behind him.

"That's him."

"I see the dirty old bastard. Now what?"

"Now you do as I told you. He'll take the bait."

Lenny nodded and walked over towards the wheel, whistling at girls and winking whenever they turned around. Meanwhile, Quincy made his way to the Big Tent where Billy T. Moore was in the middle of one of his captivating performances. His trademark move of twisting his body around a flagpole left the crowds too baffled to applaud. Quincy peeked into the tent, and then went around the back to hide in the shadows. He ripped an iron stake from the ground. The symbolism of killing Wilbur was not lost on him. If he let Wilbur live, he would let all of his problems live. He would let all of his weakness and excuses live. Such could not be the case in the world he meant to build. His hand tightened around the iron stake.

In a short time he heard Lenny talking about Drake Wyble, the ace pitcher of the Spiders rehabilitating his injuries.

"Listen here. I don't give a damn about spiders and elbows. Where's the girls who wanted to meet me?"

"Right up here. And they're wild as hell. They think you're good looking, too. And they're *rich!*"

As soon as they passed, Quincy leapt out and hammered the stake into the middle of Wilbur's back, knocking him to the ground in a sprawl. What the coroner would discover during his examination was that the initial blow chipped the spinal cord and started what he believed would have led to a slow paralysis. It never mattered. Wilbur rolled in the grass, groaning and cursing the devil boy

with the buckteeth who had tricked him. He reached into his back pocket and tossed his wallet at Lenny's feet.

"Just take it, you little shit. There's eighteen dollars in there."

"Nobody wants your wallet."

Quincy motioned for Lenny to go stand lookout for police officers. He pressed the toe of his boot underneath Wilbur's chin. Wilbur looked up and his eyes widened at the sight of Quincy.

"Oh, Quincy boy," Wilbur said. "I'm sorry for all I done. I'm begging you not to do this. I'm a changed man."

"So am I."

Wilbur nodded and turned his head to look at the wheel one final time, the dream of his life that kept spinning out of control. He imagined Darlena crashing through the top deck of the ship. And then, he looked up to see Quincy swinging the stake towards his forehead.

As soon as Quincy heard she was going to be at the party, he telephoned Stuart Peck and told him it was a mistake to turn down the initial invitation to his annual birthday bash. He had declined the first time on account of Stuart Peck being a first-class asshole.

The little man born of wealthy heritage wrote editorials for the newspapers about modern art, and delivered a list each year on January First of the greatest artists in the country, which was always arranged by who had paid him the most money for exposure. Quincy believed critics had no place in society. If a man liked a restaurant, he ought to eat there. If a man liked a painting, he ought to look at it. Quincy never understood how people could trick themselves into believing it was more complicated than that, which was Stuart Peck's lifelong ambition. Quincy hated the man even more than his opinions.

But, he heard through reputable sources that Vienna Luz would be attending the party.

No one in the press knew how much wealth Quincy had acquired since opening Circus Wheel Lotto, but they knew he had a hefty stash thanks to the hordes of imbeciles who fed his accounts by buying lotto tickets. No one could dig up any information on his patronage. Where did he come from? Who funded the business? And who was his mysterious right-hand man with the buckteeth and the vacant morality? Was he truly the adopted brother of the great evangelist Charles Crockett? One newspaper even published a story alleging that Quincy had massacred a circus worker behind a tent while Billy T. Moore performed his majestic contortionist routine.

And so when Quincy walked in to Stuart Peck's mansion, announced by the butler who took his overcoat, everyone turned to see the infamous racketeer. He was too skinny for a man of thirty, and made to look more so by the reddish mustache which would forever anchor his upper lip. His thick hair inherited from Sara Guerrero's grandfather, Papa Ramos, was longer than he had ever worn it and resembled a tight-fitting helmet. He wore a black tuxedo perfectly fitted to his frame, and strolled through the entryway as if someone had just whispered in his ear that he would live forever. With one hand in his pocket, he nodded politely at the crowd.

Stuart emerged from the hubbub and shook Quincy's hand. "I was so pleased to hear that you were coming. No guest list is complete without you. Would you care for some wine? Cheese? You must try the cheese. It was cubed by Jacques the Cheeseman. I'm sure you saw his exhibit last spring?"

"I must have missed it."

"And where is Lenny tonight?"

"Lenny's out with a girl. He took her for a drive in the country."

"How fabulous. Listen, Quincy. There are some people here I would like for you to meet. Surely you've heard of Carmen T.?"

"No."

"No? She paints with her own blood."

"Stuart, I came here tonight to meet Vienna Luz. No one else."

Befuddled, Stuart bit into a cube of cheese and pointed at Vienna across the room.

Quincy's breath never reached his lungs. She was more beautiful than he had imagined for all of the years since she blew him a kiss behind the playhouse owned by the crippled Frenchman. Once again he felt the invisible string anchored to both of their hearts at the outset of the universe, and recalled the night he visited the gypsy and her magical feline.

"She's absolutely fabulous," Stuart said. "I'd love to just put her in a box on my mantel. You know, brown-skinned performers are popping up all over the place."

They can sing like birds. And take a look around. Just take a look around. Not one person here is giving her any trouble. It's almost like she's one of us! Almost!"

Quincy watched her in a stupor, paralyzed by her graceful elegance, so natural to her every movement. All the world stopped spinning, the lights suspended and the music stalled in its most painful note. She switched a glass of champagne from one hand to the other. Quincy believed it to be the most beautiful movement he had ever seen, unable to be replicated in a million years. Her hair was almost black, her eyes almost green. Her cheeks hung high, tinged with a dash of red at their highest peaks, her lips thin but widened by lipstick, her neck accented with a perfume that made men want to nuzzle up and kiss right behind her ears, where diamond earrings dangled down to her shoulders.

Vienna spoke with a group of adorers. One gangly fellow in particular was asking her what she was doing so far from Hollywood. She responded with a polite disinterest.

"I wouldn't be able to call myself a host if you didn't try Jacques' cheddar!" Stuart said, presenting a mound of cheese in front of Quincy's face. "I've never had anything so potent in my mouth. And the Meunster, well, you'll have to see for yourself if –"

"Listen here, Stuart. I don't want to hear from you the rest of the night. Or the rest of my life, for that matter."

Stuart took his plate of cheese elsewhere.

Quincy popped a peppermint into his mouth. He straightened his bowtie and walked towards where she stood, each of his steps on beat with the jazz band steaming up the windows with their red-hot tunes.

"That's exactly what I was about to say!" the gangly man crowed to Vienna. "You and I seem to be on the same wavelength, Ms. Luz. May I call you Vienna?"

Vienna offered him a smile. "It was nice to meet you, Gilbert. I'm sure I'll see you around the party later." She turned to walk away, but Gilbert followed at her heels.

“Why later? Why not now? Do you need a drink, Vienna? I’d be happy to get one for you. I have a servant’s heart. That’s what my mother always told me. Of course I don’t know what she’d say about me talking it up with a colored girl, but who’s going to tell her? Really, I’d love to get you a drink.”

“No thank you.”

She moved through the crowd towards Quincy, whose breath quickened as the string between them shortened.

“So, is there a man in your life?” Gilbert asked, following behind. “Not that I’m prying.”

“I’m not really looking to date.”

“I’m only kidding of course. But tell me, what would it take for you to give me some singing lessons? I’d pay top dollar.”

Before Vienna could answer, each of them looked up to see the man known as Quincy Ray, the ghost of business who had taken the city by storm with his spinning wheel. Quincy grabbed onto Gilbert’s bowtie and gave it a slight tug.

“If you have to ask what it takes to win the heart of a woman like Vienna Luz, then you don’t have what it takes.”

“We were just talking and I thought maybe—”

“You thought wrong. Vienna and I are here on a date together, and you . . . what’s your name?”

“Gilbert.”

“Listen sport. You’re beginning to get on my nerves. Go find a corner and sit there for a while.”

Gilbert sulked away and took a seat in a chair in the corner of the room next to Stuart Peck, who offered him solace through cheese cubes.

Vienna turned back to Quincy.

“I’ve been trying to shake him since I walked in the door.”

“I’m Quincy,” he replied.

“I know who you are.”

“I know who you are, too.”

"Yeah? Let me guess. You've seen me in the pictures."

"I have."

Vienna took a sip of champagne, her eyes still visible over the edge of the glass and outlined in a peculiar shade of dark liner. "You seem to have made quite a name for yourself around here, by the way everyone is fawning over you."

"Some people care too much about names," Quincy said.

"A name is important."

"Yes, but the *making* of a name is more important. I'd rather be recognized for that, rather than the name itself."

"Very well, Mr. Quincy Ray. How did you make a name for yourself?"

"I turned a nickel into a million dollars."

Vienna took another sip of champagne, never taking her eyes from the enigmatic man before her. Some inconceivable detail set him apart—something she could not identify and knew she never would.

"But the incomparable Vienna Luz. Now that is a name worth speaking."

"Oh, please. I'm Stuart's exhibit. That's all."

"Not to me, you're not."

"Then what am I?"

"You're my best memory."

Quincy looked down for a brief moment, and thought back to the night behind the Frenchman's playhouse when he waited in the alley to tell Vienna that a gypsy prophesied that she was his soul mate.

"I'm sorry?"

"You know, if your mother wasn't there, I would've kissed you. I would have taken you right up in my arms and kissed your lips. That was my plan, anyways."

Vienna choked on her champagne. "I'm sorry. What are you talking about?"

"Your mother. I don't know if you would have kissed me back. But I was damn sure going to try."

"Quincy, I am not quite sure what we are talking about."

“A long time ago. You sang during the intermission of *The Few and the Many*. I was just a kid. I waited for you back by the performer’s entrance. And then when I saw you, your mother hurried you into a car. I think she called me a street boy. It must have been fifteen or twenty years go. But you blew me a kiss. That much is certain. The driver tossed a nickel at my feet. I took that nickel and turned it into a million dollars.”

Vienna’s mind dug for the memory, buried under so many fawning boys and flashing lights.

She saw him.

She saw the boy standing all alone with his hands gripping the cloth cap, nervous and brave, his face illumined in the alley light. She heard the coin flipping through the air and landing at his feet, the car door slamming, her mother leaning over and saying everyone wants something for nothing these days, but you can never make a mistake. You must be flawless or they will trample your name.

“My God. Quincy. What a tiny world.”

The flush of adolescent love spread across his cheeks.

Stuart Peck clinked his glass and mounted a chair, with Gilbert now holding the plate of cheese cubes.

“Here’s to me and my birthday!” Stuart bellowed.

Everyone cheered except Quincy and Vienna, who remained locked into the enigma of one another’s presence. The crowd burst into laughter at a joke neither one of them had heard.

“Do you want to take a walk? I’m not much for these kinds of things.”

She nodded. Quincy took her hand and led her out the door.

The next morning, when he awoke, she was gone.

He found a note taped on the mirror in the bathroom which read, “We cannot afford each other.”

He pulled the note away, terrified of the truth.

*

After his night of romance with Vienna Luz, Quincy attempted to recreate the sensations with every woman who would have him.

He became a regular at the Coconut Club down the street from where he wished to build his skyscraper. There he became so familiar with the clientele that he could sniff out a new woman as soon as she walked in the door.

He patronized the place for more than the women.

In a way, it represented everything he loved about humanity. Every coconut tacked onto the wall was marked with its place of origin, as the owner Vern King had spent much of his youth traveling the world and collecting coconuts for the bar he wished to open in the twilight of his days. He forged his dream into reality, suffering international diseases along the way. Quincy earned his trust and friendship when a newcomer attempted to steal one of the coconuts from the wall. Quincy tripped the thief prior to his escape. Vern rewarded him with a free ticket for his lunch buffet, which Quincy would eat thousands of times in the decades to come. Before Quincy's legendary patronage, the Coconut Club considered closing its doors. The only time they drew a crowd was when Red White and the Black Bluesmen played their sensual jazz late into the night. On these special nights Quincy always left the club with a woman on his arm, and then took them back to the penthouse he had decorated with zebra skins. He sat in the back booth and swooned the women with his most harrowing tales from the war, drinking through a gallon of orange juice as the hours faded. His most common fantasy in those days was to turn and see Vienna Luz sitting at the bar by herself, swaying slightly to the music. One night he believed the dream had become a reality. Alas, it was Lois Davies, another actress who somewhat resembled Vienna from behind. She wore a sequined dress that stopped halfway down her thighs. She scratched Quincy's kneecap beneath the booth.

He took her up to the penthouse, and allowed her the privilege of turning the key in the lock.

"I'm going to take a bath," she said upon entering. "Would you pour us some tea? God, I'm drunk. Will you be okay while I'm gone?"

"I think so."

"Don't go running off, Quincy Ray. I know where you live."

She thought it was very funny. He watched her stumble down the hall in search of a bathroom, and then he heard a rush of water from the tub.

She walked back out completely nude and told him he needed brand new furniture with a woman's touch. Where were the curtains? Why was the art so brutal and masculine? How could one see with so few lamps? Were it not for her stunning body with the youthful breasts and soft mound of tangled hair over her sex, he would have asked her to leave. But she was in no condition to walk the streets, and he was in no condition to turn down an erotic experience with such a hellcat.

"I like my things."

"You have no taste. None. You're hopeless."

Forgoing the bathtub, she stumbled into his arms and convinced him to make love. They continued their lovemaking on the white rug in front of the fireplace until a pool of water crept towards them, overflowing from the bathtub and soaking the wood floors throughout the house. He pushed her aside and rushed for towels.

"It's all your fault," Lois sobbed. "Here my things are ruined, and you're just running around."

Lois gathering her soaked clothes from the floor of the bathroom.

"Whatever will get you to leave, I will do," he answered.

"You have no idea how to treat a woman."

"You're the one who left the bathtub running."

They fell into one another's arms and made love like bitter enemies, clawing at one another and cursing the other's very existence, as they would continue to do for the next three months.

And then one day she sent him a letter signed by a doctor. She was carrying his child.

*

The same day he learned of Lois' pregnancy, he married her. She moved into his penthouse and burned up the zebra skins in the fireplace to make room for the cribs and toys. After the birth of Madeline, Lois lost the magical spark in her eyes. She donated all of her sensual clothing to a women's shelter and purchased every color in a series of matching sweatsuits. He could have withstood the redecorating, until she cast his framed playbill of *The Few and The Many* into the garbage and replaced it with a photograph of her grandmother sitting next to a Labrador. He fought his impulse to break the frame in half.

"I'm off to the market, Quincy. So you had better keep an eye on the baby," she said, standing by the door.

He lounged in an easy chair looking over some documents sent by Julian Graham. The old banker had tipped off Quincy to an investment opportunity involving space travel.

"Did you hear me, Quincy?"

"Yes. Be gone for as long as you would like."

"And you'll be working?"

He looked up at her. "Don't ask me that. You already know the answer."

Lois wished he would spend more time with her and Madeline, but knew in her depths that he viewed them as a secondary priority. She had sacrificed everything for motherhood, and felt more and more that her life had been split into two persons, with one of them dissolving and the other appearing more brightly. Quincy, on the other hand, moved forward with solidarity. He went into the office at odd hours and would often disappear for weeks. In those days he had taken to riding trains and seeing where they stopped. Prior to his departure, Lenny

would hand him three rolls of tickets. Quincy liked to keep his instincts sharp, and often sold all of the tickets to passengers before reaching the first stop.

"I'd like it if you stayed around tonight. I'm going to cook a roast and we can listen to a radio program."

"I was planning on taking a ride."

"No more trains, for God's sake," she said. "Forget about the train. You have a family now."

The pressure of family responsibility could have subsided if Lois still accepted roles as an actress. But she never left the house. The great art of her life was reduced to choosing which color sweatsuit to put on each morning. After a harsh comment from the maid about her sedentary lifestyle, Lois called everyone in the movie business and begged them for another chance to rekindle the magical screen dreams of her youth. No one honored her requests. Most actresses who announced their pregnancy simultaneously announced their retirement. After such a scandalous marriage, no one knew if casting her would destroy or save a film.

She left. Quincy walked over and looked inside the crib at Madeline.

"I love you, honey-bee."

The telephone rang and he picked it up.

"Yes?"

"Quincy, it's Dale."

Quincy carried the phone over to the window and looked through the clean glass.

"What's going on?"

"This ain't easy for me. You've got to know that to be the truth. But I need some money, and I'm in it deep."

"What happened to your job?"

"Kellor fired me this week for what he called stock fraud. I'm flopping around like a catfish, pal. I'm scared. I owe some people money. I don't have it and they aim to get paid."

"How much do you have saved?"

Dale paused. "None. I got eight dollars. It's all gone in the wind, blown to hell. My whole life was in those stocks."

"Don't bet on other people to make the most of your money. How many times do I have to tell you that? You put stock in yourself and no one else. You'll never get rich on someone else's ideas."

He crossed the room to the folder sent over by Julian Graham and tossed it into the fireplace. All of Julian's research went up in flames. He would have no explanation when the Chinese astronaut who went by Chi Chi inquired whether or not Quincy could be counted on as an investor in his machine that promised to travel through time by first traveling through space.

"So what is this? You want charity?"

"One time, Quincy. One time. I could barely dial your number, my finger was shaking so bad. I'm already embarrassed, so don't make this worse on me."

Unlike most of his countrymen, the recent economic collapse had been a time of feasting for Quincy and his unstoppable Circus Wheel Lotto. He paid a social theorist to draw up a chart to explain the phenomenon, and was given in return a twenty-foot work of art that showed a series of events beginning with the evaporation of wealth, then the onset of depression, the terrors of jealousy, the flicker of hope, and, finally, the purchase of a lotto ticket, which spiraled the loser into an even lower state of being and started the cycle with more ferocity. Quincy hung it in the lobby of the office.

"How much do you need?"

Dale breathed into the phone.

Quincy wondered how much he had been drinking.

"A thousand dollars would be a good start."

*

She walked into the office unannounced at nine at night on the Fourth of July carrying a paper grocery sack. He said nothing as she took a seat across from him and placed the sack on the desk. He had not seen Vienna Luz in two years.

"It's a shame, really," she said at once. "And all my fault. We're destined to be great friends, and I threw it all away because I was scared of the way you made me feel. I hope you'll forgive me."

"You look rested."

"Bahamas. On location. I'm glad you said that because I've been working like a dog lately."

He smiled and looked across the empty office building.

"What would you like me to say?"

"I'd like for you to say we can be friends."

"I don't know if that's possible."

"Oh? And why not?"

"Because I don't have any use for friends."

She raised a single eyebrow higher than the other, as she was prone to do when being playful.

"I think you're wrong. Everyone could use another friend."

"Every friend I've ever had has tried to take something from me."

"You don't have anything I want."

"What's in the bag?"

He reached for the opening but she pulled it away. She leaned back and adjusted the patterned scarf around her neck.

"Something meant for a friend."

"I see. And what advantage would I gain to add you as a friend? Distraction? Obligation? Frustration?"

"It's a risk."

"With low chances of success."

"Yes."

"You always meant something to me that would be absolutely ruined by friendship. Lovers, on the other hand, could be interesting."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I won't be your lover while you're married, and I cannot be your wife."

"Then it's settled."

"Settled?"

"Yes," he said, standing up. "Friendship is our only option."

He reached for the bag and dumped out a cache of fireworks. She burst into laughter as his eyes lit up at the sight.

"There's some kind of gathering down at the park. What do you say?"

So began a long-lasting relationship in which Quincy and Vienna would surprise one another at inconvenient times and drop everything in order to go eat at the nearest restaurant, or ride horses through the hills, or watch street musicians for hours at a time. As the months rolled on, the relationship remained purely platonic, but ripe with a sexual tension both knew could not be harvested thanks to Quincy's loyalty to the woman he did not love. The soothsayer's prediction haunted his nights. He slept through fits of madness. She had told him long ago that he would have no trouble loving the one person who could bring him fulfillment, but would never possess her.

One day as they left the city zoo, she handed him a small wrapped gift.

"Don't buy me things," he said.

"I didn't buy it. But I want you to have it."

He tore through the wrapping paper and took out a mustache comb inlaid with a strip of gold.

"It belonged to my father. He made it himself."

"Don't you want to keep it?"

"I'm not planning on growing out my mustache any time soon," she said. "And since you've got one, you ought to have it. I like the way it looks in your hand."

Lois grew suspicious when she found a note stuffed inside one of Quincy's socks that read, "WAYNE HOTEL, AUGUST 7," signed with an enigmatic E. She

wiped Madeline's nose with the note and then cast it into the garbage along with the dirty diapers. Despite her intuition, she waited to confront Quincy. In time, the evidence of an affair mounted. He scheduled more of his train rides. He lost his appetite for lovemaking. And in one night of certitude, Lois smelled the jasmine-scented perfume of another woman on his fingertips. She threw a glass vase against the wall and told him that his secrets no longer needed to be kept from her.

"I have no secrets." He whipped out the miniature comb to corral his mustache. "Darling, would you sweep up the broken glass? If I cut my feet, I'm going to wring your neck. Also, my old friend Vienna Luz is coming over for dinner tomorrow night. Let's make something nice."

Lois ran down the hall, her bathrobe fluttering as a pink ghost in the darkness. She began spread her clothes for the next night, hoping to impress the tremendously talented and famous woman who she believed had taken her place as the jewel in the eyes of Hollywood's most progressive producers. Quincy swept up the glass and threw it out the window onto the bushes below.

He remained in the window for a long time feeling the cool breeze against his shirtless body. He looked up at the moon dangling over the midnight cityscape and thought of how wonderful it was that a thing so far away dictated the ocean tides, which had to be ignored because they were always changing. Each man's life has one course, he thought, and the only secret worth knowing is you ought to follow it without giving a damn what everyone else thinks your course ought to be.

The following night Vienna arrived on time wearing a beige overcoat and green high heels with perfect elegance. She was taller than Lois expected. Lois, on the other hand, had tried so hard to impress their guest that she came out looking more like a storefront mannequin than a woman at ease. She watched as Vienna greeted Quincy with a kiss on the cheek.

They sat down at the dinner table, with Quincy at the head and the women facing each other as two boxers in a fight to the death to see who could wear him around their waste as a trophy.

"I've always admired you," Lois said. "You're so talented. God. Acting and singing and all the rest."

"But I sure can't cook like this. I'm a mess in the kitchen."

Lois narrowed her eyes, interpreting the compliment as a slight. "You're being modest. It doesn't work on me, I'm afraid."

Vienna smiled and took a bite of her chicken. She placed her knife on the china and the clink sounded too loud in the unbearable tension of the moment.

Lois gulped her wine and refilled the glass to the brim.

"See, not all of us in show business are so lucky. Some people catch breaks and others don't. It's hard enough for women. Even more so for women like us. The nature of the beast, as they say."

Vienna nodded, neglecting to mention the treachery of her youth, when her maniacal mother sent her around the country to sing the national anthem, despite the howls of the audience members who mocked her for being Mexican. More than once a protester threw tortillas at her during the performance. That said nothing of the year she learned how to tap dance so that she could win the role of Zeke Oleander's companion on his groundbreaking theatrical play. The endless dance practice wreaked havoc on her toes, leaving them forever disfigured. Every time Vienna had encountered a wall in her journey to stardom, she had banged her head against it until it fell to the ground. Then, she walked through the rubble with the grace of an angel and the fortitude of a gladiator.

"You've had some nice accomplishments yourself. I saw you in that one film. Oh what was it? You played a fireman's wife."

"It was called *The Fireman's Wife*. That was ten years ago."

"Anyways, it was a very funny movie. I laughed all the way through it."

Lois filled up her glass of wine and turned to look at Quincy, who sat straight in his chair looking at neither of them.

"You're not saying much. Or eating much."

"I ate a big lunch with Julian and Lenny. You wouldn't believe how much food Lenny can eat. I don't know where he puts it. We went to the club, and Vern finally

asked him to lay off the chocolate pudding. He must've eaten six bowls. It made him sick."

A servant walked into the room and replaced the bread on the table. As he reached over Vienna, she leaned back and yawned.

"Should we put on some music?" Lois asked. "I'd hate for us to bore you."

"I'm so sorry," Vienna said. "All this traveling. It's exhausting."

"So is sleeping with my husband."

Lois buttered the bread. She bit into the crust and some crumbs fell on the ruffled front of her dress.

"Pardon me?" Vienna replied.

"Lovemaking with Quincy. I know how physically demanding it can be."

Vienna wiped the corners of her lips.

"Are you implying something?"

"Am I?"

"I'm not sleeping with anyone, not that it's any of your business. I hope you haven't gotten the wrong idea, Lois."

"The mind wanders is all. Late telephone calls and trips to Los Angeles. Notes to meet in hotel rooms. I don't know how on earth I got the wrong idea. Anyways, tell me more about your fabulous career."

At this, Quincy threw his napkin over his plate and stood up at the head of the table. He scooped a handful of chicken from his plate and forced it into his mouth, then walked over to the phonograph and lay the needle into the groove. Quincy spun in slow rhythm to the music, moving towards the wall where the portrait of Lois' grandmother and the Labrador hung.

He lifted the frame off the wall and flung it out the window.

Lois shrieked and rushed to the window. Quincy hooked his thumbs into his suspenders.

"No one here is sleeping with anyone else here," Quincy said calmly. "So we'd better mind our manners, darling."

Just then, Lenny walked into the room having returned from watching the Spiders win 5-4 in extra innings. He had sat alone in the empty bleachers of center field, shouting at the outfielders to accept the nicknames he designed for them.

“Lenny boy! Won’t you join me for a dance?” Quincy asked.

“I don’t think I’m up for dancing. I probably had a gallon of pudding for lunch.”

*

The following winter, anticipation for the lottery had grown to a fever pitch. No one had won the jackpot in six months. The sum exceeded fifty thousand dollars. Questions abounded concerning the integrity of processes used by the Circus Wheel Lotto. Aspiring journalists tried to uncover a scandal. They photographed Quincy purchasing a new convertible and called him the Titan of Greed. Quincy put the fears to rest one day when he announced a winning ticket had been sold, and that some mystery player now held the key to a bright future. The newspapers carried the stories for three weeks, beckoning for everyone to double check their tickets. And one morning Lloyd Stovall, an orchard keeper with six children, walked into Quincy’s office clinging to the ticket he had purchased with tremendous guilt while selling his apples at the town market. Quincy alerted the newspapers, and sent Lenny to purchase lemonade, streamers, and white balloons.

By the time everyone arrived for the announcement, Lenny had decorated the office and handed out cups of lemonade to everyone who walked through the doors. All eight members of the Stovall family stood at the back of the crowded office with flowers pinned to their collars. Parker, the youngest of the boys, held the winning ticket. The family was photographed in an explosion of flashing lights.

“What are you going to do with the money?” someone hollered.

“A whole bunch of nothing for a few days, and then we’ll get back to working the trees. We got a few debts to pay. I suspect we’ll be sending the kids off for a proper education.”

Wanda Stovall blushed and fought back tears.

Quincy emerged from his office with a check in his hand made out to Lloyd Stovall. Lenny led the crowd in a rousing toast of lemonade. Quincy handed the check to the patriarch.

“Lloyd, Wanda, kids, this is a great day for me. On behalf of Circus Wheel Lotto, I’d like to congratulate you on winning the largest jackpot in the history of this great game.”

Everyone cheered as Lloyd held the check above his head as a trophy.

“Quincy! Quincy!” the reporters shouted out, hoping to ask questions of the man who took no questions.

The mystery of his personal life still befuddled newspapermen. Some of the nation’s most decorated journalists had followed his trail until it became cold. They knew he fought in the war, but could not find any of his fellow soldiers to expose useful details of his life, or anyone who could recall seeing him on the battlefield. Did he fight? One journalist claimed he grew up in Wisconsin herding cattle with his father. Another added that he molded wire into collectibles sold at rodeos. One unnamed source said he killed a circus worker in cold blood. His boyhood trials remained hidden. One certainty was that he palled around with a select group of notables, including the applesauce baron Thomas Warfield, the oilman Barrett Mitchell, and the Mexican superstar Vienna Luz. None caused as much speculation or dinner conversation as the latter.

“How much do you have left after the payout, Quincy?”

“Today isn’t about me or this company. Today is about the Stovall family. And to sum things up, I’d like to remind everyone that if you don’t take a chance, you don’t have one. Any other questions can be directed to my assistant, Lenny.”

Quincy pushed through the crowd and disappeared into his office, and closed the curtains. To the great dismay of the reporters, a bucktoothed little man named

Lenny took center stage and answered questions for the next half hour, providing no material appropriate for public consumption. He told wayward and explicit stories, one of which revolved around the prostitute Genie Jerusalem, who promised to take all of her clients to the Holy Land. Slowly, the columnists gave up hope and left to write their articles.

After everyone had gone, Quincy looked out from his office and saw Lenny drinking the remainder of the lemonade straight from the bowl, exasperated and melancholy from telling stories of his past.

“How’d it go?”

“Just like you wanted it to, Quincy. They can’t print a word of what I told them, unless they want people calling up and complaining.”

The next day, the leading newspaper in the country printed a front-page picture of Quincy handing Lloyd Stovall the winning check. The one quotable line from Quincy read, “If you don’t take a chance, you don’t have one.”

*

Eventually, Captain Demetrius Joyce survived into old age.

He recovered from his beating at the hands of Wilbur Welch and returned home to seek the counsel of his pastor and friend, Walter Jeremiah, the simple shepherd who advised him to let the boy go once and for all.

“Some children are cursed, Demetrius,” he had said. “Come, let us tend my sheep.”

He spent the day wrangling the ewes to prepare them for the shear. Demetrius concluded that Walter was correct. Some children were cursed. And as he sat amidst a pile of wool, Demetrius realized that Quincy was not one of those children. No, Quincy was blessed. He scrambled to his feet and escaped the sheep ranch on Walter’s fastest donkey. Walter telephoned the police, but no one could locate Demetrius. They found his uniform and badge sunk to the bottom of the river and held in place by his revolver.

Thus began the longest and most challenging journey of Demetrius' life, when he spent six years following the clues to lead him back to Quincy Ray. He pieced together evidence using his detective's training, and landed on the doorstep of a different man named Quincy Ray who stole his pocket watch and nearly broke his ankle as they wrestled in the street at sunset. Demetrius leapt onto a passing streetcar and escaped the madman, realizing that his journey to find the missing boy must be restarted.

He returned Walter's donkey with a collection of withered petunias tied onto the saddle horn as a symbol of attrition, and started over.

Many years later, he knocked on a brass door and stepped back as Lois answered holding Madeline's hand.

"Yes?"

Demetrius leaned heavily on a cane with a chipped eagle headstock. Surely he would have collapsed were it not for the quality of Brazilian wood holding him upright.

"Mrs. Ray, I presume. My name is Demetrius Joyce. I'm here to speak with my son, Quincy."

"I'm sorry," Lois said. "But he won't speak with anyone claiming to be family. You'll have to contact our lawyer. Would you like his information?"

"No. That won't be necessary."

Lois began to close the door on Demetrius, but he placed his cane in the doorway. "If you'll only tell him that I almost died long ago in the Jefferson Hotel, that will be all."

His eyes sunk into the memory and his lips turned white. The years had created a hunch in his back. He tried to shroud the deformity with a heavy and moth-eaten coat that smelled of a thousand hobo campfires. Lois looked down at the cane blocking the doorway.

"I'll get you the address. Wait here."

She turned into the entryway. Demetrius nudged the door open to see inside. As he did, Quincy walked past eating a waffle smeared with strawberry jam. He

glanced at Demetrius, and dropped the waffle onto the carpet. His hands grew cold as he stared into the memories of his misfortunes. Ever since he had escaped from Wilbur, he had seen this man in the passing hazes of his most troublesome dreams. Often times in the dream the man would be paddling a canoe up the river with no knowledge that he was approaching a waterfall. Quincy stood on the banks throwing sticks to get his attention, but the man paddled happily towards the falls and then disappeared in the tumultuous white foam. Quincy then ran through the forest to find the battered canoe on shore, and the man soaking wet and lying next to a pile of fish, fighting away the vultures that had gathered to steal them.

“Who in God’s name are you?”

Demetrius placed one foot into the house, and then the other.

“I came upon you and your mother right after you were born. She died bringing you into this world, and I took you in. Some years later, I knocked on the door of a hotel room. I saw you shoot the man who took you from me. Now, I am hoping that you will take me in.”

He did.

They stayed awake for many hours recalling the hardships they had faced in the years following their separation, and lamented that those times could never be rewritten. If both of their stories could be believed, they were within one mile of each other on a handful of different occasions. In the wee hours of the morning, after Quincy tucked Demetrius into the bed with his warmest blankets, Demetrius thanked God for faith, hope, and love.

The next morning, Quincy found him dead.

*

None could have predicted that Buddy Bobbitt would become an elected representative of the voting public. He created his own political party marked by the symbol of a roaring lion and won in a landslide, promising the people that he

would personally bring down the president by exposing corporate corruptions. A week after his election, they discovered sixteen scandals involving Buddy's fundraising efforts. He was reprimanded and claimed he had no knowledge of campaign finance rules thanks to his humble upbringing.

One evening Quincy received a surprise telephone call from Buddy, who asked in a roundabout way for an assurance that neither of them would ever reveal the story about the year they spent forging pension papers for deceased veterans of the war.

"Also, I have an offer I think will help your business," Buddy whispered. "And may help mine, too."

"What kind of offer?"

"One that will make you a lot of money."

"Meet me at the Coconut Club."

He roared out of the garage and sped towards Lenny's house, where he jumped out of the vehicle and left it running in the middle of the street. He entered through the back door and climbed the stairs to Lenny's room.

"Lenny! Get dressed. We're leaving now."

He burst into the bedroom and saw Lenny in bed with the blankets covering his nude body. A record of Lenny's favorite musician, Carlito Diego the master saxophonist known for his checkered shoes and mismatched gloves, played in the corner.

"Whoa, whoa!" Lenny cried out. "I didn't know you was coming."

Quincy gathered the clothes scattered across the floor.

"Get dressed. We're going to the Coconut Club. Buddy Bobbitt is going to meet us there. He's worked up some kind of deal for the lotto."

He threw Lenny a white dress shirt, and then noticed a black dress crumpled on the ground next to a brassiere. He picked up the dress with two fingers, and held it up into the sunlight pouring through the skylight. Quincy glanced at Lenny, who scratched his head and swung his legs off the bed.

“Sure. The Coconut Club. Why don’t you wait downstairs and I’ll put some clothes on.”

Quincy shook his head, no. He walked over to the armchair with the dress dangling from his fingers. He sat down and lay it across his lap.

“Hope you don’t mind seeing my pecker cause I’m naked as a jaybird under these sheets.”

Lenny slid out of the bed and pulled on a pair of faded white underpants.

“Why on earth would Buddy Bobbitt want to cut us a deal?”

Quincy neglected to answer. He combed his mustache. How he could have been so foolish to overlook a matter right beneath his nose? On one side of the bed were the high heels she purchased against his will during their holiday in Costa Rica. On the nightstand were the earrings he gave her after forgetting their second anniversary.

“Quincy.”

Lenny stood in the middle of the room with his arms crossed over his pale chest that only now grew a few wisps of hair. “Go on and wait downstairs. I’ll be right down.”

“If you’re going to lie to my face, at least make a good effort at it.”

“Please.”

“Please what?”

Lenny looked down.

“I can’t say it. I can’t say what I done.”

Quincy curled the fabric of the dress between his fingers, wondering if the unnamable feeling in his guts was gratitude. Lenny stood beneath the beam of sunlight pouring over his head, giving him an angelic shine. A shuffling of feet sounded in the bathroom. Light shifted beneath the crack of the door.

Quincy looked down at his watch.

“I should be going.”

“Please. Quincy.”

“Tell me, Lenny, what do you believe about retribution?”

Lenny fell to his knees like he was about to be executed.

"I believe I want you to cut my throat for what I done, that's what. This ain't the kind of man I am."

Quincy walked up to Lenny still carrying the black dress. He placed his hand on the little man's shoulder and leaned in towards his ear.

"We are what we do."

He patted Lenny's shoulder and made his way to the door. Just before exiting, he turned around with a smile.

"Did I ever tell you the story about the master and the talents? In the story there are three servants and their master. The first servant multiplies the master's money. The second doubles it. And the third saves it. Which one are you?"

"I'm the fourth."

"Very clever, Lenny. That's why I've always liked you so much."

He hung the dress on the front doorknob on his way out, and drove home, forgetting all about his meeting at the Coconut Club. He changed every lock in the house and then melted the old keys into a puddle, which he poured into the gutter outside his neighbor's house. Finally, he lay in the bed where Demetrius had died and dreamt of the waterfall and the fish bones and the vultures.

*

By March, he had sunk into the deepest depression of his life.

Many of his closest friends, including Vienna, had requested he seek psychiatric help after a dangerous series of erratic behaviors. He sent ransom notes to Lois, causing her to rush into the nursery and see that Madeline was indeed safe from harm. When she called to tell him that a lawsuit was pending, he threatened to take the clothes from her back in the greatest divorce scandal of all time.

She finally sent the divorce papers with her attorney. Quincy met the frail and balding man at the city's finest restaurant.

Quincy handed a menu back to the waiter dressed in the tuxedo.

"Just bring me a steak. I don't care which one."

"I'll have the same. Cooked all the way through. No pink stuff."

Quincy hated him immediately. He paid the cab drivers at the airport ten dollars apiece to refuse Don Johnson a ride. Don wound up taking a bus, and showed up an hour late to their meeting. Quincy enjoyed every second of the wait.

"On second thought, would you just bring me one of everything?"

"Everything, sir?"

"Yes," Quincy said. "One of each item on the menu. I've been dying to try this place. So I'm going to *try* it!"

"Very well. Please allow the kitchen a few extra minutes."

The waiter walked away and left the two men alone. Quincy wore a beautiful three-piece suit but had told Don they were meeting at a diner and to dress casual, which he did. Don knew he had been played as soon as he walked in the door. He was not dressed to make demands. He had not ordered the right food. He had underestimated the savvy of his client's estranged husband, and had foolishly disregarded his legal partner's warnings that Quincy Ray was a strange, cunning man whose natural instincts were to climb up folks' backs and onto their shoulders so he could have the nicest view of the parade.

Don removed a stack of papers from his briefcase and spread them on the table.

"I'll start with this," Don said. "No one enjoys this. Not me, not anyone. But this is as clean as it comes. We've made every change you requested. Lois doesn't want any money or any of the properties you purchased while you were married. She only wants complete ownership of all properties that she owned prior to the marriage, and a fifty-fifty custody timeshare for Madeline. We're making it like the wedding never happened. It's as fair as I've ever seen, Quincy. A man with your wealth ought to be thrilled, because legally she could claim a lot more, even with your grievances against her. You'll walk away from this divorce as wealthy as you've ever been. Frankly, she's making a mistake. But these are her wishes."

The waiter returned and placed a glass of water in front of Don and a glass of red wine in front of Quincy.

Quincy turned the papers to face him. He looked down at the line marked with an 'X'. Lois had already signed. I should have never married you, he thought. I should have waited on the one true love of my life, the one who is connected to me with an eternal string, fastened at the outset of the universe.

Quincy patted his pockets.

"I don't have a pen."

Don handed him one. Quincy put the pen inside his coat pocket and reached for Don's glass of water. He drank half the glass and then set it down.

"Oh, damn. I think I just drank some of your water. You want some wine? I don't drink the stuff. How was the flight over? Any luck finding a cab?"

Don grinned. "Just sign the papers, Quincy. You've been avoiding this for six months. But it's inevitable. All you have to do is sign your name and we all move on."

"But I don't have a pen. Say, do you like baseball?"

"You bet. Listen, Quincy, I have to do what's in the best interest of my client. You understand that. I don't know you, and I have nothing against you. I'm just a man trying to do his job. I don't want to get the police involved, but I will if I have to."

"Here's the problem, Don," Quincy said, leaning forward. "I haven't quite decided what I want from her. If you'll remember, I caught her in bed with my business partner. So, in my opinion, this contract is lacking."

"Lois seems to think you engaged in an extramarital affair as well."

"That's ridiculous. With who?"

"Vienna Luz."

Quincy wanted to crush the man's knuckles for speaking her name. "There's absolutely no proof of that, because it never happened."

"Then I'm forced to obtain a court order and ask her about it myself. We'll see what she has to say."

Quincy lowered his voice on account of all the diners looking their way and whispering.

“I don’t want you speaking with her, do you understand? You don’t deserve to be in the same room as her. You don’t deserve to look at her, or think about her, you coward.”

“It wouldn’t be a stretch to suggest that if you’re willing to engage in one immoral relationship, you’d be willing to engage in another.”

Quincy slammed his fist on the table, and Don flinched. Quincy waved his finger at Don as a warning, and then held his tongue. He felt as if his head were going to explode.

“Don’t leak your racist hatred on me, Don. You’ll lose this case, along with everything in your life that has any meaning. Do you understand? Your children. Your dog. Your record collection. I’ll take it all and grind it up into bits and piss on what’s left.”

“You could just let it go, Quincy. There’s no reason to be greedy. All you have to do is sign a sheet of paper, and this goes away.”

“I won’t allow a false charge to be held over my head, and I won’t let her forget the choice she made. I’m going to destroy her.” He took a deep breath and straightened his collar. “Excuse me while I use the restroom.”

Quincy pushed his chair beneath the table and made his way to the kitchen, where he found the waiter and told him that he had an unexpected emergency, but that Don would be paying for everything. Quincy tipped the kid twenty dollars. He then went into the restroom and climbed out the window into an alley, escaping with a savage light in his eyes.

*

He never believed himself capable of depression, and so denied the definitive diagnosis from Dr. Tim Carmen, a neurological wizard recommended from trusted sources. When the doctor announced the clinical diagnosis and prescribed a regimen of Oriental vitamins, Quincy punched him in the stomach and ran out of the office with the file in his hand. He threw it off a bridge.

From there, he ran the ten miles to where his airplane was parked in the hangar, and flew to the nearest island on his map. He could not recall its name, and never contacted the flight control navigators until he had crashed through their airspace and landed in a sugarcane field in the middle of the jungle. The farmer of those destroyed crops fired a shotgun at his head. Quincy escaped through the vines, risking snakebite. He recovered the plane in the middle of the night and drove it down the farmer's road, taking it to an airplane mechanic on the far end of the island.

Quincy sat beneath the nose of the plane looking out over ocean tides as the mechanic leaned over the engine.

"I'll put her up for the night. And believe it or not, she could fly in a few days."

"No, get rid of it. Roll it into the ocean or rip it apart. I don't want it."

The man jumped off his ladder and wiped the grease from his hands. He looked up at the plane, and then back at Quincy.

"A little tuning and she can fly, my friend. You got off lucky on that landing. I'll have her working like new."

"Forget it. I'm finished with air travel." Quincy looked past the beach, mesmerized by the magical lure of the cresting waves shimmering in the fading light of day.

"So what if I want it?"

"It's yours."

He never took his eyes from the waves or changed his expression. He stood up and walked down the slope to the sand. He peeled off his shirt and thought of Lenny and his trick bucket that he used to raise money for the nonexistent hospital. He removed his shoes and imagined Madeline on the day she was born, when the bees landed on her shoulder but he feared swatting them. He peeled off his pants and underpants, wondering if anyone in the world had the guts or the brains or the nuts required to put him out of business. Many tycoons dreamed of monopoly, but Quincy feared it more than failure. He needed the odds to be stacked against

him so that he could be reminded what it felt like to wrestle the competition into total submission.

The cold ocean tide brushed against his bare toes. No one else stood on the beach. He heard the mechanic start the plane and drive it towards the hangar. Now, he felt the magical space where the wild world came into conflict with the wild heart of an uncontrollable man.

“I’m greater than you. I’ve always been greater.”

He swam towards the setting sun until he washed up naked on a public beach, half dead and in need of resuscitation.

After six months of absence from the world, one prominent newspaper dared to write his obituary. Upon the article's publication, Quincy bought the paper in anonymity and shut it down, denying the editors their promised severance and sending them baskets of rotten fruit instead.

Then, out of nowhere, he appeared perfectly groomed on the set of the movie *Falcon Heart* and sat in the director's chair.

"Quincy Ray. My God. It's you, isn't it?" Steve Goldsmith asked, pulling up a second chair.

"I'm here to become a movie producer. And I have a few ideas I'd like for you to consider."

Quincy and Goldsmith sat in the dark of a movie set, watching two actors rehearse their much-anticipated brawl.

"From what I've gathered, your studio is either going to shoot *Speak Softly* or *When the Full Moon Dreams* in the next six months. And from what else I've gathered, you're waiting on funding to determine which takes precedence."

Goldsmith motioned for Quincy to keep his voice down.

"I'm making the decision for you."

"I understand what you're doing. But I'm still trying to figure out why."

"That's my business, not yours."

Goldsmith nodded and turned to watch the crew adjust the cameras and lights for a different angle. Two women approached the actors to powder their faces.

"Have you ever produced a film, Quincy?"

"No, but I'm familiar with the business. Tell me, have they cast *When the Full Moon Dreams*?"

"There's a shortlist."

"And the lead females?"

Goldsmith nodded. Ah, now he understood the sudden interest of a lotto tycoon in the business of motion pictures. It had nothing to do with movies, and everything to do with destroying someone who had already been destroyed ten times over. Goldsmith had forgotten about the spoiled relationship between Lois and Quincy. The divorce shenanigans spent a month on tabloid news shelves. When Goldsmith met with Lois after the casting call, she cried in his arms and told him he had saved her life by offering her an opportunity to regain youthful glory.

"Lois is in negotiations for a supporting role."

"Not anymore. Make the other picture, because this one is dead. Tell me how much you need, and we'll work out the royalties later. I'm assuming there's a standard percentage? Let's follow that, plus an extra ten percent of total gross. I think that's fair considering that neither of these films will ever get off the ground without me, and your studio can't continue making lousy movies like whatever this is. I don't want anything to do with the actual production or distribution. You hire and fire, and I'll be on the lookout for my check."

The actors rehearsed a new scene, with one of them now defeated from the fight and engaged in a deep, breathless conversation with the victor. In a moment of confession, they each said they loved the butcher's daughter, Juanita Rojo, who loved neither of them but the deaf butler who had been aspiring to become a concert pianist. Goldsmith knew Quincy was right. His career could not afford another loser at the box office.

"I'd be a fool to tell you no. I'll send over a budget next week."

Quincy stood up to leave, but Goldsmith grabbed the back of his jacket.

"She's going to hate you for it. This was her last real shot in the business. You're putting me in a very awkward position to break the news."

"That sounds like your problem, not mine."

Goldsmith fretted over the conversation for a week before he picked up the telephone and dialed Lois' number. She answered with enthusiasm.

"Oh Steve! I'm so glad to hear your voice. I was beginning to grow worried."

"Lois, I have some bad news. The movie's gone cold."

"Cold? What is that supposed to mean?"

"Sorry kid. It's looking like we're not going to have a spot for you. Stories change, you know. And I don't think it's the right role."

"It's the only role. There's nothing else, Steve."

"Well, I'll be keeping my eyes open for you. That's a promise I can keep."

"I'll do anything. Surely you can find a spot, darling? Surely? Even something minor."

"Not this time. It came down from up high."

"Did they give it to someone younger?"

"It's not that. Truly."

"Did Quincy come see you?" she asked, her voice growing sharp. "Did he do this?"

But the line was dead.

She hung up the phone and fell on her face, her cheeks wet and pressed against the dirty carpet of Lenny's foreclosed home. She lay her palm against her belly, wondering why life was so cruel to give her one of Lenny's babies and to simultaneously steal her chance to provide for it.

*

The Circus Wheel Lotto Tower rose from the heart of the city.

Quincy monitored the building every day from a nearby park bench, recalling the days gone by when he and Lenny sat out for hours eating pork sandwiches from the Coconut Club and imagining the distant day when the foundation would be laid in the middle of the earth. That time had passed long ago. Now, the steel tower rose forty stories into the sky, shadowing every other building in the neighborhood. The windows were made of reflective glass, and shimmered throughout the day like a golden finger begging for everyone's attention. Children

shielded their eyes as they passed. The building was capped by a monstrous weathervane, which the architect told him was an embarrassment to their trade. Quincy fired him, and replaced him with someone who said it was a good idea. When everything was finished, they would begin to transition the vast lobby into an atrium, with birds living amongst the receptionists. Just today, they had started laying the pipe out front to ensure the fountain would become a tourist attraction in the years to come.

Quincy sat beneath an umbrella to protect himself from the sun. He heckled the laborers who took their lunch on the construction site. He confiscated their cigarettes and matches. He tried to sell them lottery tickets. In the end, they fled to the nearby park and ate their lunches in the shade of the oak trees, just as the laborers had done on the day many decades before when Mercilus Maxwell, the parade director, had fallen from his ladder and died on the cobblestones. Quincy questioned the tormented foreman about the quality of materials he had chosen.

"It will stand the test of time," the foreman said. "Just wait and see. This building will be standing after the apocalypse."

"And the weathervane?"

"You'll have your weathervane."

"That's what I like to hear."

Quincy smiled as the foreman sounded a horn to alert the workers that their lunch break had ended.

Thus, Quincy sat on the bench, eating pork sandwiches and drinking orange juice delivered from the Coconut Club, when a young boy named Donald Beasley took a seat next to him, reached into the paper sack, and unraveled Quincy's final pork sandwich.

"That's seventy-five cents, pal."

The boy bit into the sandwich as he said, "I know who you are, Quincy Ray. I seen you in the newspaper. You can afford to give me a sandwich, I reckon."

"You reckon wrong."

Quincy snatched the sandwich back and shoved it into his mouth.

"My name's Donald Beasley, and one day I'm gonna be the richest fella in the whole world. I'm gonna make you look like a pauper."

Quincy grinned.

"Is that so?"

"Why on God's green earth are you sitting out here like a lump? Every day. I seen you here, always watching the building like you gonna catch it if it falls."

"I've got to keep an eye on what's mine."

"There's a carnival in town, and I'd like to invite you to be my guest," Donald said. "Ferris wheel is the big winner. I heard one of the carts broke down last night and a fella crashed through the beams and shattered his neckbone real bad. They carried him off on a buggy."

"I'm not interested."

"Damn. Well what are you going to do all night?"

"Whatever I feel like doing."

Thanks to his obsession with the construction, he had no time for hobbies or friendships. Even in his younger days, he made little attempt to nurture friendships. Had someone asked him to name his greatest friends, he would have said Vern King, the proprietor of the Coconut Club. No one else would have come to mind. He had long since moved a bed into his office, and slept facing the windows so that he could see the building by night. His days involved a ferocious commitment to expanding the lottery, and he even struck a deal with the King of Spain to sell tickets in that grand country for a season of experimentation. The venture only lasted for three months. Ticket sellers were overrun by excited crowds and the money was stolen. Quincy labeled them savages in a scathing editorial and promised to never do business with the Spanish monarchy again. On the home front, he experienced record-shattering success, and could buy a Circus Wheel ticket at any store in the country.

"I'll bet you could use a break from all this worrying. Come along to the carnival."

"It's kind of you. But I have other responsibilities." Quincy turned to look at the kid shaking his leg restlessly and rolling his fingers on his knee. "Tell me, would you like a tour of the building?"

"No thanks."

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

"Nah, I heard it's just another tower. Same as the rest."

"And who told you that?"

"A pal of mine. He slept in there one night with the others."

"The others?"

Donald pointed up at the faint glimmer of firelight cascading out a third story window where the glass had not yet been put in place.

"I'll be damned."

Quincy ran ahead past the orange fencing and through the front doors with a growl. On his way up the stairs, he grabbed a fire extinguisher and pulled out the safety pin. He stopped at the third floor and heard a chattering of merry voices. He sprinted down a hallway and charged into an open room to see five tramps gathered around a small campfire made from discarded wood. Playing cards lay scattered all over the ground next to empty bottles of whiskey.

They screeched at the sight of his silhouette in the doorway.

Quincy chased them out of the building firing white foam onto their heads. They fled in terror. He would never know the damage the fright caused Trenton Ganaway, one of the bums who suffered a heart attack as he ran for safety. The others left him for dead. He was discovered in the middle of the street the next morning, still panting for breath and whispering something about a madman with a magical flamethrower.

As Quincy exited the building, the extinguisher hanging at his side, Donald followed at his heels giggling.

"Well, I guess they know better now, huh Mr. Ray? You done showed them!"

Later that night, Quincy lay on his bed in the office. He telephoned Vienna a dozen times before she answered.

"I'm not alive to run charities. Everyone tries to suck the honey out of my veins. Dale called me two days ago demanding me to invest in some crackpot business of his. He told me I was a greedy bastard when I said no. Charles sends me a letter each month asking me to tithe to his church. I can't take much more of this. As soon as one man climbs to the top of the mountain, everyone else wants him to pull them up rather than doing the hard work themselves. I won't stand for it."

Vienna said nothing. Cicadas chirped in the nearby rose garden. He imagined her sitting on the porch in the white wicker chair, drinking the tea that smelled like the continent of Asia. For years, she had tried to understand his identity. The great enigma of his life stemmed from sheer simplicity. He wished to have certain things, and so he took them by whatever means necessary. No other explanation was required. He lived so honestly, and so rudimentarily, that he could never be trusted. He came out of the heart of the world and everyone knew that's where he had to return.

"What is it?"

"I'm trying to figure you out."

"Please, don't."

*

One thing Quincy knew with certainty was that he could never know true happiness without her. He could fulfill his destiny without help. But that wasn't the issue. Happiness and the fulfillment of his destiny became two very separate ideas for him, and he wished to merge them together. He came to this realization on the day the tower opened for business, and felt nothing but disgust for its shortcomings. Donald Beasley was right. This was a tower like all the others in the world. They held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the grand opening and Quincy tossed the oversized scissors created by the experimental artist Waldo Grabowski into the dumpster. Everyone walked through the half-finished atrium and went to work with no fanfare. He blamed the construction crews and their endless

cigarettes, a vice he believed poisoned their minds and stunted their ingenuity. He called the foreman for a finalized list of materials used in construction, down to the light bulbs and fixtures on the bathroom sinks. Of all his dreams, this one promised the most joy but brought him the most pain. The building was received by the worldwide press as a stunning achievement of architectural magnitude. But nothing could withstand the hurricanes of Quincy's expectations.

In a night of unrivaled agony, he vowed to marry Vienna and abandon the lottery altogether. He would choose happiness. He changed his mind just as quickly, and considered that he could happily pursue his destiny as long as she was at his side.

So began his search for an engagement ring. The expedition led him halfway around the world to the underground shop of an African warlord. As soon as he walked in the door, he was guided to a shadow box, where a black ring was mounted with a black diamond.

"It's the only one like it in the world," the man said. "It came out of the heart of the earth. God hid it there. We dug it up."

"Then I'll take it."

*

Vienna met him at the entrance of the tower, where he stood in a tuxedo and held a daffodil in one hand and a blindfold in the other. She put up no resistance, and allowed him to tie the silk cloth around her eyes. He guided her into the elevator and turned his master key to access the roof.

As the service door cracked open, she felt a warm rush of wind on her face. The monstrous weathervane creaked from its elevated platform.

"Quincy, why on earth are we on the roof?"

He grabbed her arm before she could pull off the blindfold. Her heels tapped on the concrete as he guided her forward.

“Don’t let me trip. And if this is some kind of trick you’re playing on me I’m going to hold it against you.”

“I would never trick you. I would never trick anyone, for that matter.”

She broke into spirited laughter, which filled his heart with assurance that this was the turning point in his life, and the fortuneteller would eat her prediction like a bowl of sour oats. Even at this stage in her life, he was amazed by Vienna’s beauty. He admired her physical appearance, but was more enraptured by the timbre of her voice, the delicacy of her hands, the unrelenting nature of her spirit, and her ability to slaughter insurmountable obstacles with grace. Even after all these years, he still wondered if she was an angel on loan to earth.

He removed the blindfold.

They stood atop the Circus Wheel Lotto Tower beneath a crescent moon, which shone down on a candlelit dinner table complete with champagne in a bucket of ice. Fireworks exploded in the distance, dusting the sky with a spectrum of colors. They recalled the night so long ago when they took Roman candles to the park and anonymously shot them at the man selling popcorn.

“Join me for dinner.”

She kissed Quincy’s cheek, leaving a remnant of her lipstick. He pulled out her chair.

“You’re the most unpredictable man I’ve ever known.”

“I promised you a date, and a restaurant wouldn’t do.”

“Am I that hard to please?”

“No. But you’re worth whatever it takes.”

A sparkle reflected in her eyes thanks to the light of the candles on the table. She seemed more youthful than he recalled. She licked a napkin and rubbed the lipstick from his face.

“The truth is that I brought you here tonight for a specific reason.”

“Oh! A special occasion?”

“You could say that. It’s more of a proposition.”

"If you're wanting me to be in your advertisements you can forget it. I already told you it's no good to mix business and pleasure."

"I'd never jeopardize the pleasure you've been giving me."

She lifted her eyebrows, playfully.

"A true proposition. A chance for the two of us to make the only decision that will bring us happiness."

Vienna dropped the napkin on her plate.

She had always dreaded the moment when he would ask her to save him. Long ago her mother had warned her not to default to a crutch thanks to her gender, or the color of her skin, but to rise up to the top of the world by any means necessary. For years she hated the advice. She lamented the children she never birthed. She fueled her fires with the editorials saying if only the role had been played by a white girl the movie could have been a success. If only the social engineers in Hollywood didn't force colored girls into their films the public wouldn't have to make an outcry. But one day as she stood on the awards stage, she realized her mother had been right all along. While some were destined for the joys and sorrows of family, others were destined for the lonely mirage of artistry. She had chosen the latter by her own will. Not even the man she loved could distract her from that path.

"Don't do this, Quincy."

"Let me finish."

"I will always love you more than anyone else in the world. I will always choose you. But not like this."

He presented the ring with the black diamond.

"We don't have to live by the rules. You can go off and do whatever you need to do. Go shoot a damned movie at the South Pole, if you want. I just need you to be my wife."

"Quincy . . . I can't save you from yourself. You're asking too much of me."

"I'm only asking you to be my wife."

She took his hand and rubbed her thumb along the underside of his wrist.

"No, Quincy. I am telling you no. It doesn't mean I don't love you, because I do. More than you could ever know. But I won't be your crutch, and I won't let you be my anchor. I'm sorry."

Vienna stood from the table and walked to the door.

"If you leave. I never want to see you again." He stood up and faced her. "That's the choice that you're making."

She kissed her hand and extended it towards him. The door slammed behind her.

*

Quincy stared up at the ceiling fan.

He could not recall the year, or his name, or how long he had been lying there. He only knew that it seemed like a hundred years since he had moved.

"If I'm dead and didn't make it to heaven, then heaven was always a crock," he thought. "No one deserves it more than me. I gave the people hope. I offered them a hand up the ranks of social class. I'm the phoenix who rose out of the ashes of my childhood and seized the world by its testicles. Still, the sheep don't know how to be anything else. They bleat and bleat and bleat and call me a vulture. But it's *they* who expect something for nothing. It's *they* who expect their lives to change by purchasing a slip of paper and become furious when they look in a mirror and see that they are still sheep."

A few old newspapers lay scattered across the bed. The news had never changed. The representative Buddy Bobbitt started a new petition for a so-called vice tax. He aimed to squeeze fifty percent of profits from the distributors of liquor, sex, and other carnal delights. One morning before sunrise he called Quincy and told him that the lotto could be excluded from the new laws if he received a donation of one hundred thousand dollars to his upcoming campaign. Quincy sent a check, and his business remained free from excessive taxation. Ever since the check cleared, he wished to take it all back.

“I steal from the poor and unsuspecting,” he thought. “And maybe that is true, but why is that outside of my rights? If they were more than the poor then they would already be more than the poor. If they will one day be more than poor then they wouldn’t be buying lottery tickets. I am Darwin the scientist. I am a plant reaching for the sun. Your programs aren’t helping, and they aren’t helping themselves. And on that rare occasion when a street boy rises from the ashes of his misfortune, he becomes your enemy and you squeeze a bribe out of his pocket.”

He looked out the window. Down the street, the Hannigan twins played catch with a baseball. He liked them. A few weeks prior he broke through the backdoor into their laundry room and tucked eight hundred dollars in their shoes with a note to never mention the money to their parents.

“What else is there for a man to do?”

He looked up at the clouds with his hair standing on end and a crazed fire in his eyes.

*

Lenny lay down with his nose touching Quincy’s doorstep.

Their family had collapsed under the harshness of the times, despite the success of their son, Jack, in his endeavors at St. Michaels Academy For The Gifted.

After the servant alerted Quincy to Lenny’s presence on the porch, he went out and clipped his fingernails on top of Lenny’s head.

“Why are you here, Lenny? Come to betray me again? Come to rip out my heart?”

“I need a job. I need it with all my life. We’re broke without hope. I ain’t saying you owe us something, because you don’t, but I’m asking you for a second chance.”

“I saw a hiring sign in my local butcher shop. You may be qualified to slice up livers and guts.”

“That’s pretty funny. But we ought to keep Jack where he is in school because he’s so smart, Quincy. He’s near the top of his class over at St. Michaels and they think he’s gonna get a scholarship to college.”

Quincy considered it, while Lenny kept his nose pressed to the concrete.

“Bring everyone over to the house next Thursday morning, and I’ll see what I can do.”

He shut the door in Lenny’s face.

He had not seen Lois in four years, until that Thursday when she guided her only son through the home where she once burned up the zebra skins and painted the walls a disturbing shade of turquoise. He still recalled the place where she hung the portrait of her grandmother and the Labrador. Lois had the sunken look of one who meditated too frequently on her descending fortunes. At one time she had a promising future as a sweetheart of the silver screen. Now, she could only relish the nostalgia of those days when her wings spread wide and beautiful. The great fulfillment of her modern life came in the delivery of the *Hollywood Regal*, a tabloid newspaper that slandered everyone she envied.

The physical rigors of aging took a toll on Lenny’s appearance. For the first time in his life he wore a pair of eyeglasses, set with large plastic frames that humiliated Lois. He cleaned the specs of dust from the frames, and then knocked on the door with Jack tucked under his arm.

A white-gloved man named Harvey opened the door.

“Welcome. Mr. Ray is on the balcony. He’s expecting you.”

Across the vast living room they could see Quincy through the glass, sitting on the back porch next to a campfire set in a chimenea. Lois grimaced that the zebra skins had been returned to the walls. Harvey held out his arms to prevent them from walking through the entryway. The butler pointed down at three slips of paper next to a glass vase.

“He said you would know what to do,” Harvey added.

Lenny sighed. He wrote his name on one of the slips of paper, and instructed Lois and Jack to do the same.

"Now that's settled, I hope you've brought an appetite. I've prepared quite the spread."

Harvey opened the back door. Quincy jumped to his feet with unexpected enthusiasm.

"Look at you, Jack!" Quincy shouted, clapping his hands. "You're growing like a weed. Come give me a hug."

He wrapped up the boy and spun him in a circle.

"How old are you now? Twelve? Thirteen? Thirty-five?"

Jack grinned as Quincy set him on the ground. "Twelve."

Quincy motioned for Lois and Lenny to take a seat at the breakfast table, covered in a spread of food more marvelous than anything they had ever witnessed.

"Go on. Take a plate, please."

He refused to look at anyone but Jack, who he stared at for long periods with a terrifying grin.

"It's okay, Quincy. It looks like you already ate and we don't want to be rude."

"I insist. The boy's looking skinny. Are you feeding him properly, Lois?"

"Of course I feed him. I'm his mother."

She handed Jack a plate. All the fire of her youth had been doused with the cold water of poverty and broken dreams. She finally made peace with the fact that she would never fulfill her potential. She did not begrudge Lenny more than the typical wife, and even loved him sometimes. Most of her addictions lay safely behind, with the exception of a few pills she could not resist on cold mornings.

The three of them ate in silence while Quincy watched. He offered Jack cigarettes and coffee, but the boy refused.

"That's real good, Jack. Real good. I've never smoked a cigarette in my life. Have a look at my physique! The smoke stunts your growth and limits your ingenuity. I saw it first hand when they worked on my tower. They were *stunted*."

Harvey came out and cleared the plates. He led Jack inside the house to watch television.

As soon as Harvey closed the door behind him, Quincy became somber. He bit into a piece of crisp bacon.

"I've been doing some thinking the past few days about your proposition. By the way, Lois, have you heard from Madeline?"

"Yes."

Lois recalled the rogue daughter who ran away from home at sixteen and turned up one Christmas Day three years later with expensive gifts she lavished on the family, refusing to make known how she paid for them. The next morning she was gone, with the sheets folded neatly at the foot of the bed.

"And? How's the casino business treating her?"

"She's like you."

He smiled.

"Who needs more coffee? Just whistle at Harvey and he'll bring it right out. He's loyal as a dog. Watch this."

Quincy whistled loudly. No sooner had the echo faded than Harvey burst through the door with a fresh pot. He filled up all six cups on the table.

"Now, drink it while it's hot. These beans were grown in the Andes Mountains." Quincy waited until everyone took a sip before he continued. "What were we talking about? Oh, about how I've made a decision concerning our legal arrangements. Let's cut to the chase. I want to help you get back on your feet. I truly do. I want nothing more. There's just one caveat. From every paycheck you receive, I will deduct the child support I gave to Madeline when she was younger. Seeing that I was the one cuckolded, I think I am legally entitled to reclaim what's mine. Let's not involve lawyers. I've calculated the cost down to the penny."

He slid a piece of paper across the table.

Lenny held it up for Lois to see. She wanted to cry out that Vienna Luz was to blame. But like the rest of the nation, she had read the reports of Quincy being shamed on top of his own tower when Vienna rejected his proposal for marriage. The night watchman at the tower received one thousand dollars for the story. Quincy tracked him down and popped the tires on his bicycle. He had the mind

to commit murder, but withheld when he looked through the living room windows and saw the man's children dancing around wearing foam football helmets.

"We'll be working as slaves once all of this is taken out," Lois said. "You want to own us, however you can. You want to own everyone and everything. That's all you've ever wanted."

He combed his mustache.

"Don't be ridiculous. Once we wipe the slate clean with this financial mess, we can all look ahead to a bright future."

"You don't need our money."

"That's obviously beside the point."

Lois nodded. She had no other options. Lenny could only succeed under Quincy's guidance. As the saying went, no one could teach an old dog new tricks. Lenny once went to work for an advertising firm threatened by an upstart competitor, and so he went out and chopped down all of their billboards with an axe. He never understood why he lost the job, and listened to his boss's dire tidings with a heartfelt squint. At Circus Wheel Lotto, his actions would have earned him a special letter of recognition and a bonus.

"There is one small matter of business that remains," Quincy said. "And it concerns the boy. When the time is right, I'd like to take him on as a sort of apprentice."

They both felt the knife of bitterness in their bellies.

"I guess that'd be okay," Lenny said. "We've always wanted him to learn from the best."

Quincy clapped his hands, and Harvey brought Jack outside, holding the vase in one of his gloved hands. He set it on the table and backed away.

"Pay attention now, Jack. Everyone here has an equal chance of winning. What should we call it? Five hundred dollars to the winner?"

He held out the vase for Jack to choose the name. Jack looked to his father, who nodded with hesitant approval. Jack reached in and unfolded a piece of paper.

"It's me," he said, not believing it to be true. "Jack."

"You! Well, then you're the winner of five hundred dollars, sport."

Quincy reached into his coat and counted out five-hundred-dollar bills into Jack's quaking palm. As Lenny stood from the table to say goodbye, he noticed that Jack's name was written on every piece of paper, as he suspected.

The combination of his separation from Vienna and his mad devotion to expanding the lotto resulted in the most reckless days of Quincy's life. He chased down his destiny like a vulture swooping down on a baby mouse just born to the world. He caroused with Brazilians at the Coconut Club until the wee hours of the morning. He gambled on train arrival and departure times with hobos. He wrote anonymous editorials and submitted them with fifty-dollar bills paperclipped to the pages.

Most notably, Quincy stoked the resentment of the bureaucrats who wished to shut him down.

Buddy Bobbitt made a public declaration of devotion to the Christian principles of his forefathers. The congressman rallied a gang of lawmakers to back him in curing the diseased culture. First, they attacked the moonshiners. Next, they went after the hustlers. And when the gang set their sights upon Quincy Ray and his insatiable lottery machine, Buddy tried to keep them at bay thanks to their special arrangement. But Steve Waters fixated his attention on the lottery after his own son lost his inheritance playing roulette. Buddy could no longer protect Quincy without a generous donation to *both* of them.

He denied Quincy a meeting at the Coconut Club, but offered to speak during his annual yachting excursion to the Festival of Balibaba. Quincy set sail on July the 18th with Buddy and his guests, bringing along a twenty-eight-year-old model named Marianna who suntanned in the nude. He left her on the top deck of the ship and spent long periods of time at the stern watching the water.

So he stood, leaning over the railing and looking for whatever that patriotic commodore saw so many years before in the unforgettable journey he took up the

river as a boy. None would ever believe the climax of that tale. The commodore leapt into the wake of the boat and never surfaced. Wilbur Welch danced with the commodore's daughters and the fiddler stood in the crow's nest playing his favorite songs. The world had changed since then. Men had lost their souls and their pride. Which came first? Quincy noticed a rowboat attached to the side of the yacht, and considered rowing away into the distance to see if he could make a life for himself among the indigenous peoples of South America. But why? One day ten years from now he would be standing on a South American senator's ship and thinking of rowing off to some other place. He knew this was his fate, regardless of location.

Buddy Bobbitt approached Quincy carrying two stiff drinks. He offered one to Quincy, who tossed it into the ocean.

"They say you should never trust a man who doesn't drink." Buddy slapped Quincy on the back. "I'm kidding pal."

"I never expected anyone to trust me. Neither did you."

"We had some times, huh? As the saying goes, 'That was then and this is now'."

"And what's now? Why am I here?"

"Because we're old friends, and the Festival of Balibaba is the greatest event in the world. You'll see women there that will make your head spin."

"If you don't mind, I'd like for you to go on with your pitch."

Buddy squinted his eyes in puzzlement. The eighty-foot yacht was populated with other politicians, staffers, and the buxom women who worked the clubs around the houses of congress. A few wealthy barons lay stretched on the decks, drunk and sunburned. Many of the partygoers had formed a line for hamburgers cooked by the whiz kid Frederic Mariqopa.

"I thought you might enjoy yourself, that's all. These are some of the finest people in the world, right here on this ship. And I include you with that bunch."

"I'm not like you."

Buddy turned serious, and tapped his finger on Quincy's chest.

“Let me make something clear, Quincy. You want to play tough with me? You want to get down to business? Your little lotto operation is one signature away from being made illegal. Do you understand that? The people of this great nation would love to shut you down. We’ve got to strangle the mobsters running loose, and there’s a fine line between you and them. Pretty damn thin. I can’t continue risking my neck for you if I get nothing in return.”

“Give and take.”

“Give and take. That’s right,” Buddy said. He burped, and his stomach grew twofold as he relaxed. “You didn’t hear this from me, but you’re about to have a big stinking mess in your lap. I’ve heard them mention you behind closed doors. You, specifically. And you need someone in your corner, which is a role I’m willing to play.”

“For a price.”

“Everything comes at a price. Come on, pal. Play the game. This is how it works, and the sooner you get on board the more fun we all have. I mean that. There’s a world of opportunity waiting for you, if you wouldn’t be so stubborn.”

Quincy looked out over the waters, thinking again of the commodore. He had often wondered what the man saw that night in the water that made him strip naked and leap to his death. He wished he could see it now. He wished he could understand.

“Do you swim, Buddy?”

“We’re all going to swim when we get to the Festival of Balibaba. They have an annual competition. I won 58th place last year, and I was drunk as a skunk.”

Quincy shoved Buddy into the railing of the ship. His drink spilled to the ground, and he fought to grab the railing.

“Are you out of your mind?”

Quincy grabbed his oily legs and flipped him into the ocean. Buddy plopped into the Atlantic with a tiny splash. In a short time, Buddy’s head rose above the surface and he spit up a heap of salt water.

“Help! Help!” Quincy shouted to the crowd.

The whiz kid Frederic Mariqopa was the first to respond. He cast his spatula aside and slid to a stop at the railing, locating the host who waved his arms in the distance.

“My God,” he said, pointing. “We have a man overboard.”

“I think he’s drunk,” Quincy explained. “He made an advance on me, and then slipped through the railing.”

As the crowd gathered to watch Buddy fight to stay above the surface, Quincy ran up to the second deck and kissed his model friend on the head, telling her to enjoy the festival. He stole her bottle of suncream and ran down the stairs. By the time they started looking for him, he was miles away, slicing through the ocean on the stolen rowboat, aiming for shore and laughing like a lunatic.

*

No one could keep up with his antics.

After fleeing from Buddy Bobbitt’s yacht, he hired a team of lawyers and claimed the man assaulted him with sexual intent. In order to keep the claim private, Buddy dropped his charges against Quincy but vowed to destroy him with the strong arm of the federal government.

Quincy dared him to prove it.

Meanwhile, Quincy lost control of his sensibilities. Ever since he escaped from Wilbur at the age of eight, he had been teetering on the edges of standard societal practices. In the spring of that year, he abandoned all loyalty to society’s codes and lived under the sole direction of his unfiltered madness. Something about seeing Buddy Bobbitt falling over the edge of the ship lit a zealous desire to live by his own standard, with no one to tell him how things could or could not be done.

He started small. With Lenny’s help, he paid the local minor league club to throw games. Quincy won every bet he placed among the simple crowds of that stadium who could not fathom his historic luck. The manager Ty Bronte suspected the worst. He waited by Quincy’s convertible in the parking lot one evening, and

tried to kick him in the shin with the spikes on his cleats. Lenny wrestled the man to the ground and tore at his ears until he promised to return to the clubhouse. In a spirit of camaraderie, Quincy included Bronte in the ruse. By the end of the season, after all of the payouts had been made to players and management, Quincy won thirty-eight dollars and ten cents. He counted it as one of the great victories of his life.

A few months later, Quincy was convicted of stealing a man's pocketbook on the train. He had started riding again with his rolls of tickets, determined to sharpen his skills. When asked to defend himself, he claimed, "Now he will keep a closer eye on his things. He ought to be thanking me for protecting him."

He hired a few kids to complete his mandatory community service of pulling dandelions from the governor's garden. After the scandal, the American Red Cross disinvited him from their annual celebration of donors. He bucked their request and stormed the stage to give a speech about the inherent differences between the weak and the strong. Ivan Dunks, the head of that organization, needed six men to carry Quincy from the stage. They succeeded, but not without losing the microphone. Later that night when Dunks undressed and spread his suit on the bed, he realized his wallet had gone missing. He received the wallet ten days later in an envelope with a dead mouse.

Some time later, Barto Smithwick, the investigative reporter, fascinated himself with the legend of Quincy Ray. He convinced his newspaper chief to give him a sabbatical, during which time he planned to ride a bicycle through the timeline of Quincy's life and compose a biography. No such undertaking had ever been attempted. Smithwick had a nose for uncovering all of the stones carefully placed to bury the past. He unearthed the birth records of Demetrius Joyce. He interviewed the son of Walter Jeremiah, the pastor who never forgave Demetrius for escaping on his fastest mule. Finally, against all odds, Barto found the grave of Wilbur Welch. The simple tombstone lay amongst the weeds of a forgotten cemetery used by the local magicians' union. Thanks to a testimony by Billy T. Moore the contortionist, Smithwick had good reason to believe his greatest

suspicion and the inspiration for his book: Quincy Ray murdered the circus man. One day Smithwick knocked on Lenny's backdoor and asked him to recount the story for a price of ten thousand dollars, or else he would label him as an accomplice to murder. Lenny hurled him through the dining room window. He gathered Barto's unconscious body and photographed him surrounded by fifteen hookers, then sent the pictures into the newspaper to be published. Barto Smithwick never wrote another article from that day until the day he died selling life insurance on the shores of Lake Sofia. Quincy offered Lenny a thousand-dollar reward for his exemplary work.

One day, the two of them stood on the roof of the tower.

"I've figured it all out," Quincy said.

"What's that?"

"We're invincible. Me, you, everyone. Some people just choose not to be. I've chosen otherwise."

"What's it mean to be invincible?"

Quincy found a pebble and flicked it off the building. "It means that even if I die, I'm going to keep on living."

Quincy planned to continue living with his foot on the gas pedal until the day Vern King threatened to excommunicate him from the Coconut Club. Only this threat forced him to re-evaluate his life. Without consulting Vern, he invited all four hundred employees of the company to join him for a mandatory lunch at the Coconut Club. They flooded Vern's club and ravaged the Mediterranean buffet, sending the other patrons to the exits.

Vern approached Quincy sitting at his corner booth and slapped the back of his head with the full force of an old man's rage.

"This was the last time. Day after day you come into my club and break all the rules," he cried. "You are hereby banned from the Coconut Club until you are civilized once again. You have been scratching at this for a long time. And it's all because you miss Vienna. You're a lonely man in need of a friend."

“Don’t say that, Vern. I’ll buy you some new wallpaper. I’ll replace your countertops.”

Vern glanced at the stained green walls, and groaned with exasperation.

“If you buy me new wallpaper, you’re no longer banned from the club. But you have two strikes from now on. The first mistake, and you can never return.”

Quincy shook his hand and sent everyone home. By the time Vern opened shop the next morning, his entire club had been revamped, and the coconuts restored. A large portrait of Vern was also framed and placed above the stage, where it would become an icon of jazz music in the decades to come.

Quincy lay in bed for a long time the next day considering what Vern had told him. And then, he made two decisions that changed his life.

First, he needed to deal with his lack of companionship. So he purchased a trained chimpanzee named Darwin who retired from the circus with a deadly habit of smoking two packs of cigarettes a day. Second, he thought of Vern talking about scratching the surface. He telephoned the Development Department and instructed them to create a scratch-off lottery ticket.

On the day the scratch-off was unveiled, Quincy sent a letter to Buddy Bobbitt.

It read: “Can you swim?”

The printing presses couldn’t run fast enough.

He struck deals with every gas station in the nation and his fortune doubled overnight. To spread word of his world-changing invention, he purchased a thirty-minute segment prior to the presidential debates. The media’s campaign against him had reached an all-time high. He was labeled the wart of capitalism. As the cameras rolled, he sat in a leather recliner and sipped ice tea out of an abnormally large commemorative glass with Buddy Bobbitt’s face on it.

“For the last thirty years, Circus Wheel Lotto has issued out millions of dollars in prizes. I am the man who spins the Ferris Wheel of Fortune. I’ve done it before, and now I’m doing it again. And tonight, I have a special surprise for you.”

He blew on a wooden flute. The chimpanzee named Darwin swung onto set wearing a silver suit. The primate arrived throwing scratch-off tickets in all

directions and smoking ten cigarettes at one time. Quincy grabbed one of the tickets, and held it up to the camera.

“This here is called a scratch-off ticket. In one week, you will be able to buy these in convenience stores and supermarkets across the country. One in every ten is a winner, and I’m going to prove it right now.”

He proceeded to scratch at the tickets for the next twenty-five minutes, while Lenny kept a tally of the winnings on a chalkboard and Jack watched from the shadows of the studio.

Buddy Bobbitt finally claimed his revenge for the day Quincy cast him into the ocean.

After Quincy escaped on the emergency boat, the other partygoers had to drop an anchor for Buddy and watched in embarrassment as he was drawn up towards the ship completely naked. The current had whipped off his bathing suit. As soon as he flopped onto the deck, he publicly vowed to destroy Quincy Ray. For years, he had spent every moment of his free time researching the business practices of Circus Wheel Lotto to find evidence of wrongdoing. The obsession eventually cost Buddy his second wife, who left him for the jump-rope champion of the southwest who was passing through town for a performance. The disintegration of his family only fueled the fires of his vengeance. Finally, he caught a break. He rallied his gang of lawmakers and convinced them to bring Quincy in for questioning concerning the legality of private lotteries. Quincy told them all to go to hell.

They sent a subpoena.

On the day of the hearing, he showed up ten minutes late. He stepped out of the limousine and peered into the cab.

“Come along, Darwin.”

He reached into his coat pocket and produced a slice of ripened banana.

A hairy hand extended from the car and snatched at the banana. He captured Darwin and guided him up the steps and into the building. Darwin wore a pinstriped suit and a golden tie clip.

“Don’t dawdle, Darwin.”

They pushed through the great doors and walked hand in hand down the aisle towards the rotunda where the politicians and journalists waited. An array of flashes assailed them as Darwin waved at the cameras. Quincy kissed his hand

and held it up to the paintings on the walls made of famous men of old. Buddy Bobbitt stood up to see more clearly.

“What the heck is this, Quincy?” Buddy demanded.

“Our apologies.” Quincy and Darwin took a seat at the witness table. He poured two glasses of water from the carafe. “Drink up, Darwin. I’m afraid you’re dehydrated.”

“I won’t let you make a mockery of this hearing, no matter how hard you try,” Buddy said.

Quincy wore a white silk suit and bent the microphone towards his lips.

“Then let’s get down to serious business.” Buddy lowered his spectacles and read from prepared remarks. “We are here today to question your monopoly on the private lottery market and determine the constitutionality of your company, requesting that action be taken to dismantle your enterprises if proven illegal. We have reason to believe that you are not only threatening monopoly, but are also in violation of gambling laws which, of course, vary by state. This committee has determined to reevaluate a business that fails its investors 99% of the time.”

Quincy had stopped listening. He leaned over and picked a bug from Darwin’s fur. He tossed the bug on the ground and crunched it beneath his shoe, then whispered something in Darwin’s ear. Darwin laughed and lit a cigarette.

“Mr. Ray! Tell your monkey that there’s to be no smoking in this room!”

“He’s a chimpanzee. Not a monkey.”

Buddy slammed his fist on the railing. “You have peeled a fortune off the backs of the poor under the guise of hope. Your business is a disease on the soul of this country!”

Quincy leaned back and kicked his feet up onto the table. He glanced back at the journalists with a slight grin, and straightened his mustache with the brush given to him so many years before by Vienna Luz.

“What’s your response, Mr. Ray?”

“You steal a hundred dollars and they put you in prison. You steal ten million dollars and they put you in congress. I guess you figured it out, old boy.”

“You have some nerve, Mr. Ray.”

“Yes, and great big balls too.”

The journalists scratched their pens against the pads, trying desperately to capture the nuances of the unprecedented conversation.

“My customers buy a ticket knowing that they have a chance to win, and a likelihood of losing. Your customers are forced to pay money to people they don’t trust, for programs they don’t support, that help people they don’t know, living in some city they’ve never been to. And to make matters worse, no one is actually helped. The poor are getting poorer. Meanwhile you all seem to be feasting on the fattened calf. So, you tell me who is the real thief.”

“Sir, you don’t...”

“And as for me breaking the law, let’s set the record straight. If you studied state gambling laws for ten years, you wouldn’t know them half as well as I do. If I had broken the law, you would have me arrested. But you can’t, Buddy boy! I’m pure as an angel! You, on the other hand, are a skidmark on the underpants of society!”

The hearing ended with Quincy being tackled by two police officers and dragged through the court with Darwin chanting for his release and throwing cigarettes in all directions. Buddy Bobbitt flung his stack of papers in a fit of madness. The sheets rained down atop the court stenographer.

The officers took Quincy to a holding cell behind the courtroom and left him there for almost two hours, while Lenny and Jack arranged for his release. Quincy sat against the wall and wondered how life would have turned out had he chosen to be a small-town shopkeeper, or a science teacher, or a chimneysweep. He wondered if it would have resulted in more companions. He wondered if he could have kept a family together. And then, he laughed like a lunatic at the thought of being anything other than a lotto man.

The arresting officer knocked on the cell. He passed a lotto ticket through the bars with a pen.

“Would you sign it? I’m a real big fan.”

*

Lenny rolled three boxes into the room with a dolly and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

“Are they filled?”

“Filled to the top.”

“And the others are ready to go?”

“That’s right. They’re all waiting on your signal.”

Quincy poured a glass of water for Lenny. He handed it to the little man and pointed to a chair in the corner.

“Go take a seat, Lenny. You look like you’re about to faint.”

It was true. Lenny dehydrated himself while dollying the boxes all over the Circus Wheel Tower. Quincy walked to the window of his personal office and looked down to the street below. Hundreds of protestors had gathered to bring shame upon the Circus Wheel Lotto. An upstart political magazine published a series of graphs linking Quincy’s most successful markets to the poorest people in the country. Wherever the poor lived, there his business thrived. Influential pastors and community rabble rousers banded together to organize the protests. The group advertised in the newspaper that anyone who wished to sear off the wart of capitalism ought to join them. Victoria Mendez, the most charismatic of the organizers, held a special hatred in her heart for Quincy Ray. She felt that if men like him would take responsibility for the poor, then there would be no poor. The entirety of her life had been spent learning the mesmerizing ways to spin a protest sign.

Quincy watched her through a pair of gold-rimmed binoculars.

“They’re about to be made in to fools, Lenny. I’m about to show them more about themselves than they could ever learn on their own.” He pressed his face against the window to feel its warmth. “People are going to hate me one way or

the other, but all of them think they deserve something from me. If I hand out one, they ask why I didn't give two."

A new chant rose below. "Free, free, free! Free from currency!"

That afternoon as he had walked to the Coconut Club for lunch, the protestors threw eggs at him. Quincy escaped through the back exit. Vern King loaded his shotgun to protect the front doors. A photographer hiding in the corner booth snapped a photo, and Quincy subdued him while Vern blasted the camera to bits with the shotgun. The man fled into the crowd of protestors, and Vern fired off another round into the sky to let them know how strongly he felt about protecting his patrons.

Lenny gulped the water.

"I never understood you, boss. You got a plan I'm sure, but I never would have thought of it. Course you know better than me. I'm just a maintenance man."

"The smartest maintenance man in the city," Quincy clarified.

"Speaking of, I saw there's some other positions opening up in the company. I thought maybe I could apply for one of them. More on the management side of things."

Quincy turned from the window. "How's Jack these days?"

Lenny felt the sledgehammer hit his heart. He blinked fast, and said, "He's doing fine."

"It's almost time. Bring those boxes over. We're going to shine a light right down their throats and have a look at their damned rotten hearts."

Lenny dollied the chests over to the window. He popped the lid off the first one with a crowbar. It was filled with thousands of one-dollar bills. Quincy slid open the window and waited as his watch ticked down. As soon as it hit the top of the hour, he and Lenny emptied the boxes out the window, as did a dozen other employees spread throughout the tower. Tens of thousands of dollar bills fluttered down on the protestors like confetti on a parade.

Lenny grabbed Quincy's belt so that he could lean out the window and watch the protestors fight for the money. As soon as the crowd realized they were being

showered with dollar bills, they cast their signs to the ground and scrambled around the pavement on their hands and knees like animals. Brawls broke out in the streets as they robbed one another. Quincy took particular pleasure at the sight of Victoria Mendez biting someone's hand with the ferocity of a she-wolf and ducking through the mob with her fists clenched around the cash.

"It's a shame," Quincy said. "But they're probably too stupid to realize what I just did to them."

Mendez stopped a few blocks from the chaos to count her riches. That's when she saw Quincy's face on the center of the bills.

*

On Jack's eighteenth birthday, Quincy took him to the Coconut Club at midnight, when the band led by the experimental percussionist Charlesy Cockadoodle offended everyone in the crowd with his extensive drum solos. Cockadoodle sat on an upturned bucket and wore a pink tuxedo, tapping away at his three-piece set. He never stopped playing. Quincy watched in amazement as Cockadoodle ate a full meal while in the middle of a song. When he was heckled by a woman on the front row, he cursed at her so viciously that even Vern King blushed.

Quincy understood that this man was also trying to take over the world in his own way. He tipped his cap from afar and started rounds of applause at unusual junctures in the songs. Jack sat there drinking sweet bourbon in a tall glass with ten or twelve maraschino cherries.

During the intermission, Quincy turned to Jack and placed a coin on the table.

"If I flip this coin one hundred times, how many times would you guess it to land on tails?"

Jack picked up the coin and made sure it was not a magician's prop, as Quincy was known to carry in those days.

"I'd be a fool to guess anything other than fifty."

“And how many times for heads?”

“Fifty.”

“Good. Now we have something to build off of. But let’s say that we own the coin, and everyone else pays us to flip it.” He flipped the coin and let it fall directly on the table, where it wobbled to a stop. “Does it matter how it lands?”

The following morning, Quincy picked up Jack at five o’clock and drove him to the train station in the worst part of the city. Lenny might have tagged along, but he had taken it upon himself in those days to visit the lavish tombstone of Demetrius Joyce and wax it before sunrise. He liked the wind before dawn, and often spoke to Demetrius as if the two had been close friends or relatives. Quincy added the cost of a bucket of wax to Lenny’s paycheck each month. When they arrived at the station, Quincy confiscated Jack’s wallet and handed him three rolls of tickets.

“I’ll pick you up at the end of the line. This is your official job interview. Don’t bother coming back if you can’t sell all of these by day’s end.”

He pushed Jack out of the car and threw gravel on him as the car sped away. Quincy never went to the end of the line, but left Jack to fend for himself on that dangerous cart that took men from the slums to the coal mines. Had Jack been carrying a wallet, he would have certainly been robbed by the re-created Victus Clan, who terrorized passengers in the restrooms of train stations. The famous clan had been reborn when an ancestor of John Victus found a collection of old photographs taken of his grandfather wearing a red sash and sitting on a pile of pocketbooks.

Quincy went to his office and waited until dusk, when Jack returned wearing only his socks and underwear. He sported two black eyes and busted lip.

“Well?”

Jack dumped a crumpled pile of money in front of Quincy. He then reached into his underpants and handed over the rest.

“What did you learn?”

“That you’re crazy, and I don’t want to work anywhere else.”

Quincy pushed forward a contract and handed Jack a pen.

*

Quincy waited too long to admit his mistake.

Perhaps he was blinded by revenge.

He had always viewed Jack as the final pawn to advance his army upon Lenny and Lois. He recalled the surprise son of Lenny who won five hundred dollars by pulling his name out of the vase, and the odd boy with the almond skin pictured in their annual Christmas cards who wore the exact same sweater four years in a row. But such blindness prevented him from seeing Jack for who he truly was: a rotten apple.

The other employees of the Circus Wheel Lotto recognized the darkness immediately. No one liked Jack, or respected the position he had been given by Quincy for completing the mandatory train ride. No one had the courage to express the common sentiments to Quincy for fear of losing their job. The only time the other employees treated Jack with disdain was when Quincy left town for business.

On one such trip, Jack ordered everyone in the office to send hourly updates to his secretary so that he could monitor their productivity. Only a handful of people responded. He approached Gil Newton, who sat with his legs propped up working on a crossword puzzle. A radio played softly from underneath his desk.

"Why haven't you sent over the contract for the Seattle account?"

"Seattle?"

"Yes, you fool. Don't play dumb with me. Why haven't you sent it?"

Gil tapped his pencil on the newspaper.

"Gee whiz, I thought I'd wait until Quincy gets back tomorrow. I want him to double-check everything. What's a six-letter word for something good or bad, depending on the sport?"

"I already double-checked everything. And I specifically told you to send it."

Gil raised his eyebrows in revelation, and then filled in the word.

“Strike. Wait a minute. Is bowling a sport?”

Jack swiped the pencil out of Gil’s hand, then snapped it in half.

“I am the Vice President of Operations, and I have the authority to tell you what to do and when to do it. Now, get your ass to work!”

Gil found another pencil as Jack stormed down the hall.

He kicked open the stairwell door and paced back and forth on the landing.

“Just wait,” he muttered. *“Wait until this company is mine. Then I’ll show them.”*

*

Quincy lay on the floor of his bedroom alone, just as he had slept for the past eighteen nights since learning that his only daughter, Madeline, would be giving birth to twins.

He was overcome by the cruelty of time.

Initially, the news of grandchildren brought him more joy than he had ever experienced. Quincy always assumed that his lineage would die with her. Now he had to consider the legacy of his last name – the same last name given to him by the young whore impregnated by the skinny card player who stole his mother’s money but left a love letter on her dresser. He bought Madeline a shopping spree at a maternity retailer, and sent over a list of one hundred names he thought might be suitable, including his own three times by mistake. In time, the joy gave birth to a sadness he had not experienced since the days when he vanished from society and lived among the natives of Indonesia. The news of an expanding family brought to mind the family he never had – namely, Vienna Luz.

He twirled the mustache comb between his fingers.

For many years he had busied his mind with business and his time with wild antics. He never allowed a memory of her to invade that painful vacancy in his heart. But now, in the twilight of his prime, and in the birth of his new family,

thoughts of her wondrous spirit tormented his every moment. He wished to trade everything he had ever accomplished for her hand in marriage.

Such a life was out of his reach. That was not the road either one of them had chosen.

To make matters worse, Buddy Bobbitt finally succeeded in raising taxes on private lotteries to nearly seventy percent, forcing all of Quincy's competitors to sell their companies to the state. Jack believed this was also the future of Circus Wheel Lotto, and unsuccessfully tried to convince Quincy to nationalize before it was too late.

Harvey entered the room with a tray of chocolate milk cartons.

"Your bed would be more comfortable. I would hate to see you develop back problems because of your sulking."

"What kind of man am I?"

"Drink your cocoa milk. And please know that Darwin is waiting to vacuum the carpet."

Quincy rolled towards the milk cartons and took a sip without the use of his hands. A thin film of chocolate remained on his lips.

"Here I am, on top of the world and on the floor all at once. Isn't that something? I have everything, but I'm on the floor. All alone. I have no plans for dinner. I have no invitations. I have no friends."

He continued lying on the floor, recalling the desperate letter he sent to Vienna the day before, pleading with her to say *yes*. He expounded on all the differences between a life of destiny and a life of happiness, asking her if anyone really had a choice in the matter. He spoke of time machines, and the necessity of scientists to create a way for people to right the wrongs they had committed. He spoke of second chances. He spoke of Romeo and Juliet, Icarus, and vultures sitting atop spinning wheels. He spoke of an eternal string that was fastened at the outset of the universe, anchored into the deepest chambers of their hearts, but was now on the verge of snapping thanks to their separation, saying that such an event would be the catalyst for the end of the world. He did not know if his skyscraper could

withstand such a catastrophe. He wrote the letter while sitting in his car outside the post office

“Whatever happened to Wilbur Welch?” he asked himself. “Who was that young man crazy enough to murder him at a public event in front of a witness who I spent the better part of my life trying to destroy? Did he ever make it to Hell, or did they turn him away? Is that man still in me?”

He ran the comb through his graying mustache.

Quincy licked the rim of one of the milk cartons. Then, he felt a terrible sense of foreboding. A thought struck him like a hammer. Perhaps he wasn't invincible. Perhaps the end was hunting him.

The roar of the vacuum cleaner saved Quincy from his darkest thoughts. He looked up to see Darwin standing in the doorway smoking a cigarette, ready to vacuum the carpets as he had been trained.

At Vern King's funeral, the wife he never mentioned approached Quincy and handed him a caged dove.

"He wanted you to have this," she said. "He said you would know what to do."

Quincy released the bird from the roof of the Coconut Club. Rather than flying, the bird fell to its death on the sidewalk below.

That treacherous omen led him to believe that all hope for mankind had been extinguished. No longer did commodores leap into rivers, or collectors of coconuts open the nightclub of their dreams, or men of unusual character track down their sons after decades of separation. No, that spirit had died in the human heart. He was the final torchbearer of a generation of titans. He left the bird on the sidewalk and drove his convertible five hundred miles in one direction. Not wanting to drive all the way back, he left the car in a parking lot and bought a plane ticket home.

So began the season of death.

Next to fall was Julian Graham, whose last act was to send over Quincy's bank statements. He left the world with a word of encouragement, saying, "Sometimes you have to bet on the Chinese time travelers."

Only Quincy would understand that enigmatic advice.

After Julian, news came that Dale Crockett crashed through his front windshield after hitting a telephone pole at three o' clock in the morning. The autopsy revealed a liver that would have failed him in the next month or two even if he survived the accident. His skin had turned yellow in his last years as a testament to his condition of alcoholic hepatitis. Dale spent his final years looking

like a jaundiced baby. The youngest Crockett wore silk scarves to protect himself from the sun. He would always blame Quincy for abandoning him at the bottom of the barrel, and refusing to offer a hand up. Quincy attended the funeral alongside Pastor Charles, although no one else showed. Even the undertaker called in sick on the morning of the service, and the gloomy assistant quoted a few words from Shakespeare before lowering the casket into the ground.

Had Charles known the turn his own life was going to take in the following months, he would have found a replacement at the church where he preached. The sickness came on him without warning. Three weeks after the doctor revealed a tumor in his brain, he lay on his deathbed, looking more like a skeleton than a man. Quincy brought him a bouquet of orange flowers and placed them in the windowsill that looked out on the herb garden.

"Everyone keeps telling me to hang on a little longer. But not you. Not you, Quincy Ray."

"People are supposed to die," Quincy said. "That's what we're best at."

"Everyone knows that's true. But it's different when the time comes. It's not like you'd expect."

Charles coughed violently into a pillow. Quincy wiped his brother's mouth with a towel. Quincy would always think of Charles as a boy living on the farm, watching his father fix automobiles and eating bacon sandwiches at the table. Charles had grown up to make the most of his talents and passions, and even penned a book about the mysterious nature of the Holy Spirit. He had married a girl long ago but she ran away with a sailor after the Second World War. After that, Charles sliced off his need for female companionship and devoted himself fully to the ministry. His house was a modest representation of a bustling bank account that would be inherited by the church where he had poured himself for fifty years. In time, they would use those funds to build a gymnasium.

"Look at me, Quincy. Look at my body," Charles said. "This is the fate of all men."

"I know."

“So why not let yourself be happy for once? Why not let it go? You have no obligation to climb to the top of the world. None. Let Jack run the company. All of this acquisition is fleeting. Go off and do anything in the world. Give yourself some peace.”

“I’ve already done everything in the world worth doing.”

“Then be someone worth being.” Charles hated that he had to say it. “Listen, Quincy, I need to give you something before you go. Open that drawer.”

Quincy reached into the drawer and found Mrs. Demps’ ring that they stole so many decades ago.

“Take it,” Charles said. “To remember where you came from.”

He died the next day.

All of the deaths impacted him. Only one changed him.

He would never be able to name the emotions he felt on the day Jack called him with the news that Lois committed suicide by swallowing a bottleful of pills. She had been living on the edges of depression for years. She finally decided one cold morning to see if her body could withstand an onslaught of pills designed to help ease her depressions. Lenny found her when he stepped out of his ice bath, intending to make his daily pilgrimage to wax the grave of Demetrius Joyce. He thought she was deep in sleep until a creamy foam poured out of her mouth and stained their blue bed sheets.

The mortician guided Quincy and Jack through the double-doors and into the refrigerated warehouse of corpses. In the middle of the room, Lenny stood over Lois’ nude body, weeping as a child.

“Oh, girl. Come on back, girl.”

Quincy and Jack approached the table and said nothing. Lenny shivered under the air conditioning vent. In a twist of irony, Lois looked more alive in this moment than she had in the past five years. The mortician had done a wonderful job, and cared for the bodies with a genuine passion found only in a select few of his grim occupation.

"She did it herself. Did it herself with a bottle of pills. At least, that's what the fella thinks killed her. I'm not so sure. I don't think they know what the hell they're talking about, because she would have never . . ."

"Stop lying to yourself, for once," Jack interrupted. He wore a clean suit and remained a few feet from the table. No visible signs of sorrow marked his hawkish face. His mother's death was an inconvenience, but not much more. "She was unhappy, Pop, and you know it better than anyone."

Lenny shook his head.

"No, Jackie. She loved us all so much. I know it. She was as happy as anybody on earth."

"No, Pop. She hated herself, and so she ended her life. Follow the logic. It's almost mathematical. The sooner you accept that, the better off you'll be." He took out a planner and circled the date of the funeral. "You know, she started taking those pills when I was just a kid. I've never seen her when she wasn't stoned on pills and booze. I guess the numbness couldn't cut it anymore."

"What do you think, Quincy? Would she do a thing like this?"

"I'm not sure what to think."

Quincy looked down at Lois naked and covered in the clean white sheet. There lay the same unhappy woman who once burned up his zebra skins. Since then, he had force-fed disappointment into her life, ransacking her chances for success at every turn. He could not tell right now whether he regretted it or not. In time, he would look back over his life and realize his treatment of this woman was his greatest failure as a man.

"Lenny, I'm so sorry."

"Maybe it makes sense. I think the cold made her sick. That and the news anchors, those bastards with the stories about how people are so bad to one another. She watched too much of it. I think it got in her head like poison."

No one spoke a word for the next few minutes.

The three men who had dictated the course of her life remembered her as the woman who tried to grow wings, but trimmed them too short and so never flew.

She was Vern King's dove falling to the sidewalk. She was Wilbur's attempt to resurrect the circus. She was Captain Demetrius Joyce lying half-dead in the hallway of a hotel, desperately trying to keep his eyes open so he could see the estranged boy running off once more into the mysteries.

"I'm sometimes – sometimes I'm halfway obliged to think it's your fault she turned out this way," Lenny finally muttered. "She was never the same because you wouldn't let her be. She was in the movies once. As good as anybody else. She had some fire in her back then, but it was you who put it out. With the lawsuits and taking money out of our checks and all that."

Quincy covered his mouth, his hand quivering. The comb in his pocket sang to him, but he resisted the urge to grab it and so dishonor Lois.

"Answer me, Quincy. I did everything I could to make her happy. All my life I did. That's all we ever wanted, but you wouldn't have it. Quincy –"

"I tried to give you everything," he said quietly. "Don't tell me to have a soft heart when you handed me a hard one."

Lenny wiped the streaking tears from his face onto his sleeve and nodded. "I could never fix it. I tried and tried, but I could never fix it."

"Get some sleep, Pop," Jack said. "Take a shower. You'll feel like a new man in the morning."

Quincy turned to leave, and Jack followed on his heels. Sensing Jack behind him, Quincy spun around and violently shoved Jack backwards towards the corpse.

"Don't follow me. I don't want anything to do with you."

*

Of all his predictions, he never could have guessed that he would lose his own company. The idea seemed impossible, akin to an elephant performing back flips.

Quincy should have grown suspicious on the day he walked in to the conference room to find Jack leading a meeting with two charts prominently

displayed on a projector screen. One chart showed growth at current rates. The other chart showed projected growth in a nationalized system that would be overseen by a Federal committee in Washington.

"The numbers speak for themselves," Jack said. "Charts don't lie. If you want to cash in for top dollar, we have to make this move now. Not tomorrow. Not next year. Right now. They're chomping at the bit to get all of the private games off the streets. And we're the golden boys. You know as well as I do that Quincy will never comply with this move, and he will stunt growth to feed his own ego. We have to maneuver around his stranglehold."

Jack took a seat in Quincy's chair and propped his feet on the table. Everyone still loathed Jack, but knew he was right: Quincy would never sell the company, and doing so would make them all rich. As a bonus, they all had the option to keep their jobs through the restructuring deal. Buddy Bobbitt had been working with Jack for months to craft an appealing package.

"I know you boys don't like me. To tell the truth, I don't like you either. But the reality is that I'm willing to make you rich, and he isn't. We have some friends in Washington. Sure. But they can just as quickly become enemies if we kick the hornet's nest."

A secretary called in with the news that Quincy was on his way.

"Remember one thing," Jack added. "He doesn't even know your names. He wouldn't recognize you on the street. The man has his head in the clouds of a different decade. You think he has your children in mind? He's living in the past, gentlemen. Stick to your guns, and let's force the issue."

Quincy walked into the meeting and motioned for Jack to get out of his chair. He examined the charts on the projector.

"Who drew these up?"

Quincy turned to look at the others, his hand still pointed at the charts as if they had fallen from outer space.

"Hunter in graphics," Jack answered. "He's talented."

"He's fired."

Quincy walked over to the intercom system and hit the button.

“Let it be known that Hunter in graphics is now fired. Pack up your things, you traitorous bozo. You’ll never work in this city again.”

He turned back to the board.

“Quincy, you can’t just fire someone for making a few charts.”

“I can do whatever I please. Could someone explain to me, without using these charts, why you’re so eager to sell your souls to the state?”

He examined the faces of the board. The second greatest mistake of his life, behind letting Vienna Luz escape his love, was forming a board. He had been convinced by the corporate lawyers that such a move would be necessary for the continuation of the company after his death, and necessary to protect his own interests in case things turned sour with the government. They told him the world was modernizing. In his view, that just meant there were more papers and more lawyers and more interference of his overall goal. The changing world pried him apart from the company with a crowbar. He wished for the antithesis of modernization. Jack assured him the new structure would free up Quincy to focus on growing the business. But as the beast grew, he lost his grip on it. Never in his wildest imaginings did he believe the pudgy men with eyeglasses would try to run his dreams off the side of a canyon.

“Quincy, the world has changed. No one takes for granted how you built this place from the ground up. But we’re taxed at 75%, and that’s not trending in our favor. The writing is on the wall. Our salaries would be safe, and selling our stock would make us all a fortune, none more than you. They’re even willing to keep the name. Your legacy won’t die, it will grow. Don’t think of it as a sale, but as a transition. Let the state take the reigns. You can find a blonde and a beach chair, old man.”

He collapsed into his chair and knocked on the table, weary from the company of fools.

“Who owns my soul? Can a soul be bought and sold?”

“You’re missing the point.”

“That’s exactly the point!” he shouted, hammering his fist down on the table and foaming at the mouth like a lunatic. “When you were running around playgrounds, I was building this company. When you were fiddling around with girls in college, I was building this company. And now you think you have the right to sell my sweat and blood to the state? The same vampires who have been sucking on my veins for the last fifty years?”

“It’s only a matter of time before we’re forced to nationalize. Don’t you see that? One man can’t stand in front of a speeding train and expect to stop it. This is the law of survival!”

“No! No! No!” Quincy cried out. “I won’t give up if they take everything. I’ll die before that happens. I don’t give a damn about the money, and I never have. Anyone who works for money is a fool. It’s the purpose and the power and the magic and the risk, and none of you have the heart to understand that.”

He lay his head on the table and ran a hand through his grayed hair, wondering how the world had been tipped upside down. All he wanted was to spin the wheel. No one said a word. In time, he returned to the intercom system for an announcement.

“I would like everyone to come up to the main conference room for a mandatory presentation. Right now.”

He lay down flat on the center of the table, combing through his mustache as he waited on the hundreds of employees to jam into the room. When everyone had arrived, he slid off the table and took the charts from the projector. He borrowed a lighter and set the charts on fire. A secretary ran for the extinguisher down the hall.

“Let this put the rumors to rest,” Quincy said, tossing the burning charts onto the center of the table. “We will never be nationalized by choice or by force.”

Quincy ambled down the street to the Coconut Club for a glass of orange juice.

*

Three years later, when they issued him an arrest warrant for tax evasion, Quincy knew the company was lost. His only consolation was that Buddy Bobbitt had since died of a heart attack, and would never fulfill the great dream of his twilight: to destroy Quincy Ray.

They convicted Quincy of three counts of tax evasion thanks to accounting errors made by Genevieve Fletcher, the mole hired by Jack to sabotage Quincy's earnings reports. She savaged his books, and pushed unaccounted monies into bank accounts all over the world. The US Treasury Secretary, a golfing companion of Buddy Bobbitt, received an anonymous tip that Quincy had been withholding from the system for years. This tip launched the most extensive audit of an individual in the history of the country. They ripped his hands away from the stranglehold he had kept on his company. Quincy spent two nights in prison playing chess with a man named Ollie who compared himself to Napoleon Bonaparte. Meanwhile, all of Quincy's assets were frozen, prompting Jack to call an emergency meeting with the board to make the move and sell the company. The move had been orchestrated over years and years of work with Bobbitt and his affiliates.

Quincy burst through the door ten minutes too late, and one of the men ran to turn off the record player. The conference room had been decorated with green balloons, and kazoos were spread across the table. Calvin Deemer drank straight from a bottle of champagne, hooting and dancing at his reflection in the window. At Quincy's entrance, Jack broke into spirited applause. He wrapped his arm around Quincy's neck and blew cigar smoke in the old man's face.

"What's done is done. It's over. We put the dog down. When all of this clears up, you're going to thank me. I made you a rich man today. You're so rich it makes me sick to my stomach."

No one expected Quincy to grin and shake Jack's hand, but he did. He picked up one of the kazoos and blew it softly, then tossed it onto the ground.

"I guess all good things come to an end. What a helluva team we've got here."

“That’s the spirit!” Jack hollered. “Here’s to retiring in style! What’s the first thing you’re going to buy?”

He still couldn’t think of one thing on the entire planet he wanted.

Quincy looked down the table to see Lenny hunched over a piece of cake, poking the fork into the icing with no intention of eating it. The others had already dug in to the cake, their plates scattered around the room and icing spread on the corners of their lips. Quincy raised his eyebrows at the little man and then winked. Lenny pushed the cake away. He alone noticed the shrouded madness in Quincy’s eyes.

Jack puffed on his cigar.

“I’m going to buy a little European sports car, a new set of golf clubs, and drive that damn thing to the coast for the best round of my life. That’s the first thing I’m going to do. Maybe I’ll pay a girl to come along and keep me company.”

Quincy pointed at Lenny with a genuine smile. “It’s just me and you, pal. Like it was in the beginning. Don’t you remember? We planned to take over the world back then, and what did we do?”

Lenny stood up from the table and backed towards the exit.

He sprinted out of the room and tapped relentlessly on the elevator buttons to escape. The others laughed at his frantic behavior, some still believing the little fellow to be mentally deficient.

“Have some cake, Quincy. Cut him a piece, won’t you Osborne? This is the man of the hour. This is the man of the century.”

Jack had never felt so alive. He had been waiting for this day since his boyhood, when Lois put him to bed with tales of how he would one day take revenge on Quincy Ray. He suffered the disrespect of his fellow employees. He braved the train and the reborn Victus Clan. He remained silent through Quincy’s mad leadership. And now, he had avenged the death of his mother and the shame of his father.

He had proven himself.

“No cake for me. I just wanted to congratulate all of you on the big transition. You deserve everything that’s to come.”

Quincy kissed his hand and touched the table and left, closing the door behind him with a soft click.

Jack grabbed his crotch. “Say goodbye to the crazy old loon. You’ll never have to see him – ”

Before he could finish, he spewed vomit all over the table.

The others followed suit, unable to keep the cake in their stomachs thanks to the poison injected into the cake by Parker Stovall, the baker whose family won the lottery so many years before and who loved Quincy Ray second only to his own father. He dosed the cake with enough juice to send all who ate it to the emergency room. The room filled with the scents and sounds of vomit. Jack fumbled with the door handle, but found it locked. He rammed his shoulder against it, and then vomited down the front of his suit.

That’s when the fire alarms sounded.

Smoke poured in from beneath the doorway.

Quincy strolled down the street with a cane. He smiled at the first sound of the fire trucks. They would fight the burning tower for the next six days, until all that remained was the charred weathervane and the black diamond he left up on the roof after Vienna refused his offer of marriage.

He walked into the movie theater and purchased a large grape soda to be shared between he and Lenny. They paid for one ticket and spent the afternoon sneaking into the various showings, and then returned to Lenny’s house for dinner. On a dare, Lenny grilled up some potato chips while they threw rocks at the squirrels sitting on the power line. Around midnight, when they turned on the music of Charlesy Cockadoodle, Quincy called home for someone to bring Darwin over, and they toasted the legendary life of Vern King with cups of orange juice.

He counted it as a great day.

The final arc of his life began with a dream.

For months, he had been buying up lottery tickets at gas stations and trying to re-sell them on trains for a small profit. Sometimes, he took Lenny along. Other times he braved the violent gangs on his own. The adventure took a turn for the worse one night when he was beaten senseless in the corner of the station and robbed of the tickets and Demetrius' old cane. A conductor found him the next morning with blood clogging his nostrils. Still, he continued the train experiment and disregarded his failures. No one wished to buy secondhand tickets from an old man, and some thought he was a homeless panhandler thanks to the oversized flannel jackets he took to wearing.

He refused to believe it that his game had come to an end. Jack stole the source of his light, and now he was fumbling about in the darkness and looking for ways to pass the time. He could not sleep. All things had come undone. Order had been replaced with chaos. Only he knew how to tie the world back together. He wandered the neighborhoods and fed sirloins to stray dogs, lamenting the fact that lung cancer had finally sent his friend Darwin to the grave. In accordance with Darwin's wishes, Quincy tossed his body over a bridge and watched as the puff of fur sunk to the bottom of the river.

The desperation finally led him to the one place where he always took solace: the Coconut Club. Xavier King, Vern's lone son, cleared his booth, spread out a blanket, and told the old man to get some sleep.

Quincy thanked the boy and lay his head on the table, where he dreamed until sunrise.

First, he saw Lois lying in bed with him, painting her toenails bright red. A hard sunlight came in on her lace lingerie, and she looked healthier than he had

ever seen her. Across the room, he saw her matching sweatsuits and the zebra skins engulfed in the flames of a fireplace.

"What if we had grown old together?" she asked. "If we had made compromises. I think life would have been grand. Me and you and Madeline, just like all the other families in the world."

"I'm trying to imagine it."

"Don't do that. Just feel it. What it would have been like."

"But it was never you. I married the wrong person."

She screwed the lid on her toenail polish and set it on the nightstand.

"What do you mean?"

"It was always supposed to be Vienna, but things didn't work out that way."

He expected her to grow angry at the admission. Instead, she kissed his forehead with the tenderness of a mother.

"Isn't that a shame? We all have one chance, and both of us missed it."

Quincy reached out to hold her in his arms, but she vanished.

Next, he saw Wilbur Welch and Demetrius Joyce standing in a boxing ring in an empty arena. Both of them were shirtless, with Wilbur smoking a hand-rolled cigarette. Quincy was a boy once more and stood between them as the official. He blew the whistle around his neck. In one fell swoop, Wilbur uppercut Demetrius in the jaw, sending him to the mat unconscious.

Quincy watched blood run out of Demetrius' ears and off the edge of the ring.

"Why'd you have to do that?"

"He wants to take you away from me."

"But you don't want me."

Wilbur blew out a ring of smoke.

"Don't be a stupid mule. If I didn't want you then I never would have had you. How's about a piece of licorice? I know how much you like it."

"I don't like it. I never did."

Wilbur threw his cigarette on the ground and turned his heel on the butt.

"Don't like licorice? After all I done for you, you got the nerve to say something like that to me?"

"I never liked it."

Wilbur reached out and grabbed hold of Quincy's elbow.

"You got a problem, there, Quincy. I made you into the man you was best at being, and he would have made you into something else. But you got to pick your daddy by whoever made you the best."

At this, Demetrius sat up and fired a pistol into Wilbur's chest.

The final and most striking of the dreams opened with him standing in the middle of the street, looking ahead at Vienna, who wore a wedding dress and walked towards him. He looked down and saw that he was wearing a tuxedo. Then, the saxophonist Carlito Diego, Lenny's favorite, walked up to Quincy and blew the horn right into his ear, interrupting the ceremony. He took the saxophone and threw it in the bushes, but Vienna had gone.

"Vienna!"

He looked over the empty streets. Diego pointed him in the right direction, and Quincy ran off in her pursuit.

He caught sight of her wedding gown tailing around a series of street corners before the chase ended in the burned-up rubber factory, where the fortuneteller with the nipple rings and her magical cat waited on Quincy to arrive.

"You've just missed her," the fortuneteller said.

"Where did she go?"

"Someplace you'll never find her."

He rushed the woman but she threw a handful of black sand into the air and he awoke with Xavier King wringing a wet rag onto his neck.

"Mr. Ray!"

"Yes?"

"Thank God. You had me worried. You were talking in your sleep."

Quincy sat up and ate one of the peanuts left in a bowl by Xavier, who took a seat across from him in the booth.

"What did I say?"

"You said that you have done one thing, and now it's time to do another."

"Exactly right."

Quincy stood from the booth. He would never return to the Coconut Club.

He rushed home and scrambled into the bathroom, rifling through the cabinets for his shaving cream and a razor. He filled his palm with the white foam and spread it over his upper lip.

"To the end of the world."

Quincy swept his mustache from existence.

*

Rebutting his own advice, Quincy finally invested in someone else's idea.

He was shuffling through the park one day when a man sitting on a bench threw a pebble at his head. Quincy felt the rock hit his nose, and then looked over at a man pretending to read a newspaper.

"You got a problem, buster?"

The man did not look up. He wore a plain black t-shirt with bright white jeans and blue shoes. Quincy had never seen anything of the sort, particularly of a man of at least forty years. He used his cane to swat the newspaper out of the man's hands.

"Quincy Ray. It's been too long."

"Am I supposed to know you?" Quincy asked.

"Probably not." The man reached down and opening a brown paper sack. "But I owe you one of these."

Quincy squinted his eyes, and then looked into the sack to find three or four pork sandwiches from the Coconut Club.

"Go on. Take one."

Quincy unraveled one of the papers and sniffed the familiar pork sauce created by Vern King many decades before while exploring the women of the Philippines.

Xavier cooked with the same passion but lacked the secret ingredient Vern would never share: lemon zest. Quincy took a seat on the bench next to the man.

He bit into the sandwich.

"It's not the same as it used to be."

"I know you don't remember my name, but a long time ago we sat on a bench like this. It was probably more meaningful to me than it was to you."

Quincy nodded and began to smile.

"Tell me, did you ever become the richest fella in the whole world?"

Donald Beasley laughed aloud.

"I'm still working on it. I got a good thing going, I think."

"And what's that?"

"Making computer chips."

Quincy shrugged and watched a pair of boys throwing a disc in the field across from them. A barking dog ran back and forth beneath the disc.

"I read an article about what your board did to you."

Quincy had learned to ignore all of the pity. Sympathizers emerged from all over the globe to wish him a beautiful future with whatever he chose to conquer next. The applesauce baron Thomas Warfield sent him a one-hundred-dollar bill and a lottery ticket as a prank. Quincy tore the money in half and dropped it into the disposal. He scratched off the ticket to find he had won six dollars, which reaffirmed that his lifetime of work had meaning.

"Yeah. Listen, tell me about these computer chips."

"We've made about a thousand so far, and have orders for five thousand more."

"Here's an idea." Quincy tossed the paper from his pork sandwich into Donald's lap. "Send me a business plan. If it stacks up, I'll give you ten million bucks for forty-nine percent. How's that?"

*

Towards the end, he spent the majority of his time in the upstairs observatory, watching the world unfold one inch at a time. His entire fortune had been invested in wild ideas, from experimental vacuum cleaner robots to military equipment to prototypes of electric shovels. He even sent one million dollars to Chi Chi II, the son of the Chinese astronaut who planned to honor his deceased father by continuing the pursuit of affordable space vacations. Had Julian Graham still been alive, he would have called Quincy every day with the good news: the fortune was growing at unprecedented rates. Some of the investments fell flat on their face. Others, namely Donald's computer company, paid dividends far larger than he ever received while running Circus Wheel Lotto.

Sometimes throughout the day he would catch a glimpse of his reflection in the window and talk to himself in long diatribes. He thought this was how Demetrius must have looked even though they did not share a bloodline. His reflections both external and internal caused him fright.

"Once, long ago, I was everything I dreamed of being. Something stole that from me. Maybe it was Jack or Buddy. Maybe it was my own monsters. I don't recall. I spun the wheel and skimmed it off the top, risking my neck. I built the greatest, smartest, most successful enterprise in the history of the world," he preached to himself. "There is such a thing as truth. The key is to make it profitable."

The clouds covered the sun and he lost his reflection in the glass.

"Which road should a man take? The road of destiny, or the road of happiness? They lead to opposite ends of the earth."

His silhouette in the upstairs window haunted the children of the neighborhood. More than one slumber party reached new heights when the children dared one another to open the old man's back door and tap on his shoulder. The legend grew in those days that the figure was not alive, but a lifelike mannequin designed to distract the neighbors from the real owner of the house: a serial killer named Butch. Quincy ruined the legend for everyone during the July 4th block party when he attended with a cordiality he had never expressed in his

entire life. He baked sugar cookies for the event and passed them out to the children shooting off their fireworks, slipping each of them hundred-dollar bills in the process.

Quincy stood in the upstairs window and placed his finger on the glass. He liked to pretend his finger guided the cars and the thoughts of the drivers. As they turned right, he nodded. He led them into their driveways, up the steps, and into their homes, where the children waited to kiss their cheeks.

“Once I was a real man. Not yet the commodore, and not yet Demetrius, but a real man nonetheless.”

Lenny made frequent visits, and never knew that Quincy had willed the entirety of his fortune in the little man’s name. Had Lenny known, he would have rejected the gift outright. Sometimes they drank hot teas from India and analyzed the flavors. In the summertime Lenny took him to minor league baseball games.

“Hey Quincy.”

Quincy’s eyes opened, and he looked across the room to see Lenny organizing the collection of old movies.

“I thought you was falling asleep and that’s okay. I was just checking if you was going to or not. Hey Quincy?”

“Yes.”

“I got something I want to tell you and you got to promise not to take it wrong, okay?”

“Okay.”

Lenny blinked fast and breathed heavy, summoning a courage he was not sure existed.

“Here goes. I love you. I had to say it just once before . . . before I don’t have the chance.”

A few days later, Lenny sent a leather journal to Quincy in the mail. He had titled the first page: PEOPLE WORTH REMEMBERING. Quincy found it comical for Lenny to guide him in such a way. He lay in bed that night for hours, tormented by the empty pages. So he cast the blankets aside and went into the observatory,

where he spent the next twenty-four hours recalling everyone who influenced his life, starting with Demetrius and ending with Donald Beasley.

*

Quincy awoke to find himself sitting in the chair by the window. He felt a glow of ethereal light, and looked over to see her sitting across the room with a rose on her lap.

“My dearest.”

Quincy slowly turned and looked out the window, and then back at her to make sure she was not another a hallucination. That’s when he realized that people look exactly the same from the day of their birth until the day of their death. Even with wrinkled skin and grey hair, he could still see her soul, which had not changed since that day so many years before when she blew him kisses through the playhouse roof.

“I always thought you were going to make me die alone,” he said.

“I couldn’t do that.”

“You’re not a minute too soon.”

“I got the letters you sent me. I haven’t lived at that address for some time, and the woman who bought the property held on to them because she thought they might be worth something. She tried to sell them to a museum. I don’t know why, but she eventually sent them all back to me.”

He nodded.

“People are funny, I guess.”

“I read them all a hundred times. And I don’t think you’ve been fair to yourself. Talking about going back in time, and whatnot.”

“There’s a Chinaman working on that technology as we speak. My investments in his company are soaring.”

“I mean for the two of us. Making us right.”

He wondered if such a term could exist for someone like him. To be right meant to be true, and he never deviated from that.

"We made our choices."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that we both chose destiny over happiness. Now here we are, like this."

"Would you choose it again?" she asked abruptly.

"It doesn't really matter now, does it darling?"

Vienna crossed the room and sat on his knee. She lay her head of white hair on his shoulder, basking in the familiar scent of his skin.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry."

"It's not fair to ask you that question," she said. "We get one life only, and there are ten ways we can take it. You can't come to the end of it all and let the nine roads you didn't take make you feel guilty for the one you did."

"I don't feel guilty."

"Neither do I."

"I just feel incompleteness."

"So do I."

Quincy ran a hand through her hair.

"I want to give you something." He took Mrs. Demps' stolen ring from his pocket and slipped it onto her finger. She held up her hand with a smile, admiring the modest jewel. "This ring can mean whatever you'd like. Just don't tell me."

He took her across town to the fairgrounds. A traveling carnival had been stopped for nearly three weeks. His senses overwhelmed with the sweet delicacies of cotton candy and turkey legs, so familiar to the days of his youth. In the distance, the great Ferris wheel rose into the sky. Vienna squeezed his hand as they purchased the tickets.

Quincy waved at the ride operator.

"Clear everyone off the wheel so we can ride alone."

The man removed his cap. "I'm sorry old timer but I can't just turn folks away. You got to wait at the back of the line like everybody else."

"Would you break the rules for ten thousand dollars?" Quincy flashed the money, and the man scratched his head.

"Good heavens, is that real cash money?"

"Not unless you do as I asked. I'll give you half now and half when we get off."

The operator stopped the wheel and forced everyone off without explanation.

"Ready?" Quincy asked Vienna.

They ascended the metal stairs hand in hand, up the altar of their chosen church.

They took a seat, huddled into one another's embrace, as the young man locked the bar over their waists.

"No hanky panky," he said with a smirk.

Quincy and Vienna felt their stomachs drop as the wheel moved them backwards and upwards all at once. They laughed together at the adventure. What must the kids below be thinking, with the two old wingless birds being carried up to the sky?

Vienna turned to Quincy. "Tell me something. I don't care what."

The wheel had made its first full rotation.

"What if I tell you a story?"

Her eyes sparkled in the carnival lights as she nodded.

"There was once a master who was leaving town, and left his fortune with three servants. When he returned, he asked the first servant for the money, and the servant had tripled the original amount. The second servant had doubled the money. But when he approached the final servant, the lowly fellow handed back the original amount, and the master was displeased."

"Because he had been too afraid to lose it."

"Because he had been afraid to take a chance. But the story is incomplete."

"Then how does it end?"

“There was a fourth servant, unmentioned in all accounts,” he said with a boyish smile. “And when the master approached him, he revealed that he lost the coin altogether. He’d lost the master’s fortune for one reason or another. Everything, gone.”

“And?”

“And he feared the master’s wrath at such a terrible mistake. The master trusted him, and now he had nothing to show but empty hands. But, still, the master kissed the servant’s cheek and said, ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant’. The master is always more pleased with the man who loses everything than the one who is afraid to take a chance.”

The wheel had made its second rotation.

Vienna leaned over and kissed Quincy’s lips. He closed his eyes and kissed back as they began their final rotation.

“That’s very beautiful, Quincy.”

“Yes, I think so too.”

He felt the fresh air flowing down his throat and into his lungs, and knew this to be one of those nights you never forget. This was the kind of night you get once, maybe twice, in your whole life.

And that’s if you’re lucky.

THE END