

## PROLOGUE

As we near the end of two really tough pandemic-infected years, it seemed to me a good time to take a temporary respite from reality. This booklet is designed to pave your way down some imaginative pathways. All I ask is that you

Put your rational faculties on  
hold and indulge these

### THREE FLIGHTS OF WHIMSICAL FANCY

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My prescription is a dose of three short-stories I wrote in years past – fictional tales that should do the trick.

- *Fortune Cookie* (pp.1-22)
  - The first story I wrote and my favorite of them all. It explores the magic of communications emanating from a dessert confection, as filtered through the brain of an otherwise realistic lawyer, which leads to some high-stakes consequences.
- *The Fab Four* (pp. 23-50)
  - Here's one of the tales in my collection *DEFYING DOTAGE – Six Short Stories Starring Sprightly Seniors*. It's a fantasy buddy

caper, in which a quartet of oldsters pool their talents to demonstrate their ingenuity, while engaging in some geezer high jinks in pursuit of a shared goal.

- *Is There a Lawyer in the House?* (pp.51-69)
  - This is an unabashedly Walter Mitty-esque adventure – but one in which things go awry in an unexpected fashion.

The rollicking illustrations on the cover (and that accompany the second and third tales) are by my long-time valued collaborator, Joe Azar.

I hope you'll pass a few diverting hours with my respites from reality.

November 2021

Jim Freund

## FORTUNE COOKIE

Once a week, usually on Tuesday, Harold Evers ate lunch by himself at the Bamboo Tree, a nondescript Chinese restaurant a few blocks from his office.

As a partner in Jenkins & Price – a bustling business law firm located in midtown Manhattan – Harold was aware he was in violation of the firm's tacit lunch hour policy: *If you can't take a client or prospective client out to lunch, eat a sandwich at your desk so you can bill the time.* But Evers – 53, balding, overweight, brown eyes framed by bifocals, and clad in one of his three identical off-the-rack gray suits – liked the idea of getting away from the office by himself. He found the formica tables and potted palms of the Bamboo Tree relaxing – a good spot to catch up on back issues of legal periodicals.

There were seldom more than a few customers at lunchtime. Harold always sat at the same table, well-positioned for reading under a bright fluorescent light. The sole waiter was an East Asian man of indeterminate age, medium height and slim build, with a distinctive large mole on the left side of his chin. Harold didn't know the waiter's name, but – in an uncharacteristic moment of whimsy – had privately dubbed him "Mao."

Each Tuesday, Harold and Mao held the same brief conversation.

Mao: "Greetings."

Harold: "Hello."

Mao: "You take usual?"

Harold: "Yes."

The "usual" was a plate of steamed mixed vegetables – heavy on the string beans – some steamed shrimp, steamed bits of chicken and steamed rice, plus a small dish of hot mustard. Evers had concocted this tasteless melange from the unobtrusive "Diet" section squirreled away on the last page of the Bamboo Tree's menu. He was allergic to MSG; and although a footnote to the menu asserted its disuse, Harold had suffered a severe headache the one time he dared to order an unsteamed dish. This confirmed his belief that remnants of MSG were too deeply ingrained in the saucepans and woks of such eateries to be totally banished from any dish containing spice or flavoring.

After Harold had speared the last string bean with his chopsticks, Mao would remove the dinner plate and slide in a small dish with a single fortune cookie in the center. Harold enjoyed the ritual of breaking it open, extracting the tiny strip of paper, and checking the message. The words of wisdom contained in the Bamboo Tree cookies were relentlessly banal, counseling him to be of good cheer, seek moderation in all things, and the like.





On the first Tuesday in April, 1977, Evers spent his usual lunch hour at the Bamboo Tree, reading an obscure essay on the rudiments of tort law in ancient Carthage. When his fortune cookie arrived, Harold noticed a slight difference in its color and shape from the usual offering. He had a brief comical vision – the restaurant laying in a huge supply of cookies at its grand opening *circa* 1972, anticipating hordes of customers who never materialized, and the supply finally running out half a decade later.

Cracking open the unfamiliar cookie, Harold immediately noted a new form of italicized printing on the slip of paper. Still, he was unprepared for the text:

"Lucky boy. You in for big surprise this week, worth plenty bucks."

Harold looked up, startled. Unlike the generalized pablum he was used to, this cookie's message was specific, predictive and seemingly aimed right at him.

He glanced around the small room to see if anything else was awry. The premises appeared unchanged. The few other customers were eating quietly. Mao was back in the kitchen, where he seemed to spend most of his time.

Then it struck him. *Why, it's April Fool's Day! These Chinese have a sense of humor after all . . .* Harold chuckled, washed down the cookie fragments with a gulp of lukewarm tea, paid his bill and left the restaurant.

The next day, Evers was contacted by a lawyer in Cleveland he hadn't heard from since law school. The classmate was calling to retain him to handle a major

lawsuit in the New York courts. It represented a real windfall for Harold – a significant case that would boost his standing at Jenkins & Price, entitling him to a larger share of firm profits in the years ahead.

When Harold had a few moments to reflect on his good fortune, the discarded prediction in the Bamboo Tree's fortune cookie naturally bubbled back to the surface. This new lawsuit had certainly come as a "big surprise," occurring "this week," and destined to be "worth plenty bucks." But he quickly brushed aside any linkage between the cookie and the case – chalking it up to the often baffling but recurring role that coincidence plays in everyday life.

Evers was, after all, a man of reason, who clung to what was explicable, with little patience for the enigmatic. He scorned ouija boards, chided his wife for tossing salt over her right shoulder after a spill to ward off evil spirits, and once got into a spirited debate at a cocktail party with a zealous advocate of the Bermuda Triangle. Harold had resolutely declined to see the two hit science fiction movies of the year – *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The unwavering rationality of law school and legal practice had smothered any interest he might have had in the occult – logic was his sole mistress now.

On the following Tuesday, Harold returned to the Bamboo Tree, although without any lofty expectations. The waiter was as expressionless as usual throughout the meal. When the fortune cookie was placed in front of Harold, he could see that it resembled the previous week's rogue confection. Cracking it open, he read the italicized message:

“Hey, big fella, you about to get nice promotion.”

Howard indulged a momentary flirtation with the possibility of supernatural intervention, but quickly reverted to the cold voice of reason. After all, he noted, promotions were something that occurred in corporations, not in law partnerships once you make partner. His litigation practice group was headed up by Stan Matson, a vigorous man in his late 50's, and the three other partners stood in no special pecking order. *So much for these dessert doodles*, thought Harold, oddly relieved that the current prediction was so unfulfillable.

That afternoon, Stan Matson suffered a sudden massive stroke at his desk and was carted off to the hospital. The next morning, Harold Evers was summoned to the office of the firm's managing partner, Bill Price. A vigorous 75, Price wore his trademark vest and peered at his visitor over the tops of his low-cut reading glasses.

"We all feel terrible about Matson, of course," Price said. "The doctors hope he'll eventually regain the power of speech. Meanwhile, life goes on, and your group needs leadership. You've performed admirably in recent years, Evers, and I'm promoting you to group head."

Harold, suddenly light-headed, gripped the arms of the chair to steady himself. He had spent a troubled, sleepless night reflecting on Matson's sudden misfortune, hardly daring to confront what it might mean to his own position in the firm. Now he knew. And with Price's explicit reference to "promoting" him, the linkage to yesterday's fortune cookie was unavoidable.

Harold immersed himself in his new duties, working late each evening, trying not to think about the cookies. But as the following week began, he knew he'd have to make a luncheon decision. Two in a row hadn't

yet turned him into a full-fledged convert to the inscrutable; nevertheless, he felt it clearly merited further investigation. The hook, as they say, was in.

But now the left side of his brain, which appeared to have taken a short sabbatical, reasserted itself under the guise of intellectual curiosity. As a lawyer, Harold typically approached thorny problems by isolating the elements of significance and then tinkering with the variables to see how this affected the result. One recurring element here was the day of the week. Harold found himself speculating as to whether the portents worked only on a Tuesday. So he decided to wait until the next Wednesday to dine on the tasteless steamed fare.

When Harold arrived at the restaurant, Mao, who was standing near the door, gave him an odd look. The waiter seemed even more puzzled when his patron broke the mold again by opting to sit at a different table than was customary. Harold, secretly enjoying his taste of devil-may-care unpredictability, then startled even himself by ordering a bowl of won ton soup.

When the meal ended, Mao placed a fortune cookie in front of him. It resembled last week's model. On an impulse, Harold said to the waiter, "I don't like the looks of that cookie. Please take it back and bring me another." Mao exhibited as much surprise as he seemed capable of, the skin crinkling in the vicinity of his mole. Honoring the request, he returned from the kitchen with a replacement cookie. Harold broke it open eagerly, sugarplum visions of even grander prophecies dancing before his eyes. He was unprepared for the italicized words:

"Unlucky week, bad thing to happen at work."

Harold sat there stunned. Somehow, he had failed to contemplate the possibility that the fortunes could turn negative. After a few moments, he called the waiter over. Shrugging his shoulders and spreading his hands – as if to imply that Mao should humor him – Harold said, "Look, this may sound odd, but remember the fortune cookie I returned a few minutes ago? Would it be possible to get it back? I may have been mistaken about its appearance, and I'd like to give it another try."

It was by far Harold's longest utterance in the minimalist dialogue that marked their relationship. But the waiter was unsympathetic, replying briskly, "Not possible. Cookie already in garbage disposal."

Panicked at what might lie in store for him, Evers virtually shut down his practice for the next few days – refraining from giving any advice to clients, deferring delivery of all papers. Still, late on Friday afternoon, he received a call from an outraged client, who claimed to have suffered a large financial loss because of a contract Evers had improperly drafted earlier in the year. Harold was unable to mollify the client, who threatened to bring a lawsuit against him and the firm for malpractice.

Harold spent the weekend working out a settlement under which the client dropped his claim in exchange for the firm furnishing him additional legal services without charge. It was a resolution Evers and the firm could live with, but the incident was clearly disturbing. And, without conceding any potency to the occult, Harold couldn't help but wonder whether his tinkering with the variables had broken the favorable pattern.

So the next week, Harold resumed his old ways. He lunched at the Bamboo Tree on Tuesday, sat at his usual table, ordered just the steamed fare, and meekly

accepted the first cookie offered. Nevertheless, the thin paper strip contained an ominous portent:

“Some days good, some not so good. Today is lousy.”

Harold grimaced, silently mouthing a few choice expletives. He paid his check and left the restaurant deep in thought, eyes unfocused, pondering what he could do to change his luck. Thus occupied, he failed to notice a wet spot near the curb, slipped on the water, and – while trying to break the fall – landed heavily on his wrist.

Fortunately, the X-rays revealed no fracture, and the sprained wrist was his left one – so he could continue to brush his teeth, use a spoon, and write legal briefs. Still, the injury was quite painful, making it difficult to dismiss the incident as something other than the fulfillment of a negative prophecy.

Evers now tried to review the situation coolly, as if it were something happening to a client who had sought his advice. He tallied up the score – four straight weeks, two favorable and two unfavorable predictions, all of which came to pass. But he couldn't help wondering whether these occurrences might have taken place in any event – no more than pure coincidence.

The next week, to test this theory, Harold avoided the Bamboo Tree entirely. It was a week in which nothing of significance happened in his life.

Harold then pondered the question of whether it was the restaurant or the cookie that was dictating his fate. He decided to try another experiment. Returning to the Bamboo Tree the next Tuesday, he sat at his usual table and ordered the steamed plate. When he had wolfed down the last string bean, Harold signaled to the waiter.

"Sorry, I'm in a rush," he said, slapping some bills down on the table and fleeing the premises – all before a bemused Mao could serve the little plate with the cookie.

The balance of the week proved as uneventful as the previous one. Clearly, Harold deduced, the cookie was the culprit.

Lunching at the Bamboo Tree the following Tuesday, Harold hit on a further permutation. This time he allowed Mao to serve the fortune cookie, but blatantly ignoring it, he exited the restaurant with the uncracked pastry forlorn on its plate. For the next few days, he searched anxiously for a sign – up or down – not knowing what to anticipate. Late Thursday, he received news that the district court had ruled in his favor on an important motion in a big case he'd been handling for several years. Harold was delighted with this result, as it was unlikely the other side would appeal the verdict. But he was annoyed with himself for not saving the cookie to verify its forecast of the good news.

He rectified this oversight the following week. After Mao served the cookie, Harold popped it into a small leather pouch he had once used for pipe tobacco. For several days, he kept the pouch unopened in his desk drawer, avoiding the temptation to peek at the fortune.

It was still in the drawer on Thursday when Mike Purdy, an associate who worked for Evers, burst into his office.

"Bad news, chief. They've decided to appeal."

The other side had surprised everyone and called into question last week's favorable district court decision. This had the effect of leaving matters up in the air for another year – a big disappointment for Harold.

Mike Purdy seemed anxious to linger to discuss strategy, but Harold craved privacy to open the drawer and find out whether the bad news had been foretold. Although he briefly contemplated pulling out the pouch in Purdy's presence, Harold restrained himself – concerned that the associate might misconstrue the spectacle of his boss consulting the fortune cookie. After what seemed to Harold half a lifetime, Purdy finally took his leave.

One millisecond after the door closed behind the associate, Harold opened the drawer, retrieved the pouch, untied the drawstring, cracked open the cookie – with his right hand, so as not to put undue pressure on his sprained left wrist – and read the message:

“Something smell sweet one week, turn sour the next.”

Deeply shaken, Evers took the rest of the day off. He no longer doubted the power of the occult – the cumulative evidence was simply too compelling. The pertinent issue now was how to manipulate these phenomena to achieve optimum results.

Seated at home in his favorite rocking chair, a yellow pad in his lap, Harold worked at devising a strategy. Lawyerlike to the core, he worked his way down the page, posing a series of relevant questions: Are these happenings specific to me, to the Bamboo Tree, to the waiter? Is there enough of a pattern to influence the timing of my Bamboo Tree visits? Might there be a way, after receiving a negative prediction, to prevent a bad thing from happening? Late into the evening, Harold continued to explore the various permutations and combinations.



Two issues in particular appeared to merit further testing. The first was whether the Bamboo Tree alone was capable of serving up the clairvoyant cookies. To test this, when the next Tuesday rolled around, he decided to try his luck at Hunan Heaven, a modest eatery with comparable decor a few blocks away.

The waiter was polite but otherwise unmemorable. Although Harold ordered a reasonable facsimile of the "usual," he suspected that the chef might have sprinkled a few specks of MSG on the broccoli, which was too flavorful for the bland taste he associated with steaming. The fortune cookie was served on a little plate – a dead ringer for the Bamboo Tree version. Harold ripped open the confection, prepared to collect his latest good fortune. The thin paper strip offered up this morsel of wisdom, in unitalicized print:

"Hard work is its own reward."

So much, thought Evers, for Hunan Heaven – and Chinese cuisine in general, for that matter.

The second issue was whether just Harold had been singled out, or might others be receiving similar treatment. So, on the following Tuesday, he invited a guest along to dine at the Bamboo Tree – his associate, Mike Purdy. Flattered to be asked to lunch by a partner, Purdy's enthusiasm paled visibly when he realized they weren't headed for Four Seasons.

Harold, seemingly unmindful of the restaurant's seedy atmosphere, played the jovial host – urging Purdy to disregard his own steamed plate and order some of the chef's zestier specials. Harold even bantered lightly with the waiter, which seemed to catch Mao by surprise, producing a puzzled facial expression that cast the mole in bas relief.

When it was dessert time, the waiter placed one fortune cookie in front of each man. Evers, trying hard to appear casual, ignored his plate, sipped some tea, and held forth on the merits of a recent court ruling. At one point, as he paused to permit Purdy to respond, Harold reached down nonchalantly, cracked open the cookie, took a bite, and glanced down at his fortune.

“Money not the only reward for hard work, as you find out soon.”

Harold pursed his lips to avoid betraying elation. He pondered what might be a reward other than money. Then, recalling that the purpose of the lunch was to see if other diners received similar treatment, he looked over at Purdy. The associate had placed his napkin on the table, apparently finished with the meal and uninterested in his cookie.

The waiter brought over the check. Harold made a show of reaching for it, placing a few small bills on top to cover the skimpy total. Then he asked, "Aren't you going to eat your fortune cookie?"

Purdy shook his head, lifted the plate, and offered it to Evers. Accepting it with a weak smile, Harold murmured something like, "Really hits the spot at the end of a Chinese meal." He cracked open the cookie, extracted the fortune without reading it, and tossed the paper dismissively onto the table. He then swallowed the second cookie – although one was his usual limit – washing it down with the rest of his tea.

As they rose to leave the restaurant, and with the associate briefly facing away from the table, Harold speared Purdy's fortune and dropped it into his jacket pocket. He waited until reaching the privacy of his office to read the plain text message:

"Patience is a virtue worth indulging."

As he pondered this thought – a timeworn maxim that seemed unlikely to result in speedy gratification – the office door swung open and his secretary appeared.

"Good news!" she said, "Your article on non-competition covenants has been accepted by the Law Review."

Evers was jubilant. Here, in less than an hour, was his non-monetary reward, neatly juxtaposed against the banality of Purdy's fortune – thus confirming that the special treatment was his alone.

Harold was now hooked on his weekly mystic moment. Although unable to discern a sufficient pattern to influence the timing of his visits, he was pleased to see that the positive events continued to outnumber the negatives in the following weeks. And though he never devised a means of blocking a baddie, they generally weren't as bad as the good ones were good – making his decision to continue patronizing the Bamboo Tree a no-brainer.

Just the next week, for example, Harold extracted the first of a promising new line of fortunes:

"Life not all work and no play. You see, something good happening at home."

That night, Harold's wife told him she had found a new housekeeper, who "cooks like a dream," to replace the incumbent whose culinary skills were less than stellar. Harold reacted with an "I told you so" look that appeared to puzzle his wife. He had not taken her or anyone else into his confidence, fearing that disclosure might mean the end of a good thing.

In the weeks following, Evers found a long-lost favorite windbreaker and made an eagle on the par 5 dogleg 17th hole at his golf club. His dog Duke did suffer a paw bruise that caused the animal some discomfort for a few days – nothing earth-shaking, though, and the goods continued to outperform the bads (although Duke might not have concurred in that assessment).

Prospering on all fronts, with occasional affordable setbacks, Harold ceased analyzing the mystery of it all and allowed himself to enjoy the fruits of his good fortune, which showed every sign of becoming a permanent bounty.

And then, one sultry Tuesday late that summer, Evers made his weekly pilgrimage to the Bamboo Tree, only to find it closed and padlocked. A crude sign in the window said it all – the restaurant had gone into bankruptcy.

The news hit Harold hard. He reread the notice several times, uttering muted oaths, then staggered away in disbelief. As his head cleared, he could see, with the clarity of hindsight, that the habitual dearth of other patrons should have served as a warning.

But Evers, a tough litigator in court, wasn't about to give up his bonanza without a fight. For the balance of the year – five months in which almost nothing of note came his way – he tried one Chinese restaurant after another, searching for a Bamboo Tree surrogate. His real objective was to find Mao, whom he suspected was the key to the whole business. But Harold didn't know Mao's real name nor where he might have gone, although he assumed the waiter had sought employment in another of the city's countless Chinese restaurants.

Evers worked his way up one avenue and down the next. Chucking his old taciturn self, he now struck up conversations with waiters and cashiers, asking if they remembered the Bamboo Tree. Few had even heard of the place. To those who did recall it, Harold would probe whether they knew his favorite waiter – a man about 5 foot 8, with slicked back hair and a mole on the side of his chin. But his inquiries bore no fruit, and the year ended with Harold in despair.

Shortly after the New Year's holiday, Evers attended a partners' lunch in the firm's large conference room. Half-way through the meal, he became aware of a conversation taking place further down the table among several of his colleagues. Cary Jensen, one of the partners in the litigation group Harold supervised, was holding the floor. His monologue was punctuated by bursts of laughter and expressions of incredulity from the other participants. Harold perked up when he overheard the words "fortune cookie," but he was seated too far away to get the gist of the discussion.

When the lunch broke up, Harold approached Cary Jensen. "From their reaction, that sounded like a good tale you were entertaining the guys with."

Jensen replied, "It's really fascinating."

"I always love a good yarn. Cary. Would you mind repeating it for me?"

Jensen glanced at his watch. "I've got some time now, chief. Come up to my office, and I'll give you the whole story."

A few minutes later, feet propped up on his desk, Jensen started in. "It appears that some higher being is communicating with me through the medium of – would

you believe? – fortune cookies! I'm receiving predictions of future events – predictions that turn out to be highly accurate."

Jensen then told him a tale that closely paralleled Harold's undisclosed story. It was occurring at the Won Ton Palace, located across town from the office – not one of the restaurants he had yet sampled in search of Mao.

"That's amazing," said Harold. "By the way, do you always have the same waiter?"

"Yes, he's the only one there at the Palace. An ordinary-looking guy, except for a big mole on his chin."

Harold rubbed his eyes with an open hand to mask any telltale reaction. *Imagine that*, he thought – *my Mao, showing up at the Won Ton Palace*. He wondered whether he could whisk over there now for a little post-lunch repast, just to get the process going again.

Jensen then chuckled and said. "This'll kill you, Harold, but just yesterday I got a fortune that said I was in line for a promotion. Can you believe it? Anyway, keep me in mind if there are any openings...."

Evers barely made it out of Jensen's office. He remembered only too well what had occurred the last time the word "promote" had figured in a fortune – foretelling his own elevation to group head after Matson's ill-fated stroke. Unconsciously, Harold attempted to take his own pulse. His left knee, aggravated by an old lacrosse injury, began to ache. He recalled that during 1976, the year just past, two of the greatest comedians – Charlie Chaplin and Groucho Marx – and two of his favorite vocalists – Bing Crosby and Elvis Presley – had all passed away. He went back to his office, checked to see that nothing crucial was coming up on his

professional calendar, and decided to change his life.

A few hours later, having packed a small canvas bag, Evers took a taxi to the airport en route to a prestigious health spa he'd heard raves about. For the next two weeks, Harold subjected himself to a rigorous physical regimen – exercising every muscle and organ of his body, eliminating cholesterol, fat and excessive calories from his diet. Alcohol, caffeine and salt became things of the past. He even refrained from taking any business calls that might serve to boost his tension level. When he returned to the city a fortnight later, he felt great.

A few hours into his first day back at the office, Evers got word that Bill Price, the head of the firm, wanted to see him. He bounded into Price's office, the picture of good health and energy. Price, flashing a look of disdain, growled at him, "We're very disappointed with you, Harold – disappearing for two weeks, just when all hell broke loose."

"But it was for my health," Harold protested.

"That may be," replied Price, peering over his reading glasses, "but you've shown yourself to be someone we can't depend on in the clutch. As a result, effective immediately, Cary Jensen is replacing you as head of the group."

Evers left Price's office, his mind reeling. He took the elevator to the lobby and staggered out into the street, coatless in the frigid January weather. The wind swirled around him. After walking a few seemingly aimless blocks, he realized he was headed in the direction of the Won Ton Palace.

Harold was half-frozen by the time he arrived at the restaurant. One glance at the interior confirmed that the Won Ton Palace was almost a replica of the Bamboo Tree. Then he saw the waiter coming out of the kitchen. The mole on the side of Mao's chin was even more prominent than in the old days. Harold was sure Mao would recognize him, but the waiter's enigmatic expression masked any sign of familiarity.

Mao motioned the lawyer to a table – a well-lit one, Evers noted, although all he really needed now was enough light to read the fortune. The waiter said "Greetings," but after he replied "Hello," Mao did not ask if he would take the "usual." Harold ascribed this to Won Ton's menu, which required somewhat more work to latch on to the same kind of bland fare he had dined on at the Bamboo Tree.

When Evers finished his meal, the waiter brought out the fortune cookie. Its appearance resembled the prophetic ones he'd been served at the Bamboo Tree. Harold popped it into his jacket pocket, flung some bills on the table, and fled the Won Ton Palace. Outside in the cold, his hands trembled as he cracked open the cookie and fingered the slip of paper. Its unitalicized message read:

"A faithful friend is a strong defense."

"Damn!" Harold exclaimed. He considered returning to the restaurant to protest, but eventually decided to go back to the office unfulfilled. Whatever magic he used to possess appeared long gone.

The next morning, Evers walked down the hall to Cary Jensen's office. They hadn't spoken since Jensen replaced him as group head, although Cary had left several unanswered messages with Harold's secretary.



Harold congratulated Jensen – avoiding any mention of how Cary's promotion fulfilled the prediction – and invited him to lunch the following Tuesday.

"That's great," said Jensen, seemingly appreciative of Harold's good sportsmanship. "Where would you like to go?"

"Well, I'd be intrigued to try that restaurant where you get the loaded fortune cookies."

"Absolutely, although I must admit it's no great bargain food-wise."

When they arrived at the Won Ton Palace the next Tuesday, Evers acted as if it were his first visit. So did the waiter, who greeted him in cursory fashion and refrained from characterizing his prior week's selection as the "usual."

The conversation between the two partners was forced and awkward, both eating in some haste to get the meal over with. At last, the fortune cookies came out, one placed before each of them on little plates. A look of excited anticipation lit up Jensen's face.

Before either cookie had been touched, Evers suggested, "Why don't we switch cookies to see if the magic works on me?"

"No," said Jensen, "I'm afraid to tinker with the system."

"Oh, come on Cary," Harold chortled, "take a chance" – and as he spoke, he reached across the table for Jensen's cookie.

"I said 'No!'" Jensen barked, slapping Harold's

hand. Jensen then grabbed his cookie off the plate, stuffed it into his jacket pocket, left money to cover the check, and said, "Come on, let's get out of here." Harold, pocketing his own cookie, followed him to the door.

They emerged from the Won Ton Palace with Jensen leading the way, topcoat still on his arm, crossing the street about 20 yards from the corner. Suddenly, a car bore down on them full throttle, the driver attempting to beat the yellow light. The car seemed headed for Harold, but at the last minute swerved and hit Jensen hard, knocking him into the gutter, limp and unconscious.

Evers, unharmed, ran to Jensen's side, arriving before any of the other onlookers. While making a show of feeling Jensen's forehead with his one hand, Harold reached into Jensen's jacket pocket with his other. He extracted the remains of Cary's cookie, which had been mashed by the impact of the car, and dropped the crumbs into his own coat pocket.

After a few minutes, Jensen began to stir fitfully, as if waking from a deep sleep. An ambulance arrived, and Harold accompanied his partner to the hospital. The doctor's verdict was that Jensen, though badly battered, would survive.

It wasn't until he returned to his office later in the afternoon that Harold was alone for the first time since leaving the Won Ton Palace. He took both his own cookie and Jensen's crushed one from his coat pocket. Cracking open his own, he extracted the slip of paper. There was no writing on either side. In all his years of patronizing Chinese restaurants, Harold could never recall ever having drawn a blank.

After pondering the significance of this briefly, Harold turned his attention to the italicized fortune which

emerged intact from the crumbs of Jensen's cookie. It read:

“Better linger over tea extra ten minutes today.”

At that moment, Harold lost all urge to ever return to the Won Ton Palace. The stakes had gotten too high for his taste – he didn't want to play this game any more. His flirtation with mysticism had left an unpleasant aftertaste. It was time to return to a rational universe. To emphasize his determination, Harold took the Guide to Midtown Restaurants from his desk drawer and ripped out all the pages referring to Chinese eateries.

The next day, Bill Price called Evers into his office. "That was a terrible accident Cary Jensen had," said the head of the firm. "Imagine, just leaving a restaurant and then, bam!" Harold mumbled his concurrence.

"Well," Price said, straightening the creases in his vest, "be that as it may, in view of Jensen's unavailability for an indefinite period, I'm reappointing you as acting head of the group. Don't let us down this time."

Evers, the reconfirmed rational man, threw himself into his work, relieved to be free from the pressures of the occult. The cycles of expectation/fulfillment/disappointment had wearied and distracted him. At last he felt comfortable again, his own man.

He still indulged himself in a regular noontime break from the office routine. With the steamed vegetables a thing of the past, Harold now began to develop a strong craving for the raw fish served in Japanese restaurants. Rather than sit at the sushi bar, he preferred a well-lit corner of the room, where he could

peruse his periodicals. There was one eatery in particular, named Rising Sun, that he began to frequent almost as often as he had the Bamboo Tree.

One Tuesday in April, Harold was enjoying a plate of sushi at the Rising Sun, his mind absorbed in a timely article analyzing recent trends in legal fees. He had saved for the last bite his favorite morsel – the delectable sea urchin called "uni", perched on rice wrapped in a cylinder of seaweed.

As he raised the uni to his mouth with the wooden chopsticks, Harold thought he heard a faint voice. He paused in mid-bite. The voice then spoke again, the accent unmistakably East Asian. He tilted one ear toward the chopsticks to obtain maximum clarity. The words, which seemed to emanate from the uni, were now unmistakable.

“Lucky boy. Nice thing soon happen to you at office.”

Harold was stunned. He examined the urchin with care, but it looked perfectly normal. There was no customer or waiter nearby who might have been an amateur ventriloquist. What's going on here, he wondered – is my mind playing tricks on me?

He gazed over to the sushi bar. The main sushi chef looked as impassive as ever, absorbed in fashioning complex maki rolls. Next to him was someone with a bandana around his head whom Harold had never seen before. A new apprentice sushi chef, he thought. Just at that moment, the apprentice turned his head slightly in profile. Beneath the shadows cast by the stark neon light, Harold saw on the man's chin a large dark mole. . . .

## THE FAB FOUR

"Okay, gentlemen, let's get started," said the one they called *Ears* to the three elderly men seated around the card table. "Who has a report today?"

"I do," said the one nicknamed *Eyes* – "with some help from Recall."

"Let's hear it."

"Well," said *Eyes*, "I checked the bulletin board an hour ago and saw something of interest. Luckily, I was able to pass it on to Recall, who will tell you about it – I can't remember the damn thing."

"Here's what it is," said the one dubbed *Recall*. "The Tasty bakery store – you know, the one on Maple Street – is having a special discount sale today on its delicious crullers. They're eight for a dollar, but only while they last. *Eyes* and I thought we ought to get us some."

"Good thinking," said *Ears*. "And you know what that means, guys. We're putting our best man on the job. *Legs*, you've just been chosen by acclamation to make the pick-up before they run out of crullers. We'll each kick in a quarter, and *Eyes* will write down for you the details of the assignment."

"I'm on my way," said the one nicknamed *Legs*, rising swiftly from his chair. As soon as he'd received the money and note of instructions, he was out the door to run the errand.

"Meeting adjourned until *Legs* gets back," said *Ears*.

It was the daily 10 am briefing held by the four men, each in his 90's, who called their group *The Fab Four*. Having survived their spouses, they all resided in an assisted living facility that they'd termed *The Barracks*, located in a medium-sized northeastern city. They had various ailments and shortcomings not uncommon to men of such advanced years, but they were far from senile and each possessed one faculty that was still operating at peak performance (thus the nicknames):

– Three of them didn't see that well and wore glasses, but Eyes' vision (glasses-free) had remained at the same 20-20 level as it was during his former career as a minor league umpire.

– Three of them had suffered measurable hearing loss, but Ears – a retired expert on hearing aids and electronic devices – could still discern a whisper at 40 paces.

– Three of them hobbled about, often using canes or an occasional walker, but Legs – a former shoe salesman who had run annual marathons – could move around as briskly as a man half his age.

– Three of them had declining memory functions, but Recall – a retired court stenographer who used to play a lot of bridge – never forgot a face, a conversation, a number, or where he'd put his keys.

So the four men – still determined to enjoy life to the fullest and cope with some of its daily frustrations – had banded together to make the best collective use of the singular talents each possessed.

Thus, on the cruller caper, Eyes was able to scan the bulletin board early that morning and take note of the attractive discount sale offered by Tasty. But fearful he'd

forget the news before the group's regular morning meeting, he had passed it on to Recall. When the group assembled at 10 am in the empty game room of The Barracks to plan the day's activities, Recall was able to make a flawless report. Since the task involved some fast footwork, it devolved upon Legs, who could be counted on to return within the hour with the goods. And meanwhile Ears – brainiest of the group and the only member who could consistently hear what everyone was saying – conducted the meetings and doled out the assignments.

Most of the time, it worked quite smoothly. For example, several weeks earlier, an article appeared in The Barracks newsletter about a jazz trio that was coming there to perform. Eyes, a heavy-set man who favored sleeveless sweaters, read the piece aloud to the group, and plans were made. On the night of the event, Legs – tall and slim, with his hairline intact and sporting a pencil-thin mustache – hotfooted it down to the auditorium early to save them good seats. After the performance, Ears – short and bald, always wearing a jacket – conducted a brief post-mortem in the game room, discussing some subtleties in the bassist's chromatic line that the others might have missed. Unfortunately, Eyes was ailing that night and couldn't make the concert. So Recall – back bent over, with white hair and thick glasses – visited Eyes the next day to pass on Ears' insights (which, by that time, Ears himself had mostly forgotten).

Their activities were no secret, and they were the envy of The Barracks. Although several other occupants clamored to come aboard, the Fab Four kept a closed shop. They did, however, sponsor a ladies' auxiliary called the "F-F Groupies" – sometimes including the women on special projects, in exchange for tasty culinary offerings prepared in their kitchens.

A half hour later, Legs arrived back with the Tasty crullers. The members thanked him for his effort and munched on the pastry, while planning a certain foray scheduled for early that afternoon. They would report back the results at their regular 5:00 pm debriefing session in the game room. As a special treat, they had also invited the two co-chairs of the F-F Groupies to attend. The women – nicknamed *Dimples* (for her still youthful cheeks) and *Cuticle* (in honor of her thrice weekly manicures) – had baked a pecan pie for the occasion.

\* \* \*

Ears brought the 5:00 o'clock session to order, welcoming the two F-F Groupies to the sparsely furnished game room and thanking them in advance for the feast to come. He then recounted with relish how the afternoon caper had turned out.

"Listen to this one, girls – a real meshing of our talents. I was talking on the phone yesterday to an old buddy of mine, who used to be a racetrack tout. I asked him, half in jest, if he had any good tips. To my surprise, he replied that he did. 'Write this one down,' he said – 'You'll want to put a few bucks on a sure thing horse with a funny name . . . .' My ears perked up even more than usual.

"I asked him to wait a second while I searched for pen and paper, but nothing was available. I could tell that my friend was getting impatient. Just then Recall happened to walk by. I corralled him to listen to my buddy's tip on a certain horse in a certain race at a certain track today – but, as usual, within minutes I couldn't remember any of the details."



"But I can," piped up Recall. "He said it was SturmundDrang in the third race at Narragansett."

Eyes picked it up from there. "So when Recall told me about this, I naturally looked in the paper – but no horse by that name was running at Narragansett today. I had to go through the listings for every track, but sure enough, I finally found the horse, scheduled to run in the third race at *Aqueduct*. Ears' tout had the right horse and race, but at the wrong track."

Ears now joined back in. "So we took up a collection this morning, got ten bucks together, and Legs hoofed it down to that OTB shop on Hamilton Avenue to place the bet and await the results."

Legs interrupted. "I couldn't hear what you just said. Were you talking about me?"

"I was," Ears replied, "giving you credit for the expedition to the OTB."

"Not an easy trip, I'll tell you," said Legs proudly – "two bus rides and a lot of pavement to cover."

"And whaddya know," said Ears, "the damn horse won and paid twelve to one. Legs came back with 120 bucks – we each took 25, and we've saved 20 for our lovely ladies, in advance appreciation of their pecan pie."

"Well," said Cuticle, plump and red-faced but still feisty at 92, "aren't you guys the sports. . . ."

"I think the Fab Four are wonderful," said Dimples, who looked much younger than her 91 years, "and we're very proud to be co-chairs of the F-F Groupies."

The men smiled in appreciation of Dimples' compliment – especially Legs who, if truth be told, had long fancied Dimples but was timid about making a move on her. But then Legs' expression changed and he appeared to be deep in thought. *I shudda gotten a better split on the winnings – after all, I did the heavy lifting to get the bet placed in time, and then stuck around to bring home the bacon. . . .*

\* \* \*

The next day, at the late afternoon meeting, Eyes and Recall had a tantalizing message to deliver.

"It just went up on the bulletin board this afternoon," said Eyes. "It's a new contest being sponsored by – oh, you know, that outfit for seniors – "

"He means the SCA – the Senior Citizens Association, the local group that's like the AARP," said Recall.

"Right," said Eyes, "just as I said."

"What did he say?" asked Legs.

"SCA," said Ears, speaking in a loud deliberate tone. "THEY'RE – THE – ONES – WHO – ARE – SPONSORING – THE – NEW – CONTEST."

"Thanks," said Legs. "I don't always hear so well."

"Anyway," Eyes continued, "it's a competition to determine which man . . . uh . . . ."

Recall finished the sentence for him. ". . .to determine which man in his nineties has retained the

most number of vital faculties."

"Which man anywhere?" asked Ears.

"No, just one who lives in an assisted living facility here in town."

"Can women enter?"

"I think there's likely to be a separate contest for them later on," replied Recall.

"For the contest," said Eyes, picking up the thread, "they're going to test each guy's sight, hearing, mobility and . . . uh . . . there's a fourth thing. . . ."

"Memory," said Recall with just a touch of irritation in his voice. "And the winner will be proclaimed *Spryest Senior Over 90*, with a plaque and a cash award to the facility he lives in."

"Well," said Legs, "this sounds like it's right up my alley. I don't know any ninety-year-old as spry as me – I can run rings around all of them."

"Yeah," said Ears, his voice a trace softer than usual, "but how are you going to pass the hearing test?"

"What's that you say?" asked Legs.

"Point taken," said Eyes. "But really, isn't that the problem for each of us? I bow to no one over 90 in terms of my eyesight, but I don't think my walker would go over big in the mobility test."

"And while I can remember anything I read," said Recall, "my eyes aren't good enough to read much at all."

*What a bummer, thought Ears, we ought to lobby the SCA to turn it into a team contest – I bet the Fab Four could lick any superannuated nineties outfit in town. . . .*

\* \* \*

When the group convened the next morning, Ears – wearing one of his least threadbare jackets – was in a state of high agitation as he called the meeting to order.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I'm here to announce that yours truly – he of the perfect hearing and myriad electronic talents – has had a brainstorm!"

"Uh, uh," said Recall as he wiped his thick glasses, "I remember your last brainstorm – that walkie-talkie network so we could be in touch with each other 24/7 – whoosh! – a couple hundred bucks down the drain."

"That was unfortunate, to be sure," mumbled the temporarily chastened Ears – "but who'd have figured that all those blood pressure monitors around The Barracks would interfere with the sound waves....?"

"Enough of that," said Eyes, whose cotton sweater vest was stretched by his ample stomach. "I want to hear your new brainstorm. Then we'll decide whether we're willing to fund it."

"Okay," said Ears, "it's about the contest you reported on yesterday. Well, I got to thinking last night as to how each of us individually would be a flop, but a melding of our four talents would carry the day. I realized, though, that the SCA would never agree to make it a team competition. And then it hit me – the answer to our dreams. We enter their individual contest"

– here he paused for dramatic effect, before completing the sentence with a loud bellow – "and WE CHEAT!"

The game room fell silent for a few moments. This might have been interpreted as a kneejerk rejection of the intention to cheat, but more likely it was because they didn't know what Ears had in mind. The enlightenment wasn't long in coming.

"We enter Legs in the competition, because mobility – his strong suit – isn't something any of the rest of us can fake. But everything else that's needed we feed to Legs through a tiny radio receiver planted in his ear. He already wears a hearing aid, so it won't look out of place. The rest of us will each be outfitted with a miniature transmitter in our fist – like the Secret Service people use. As we figure out the required information in our specialty, we transmit the news to Legs in time for him to respond in the contest. It's a piece of cake – we'll sweep the field."

This led, as you might imagine, to a lot of dialogue, questions and speculation. But throughout the discussion, Legs had a big smile on his face under the mustache – having, for once, heard every word Ears had spoken and proudly pondering his central role in the competition. *The Fab Four couldn't pull this off without old Legs – the marathon man – carrying the ball. . .*

After a while, the group adjourned to get more facts and reflect on this ambitious new caper before reconvening in the afternoon.

\* \* \*

By the afternoon session, they had elicited more specific information on how the contest would be conducted, which Recall now recounted for the group.

"Okay, so the contest will take place at a big hall downtown that has a stage. The contestants, including our own Legs, will be on the stage, with the audience a level down in chairs or standing."

Legs beamed at the mention of his name. As the vision of himself upon the stage flashed across his consciousness, his legs started shuffling in a warm-up for the physical exertions to come.

Recall continued. "For the vision test, they're going to project letters onto a screen – just the way it's done in eye exams – with big letters on the top, decreasing gradually to small ones at the bottom. Each contestant will have a different screen, which will be visible to the audience – so if Eyes gets a good seat, or can stand near the stage, he'll be able to read the letters off and relay the right ones to Legs."

Eyes broke in here. "I may not be able to get down to the lowest line if I'm too far away from the screen, but I'm sure I'll get a good ways along the page."

"For the hearing test," Recall went on, "words will be read aloud to the contestants through a loudspeaker – different words that each guy has to repeat back – with the volume being turned down a little for each word."

Ears commented, "I'll try to get right up near the loudspeaker – it shouldn't be a problem. How about your test, Recall?"

Pausing before he replied, Recall had a vision of himself back in the courtroom, instantly memorizing and transcribing words of witness testimony. *Our justice system wouldn't work without the contribution of the court reporter – but we never got the credit we deserved*

*for what we did . . . .*

"As for memory," said Recall "each contestant will be separately shown the same blackboard display, containing a dozen two-digit numbers, for two minutes. He's supposed to memorize the numbers and then write them down on a pad three minutes later. This is my kind of test – I should get at least eleven of them, which I'm sure will be a winner."

"How about me?" asked Legs impatiently. "What do I have to do on my own?"

Recall turned his way. "Sorry, Legs, I didn't mean to ignore you. They're positioning chairs in an oval covering about 50 feet. You'll have to walk as fast as you can around the oval ten times. Whoever does it the quickest wins that part of the contest."

"I'll lap those other guys," said Legs, hugging his still flexible knees in a self-congratulatory embrace.

After a few more minutes of discussion, Ears said, "Okay. Hearing no objection, I'll order the radio equipment tomorrow and should have it in hand several days from then – so we'll have plenty of time for a few dry runs to work out any kinks in the plan."

\* \* \*

It was the day of their dress rehearsal for the contest. The Fab Four were assembled in The Barracks game room, testing out their new radio equipment. They had invited the co-chairs of the F-F Groupies to attend, after filling them in on the plan and pledging Dimples and Cuticle to secrecy. "We want your honest opinion," Ears told the ladies, "as to whether the deception will work."

After warming up his limbs with a few short sprints around the room, Legs posed by a card table for inspection. The tiny radio receiver had been inserted in the ear that didn't have his hearing aid. Everyone agreed that it looked quite authentic – just like a second hearing aid. The only problem was that when Eyes activated his transmitter, pretending to read letters from the eye chart, Legs couldn't hear a word he said.

"Hey, Ears," said Eyes, "I don't think the signal is getting through to Legs from my transmitter – one of the two gizmos must not be working."

Ears, bristling at the suggestion that any piece of equipment he'd acquired was defective, performed some tests but found no electronic problem at either end. Some consternation was expressed over the crimp this could put in their plan. A muted muttering could be heard and, Cuticle began rolling her eyes. Matters were starting to get out of control, when suddenly Recall spoke up.

"Wait a minute, I know what the problem is. Legs is totally deaf in the ear we inserted the receiver. We've got to take out his hearing aid and put the new gizmo in his better ear."

Sure enough, this did the trick; and after some volume adjustments, Legs could hear each of them clearly. He began to strut around with a big smile on his face, although he might not have been so cocky if he'd overheard Cuticle whispering to Dimples, "What if the guy conducting the contest tells Legs where to stand or sit, but Legs can't hear him with the radio set in and the hearing aid out?"

"Oh, Cuticle," said Dimples, "you can be such a downer. Look how much fun the Fab Four are having."



"Yeah – they're behaving like little boys playing 'spin the bottle' or 'capture the flag' – it's ridiculous."

"Don't you dare tell them that. We're here for support, and that's what we're going to give."

The men continued about their tasks – Eyes and Ears calibrating their skills to sights and sounds emanating from a greater distance than usual, Recall practicing his mnemonic devices with the entire gamut of two-digit numbers. Gradually each became more comfortable with the process – that is, until Cuticle raised an issue they had somehow failed to consider.

"I don't mean to be the skunk at the garden party, but please tell me how each of you three guys, standing there in the audience, is going to talk into your transmitter without arousing suspicion among nearby viewers as to what you're up to?"

It was, they agreed, a valid point. Onlookers could observe them raising their fists that contained the transmitters to their mouths. Nosy folk might also be able to hear them pass along the answers – unless they whispered, in which case the odds were that Legs wouldn't be able to hear them. Cuticle's question provoked a lot of agitated discourse.

Recall said little during the discussion, but he was clearly troubled. Having been so close to lawyers for many years in the courts, his mind emulated their frequent refrain: *What can possibly go wrong here?* And he realized that *A LOT CAN!* Recall saw, lurking in this brainchild of Ears, a plethora of adverse possibilities that could undo their efforts and subject them to negative scrutiny. . . .

It was Dimples who came up with the best solution to avoid suspicion. The three transmitting men would stand together near the stage, positioned inside a large circle of F-F Groupies whom Dimples and Cuticle would round up for the event – thus keeping at a distance any intruders who might otherwise uncover their secret.

At last, everything seemed in reasonably good shape. Ears asked his buddies if they had any final thoughts before the big day tomorrow, but none did. He then called upon the F-F Groupies for their opinion on what was about to happen.

Dimples blessed the project with her rousing endorsement. "The Fab Four rides again! How clever you gentlemen are at your advanced ages. I have every expectation that it will succeed without mishap, and that you'll win the contest."

Now it was Cuticle's turn to speak. But rather than opine on the practicality of their efforts, she took another tack.

"Has anyone considered the propriety of what you're doing? To put it in the worst light, if you win, some individuals who are more deserving than Legs of the title of Spryest Senior Over 90 will have lost – victimized by a bunch of clever. . . uh. . . well, let's call a spade a spade, clever cheaters." She paused for emphasis. "Are there any pangs of conscience here?"

The room fell silent. Her words hit Eyes the hardest. A long-time minor league baseball umpire, he had an innate sense of fairness. Early on, he'd realized that their scheme wasn't fair to the process nor to the individual contestants. But he had been reluctant to speak up – not wanting to be seen as a wet blanket on the group's enthusiasm for the project. Now that Cuticle had

put the issue on the table, however, he felt somewhat freer to express his views on the matter. . . .

Legs was annoyed. He had been buoyed by the faith his three compatriots had placed in him to undertake the most difficult role. *Pretty good for an ex-shoe salesman, huh?* He was basking in the rave review from Dimples, for whom he had a sweet spot -- something that might blossom into an elder romance, especially after she was bowled over by his world-class performance in the contest. *And now along comes this damn Cuticle, who I never cared for, to drop a bombshell that might derail the whole thing.* But he didn't know how to handle this situation, so he remained silent for the moment.

Recall wasn't overly troubled by Cuticle's indictment of their efforts, but he thought others might be. So, he wondered, might this be a good time to bring before the group some of his concerns about the practicality of what they were doing, the possibility of things going wrong, the fear of being exposed. . . .?

Ears was very much in favor of going ahead with the project -- it would validate that he still "had it" at 92. He'd known all along that the issue raised by Cuticle was bound to come up at some point, and that overcoming her objection was crucial to proceeding. So he had prepared a rebuttal, which he now proceeded to deliver to the group.

"Of course we've considered that, Cuticle, but here's how we justify what we're doing. If we can pull this off, it will be a great triumph for our ingenuity, at an age when most guys are doddering around, dribbling into their soup. We think that ingenuity is just as important as sight, hearing, mobility and memory -- it's simply harder to test. If we win, we'll deserve it -- make no mistake."

Cries of "Right on!" and "Yeah, man!" went up around the room – notwithstanding any of the congregation's private reservations – and Ears promptly signaled the meeting to an end.

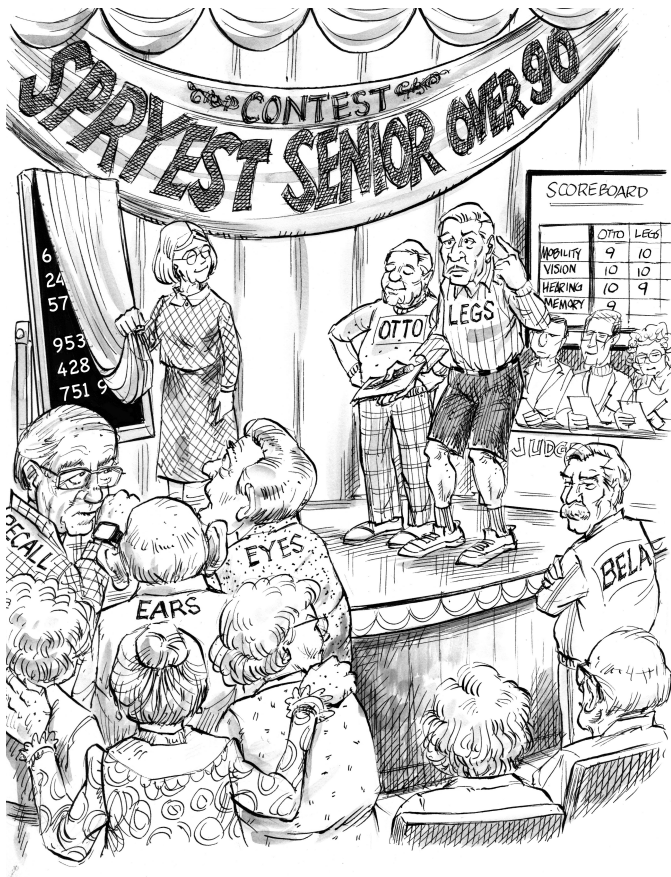
\* \* \*

The contest to determine the *Spryest Senior Over 90* was taking place at a spacious downtown hall that had seen better days. It had a stage on which the contestants were to perform. The large crowd in attendance had been drawn mainly from the several local establishments offering assisted living services. Chairs were sprinkled around the room for the infirm, but much of the audience remained standing, milling around. Some unappealing refreshments and a tasteless punch were available on a table placed along one wall.

The rules of the contest were posted on a large sign near the entrance. Eyes read them over and noted a change in the memory test – only six of the numbers to memorize would be two-digit, while the other six would be three-digit. He passed the news along to Recall, who was standing near the stage with Legs and Ears.

"Well," said Recall, "that does make matters more complicated – especially since I've been practicing all my memory hooks on double digits. But for only a three minute delay, I should be able to handle the triples."

The F-F Groupies were there in force – a dozen or so elderly women, some with canes and walkers, all prepared to do battle for their heroes. After organizing the group in a tight circle around the Fab Four near the stage, Dimples and Cuticle took off to scout the opposition. A few minutes later, they returned with their report.



"The biggest threat," said Dimples, "is a good-looking gentleman named Otto from the Elm Street house. We were told that he just turned 90 last month, and all his faculties appear to be intact – well, I guess I'd even call them admirable."

Listening to Dimples gush over Otto, Legs felt a sharp pang of jealousy. *Who is this guy Otto? I'll make him wish he never entered the contest. . . . Just watch me shine, Dimples, and you'll forget all about that handsome bum. . . .*

"We listened to him practicing," said Cuticle. "He was reeling off a bunch of numbers and letters, while marching around in a criss-cross pattern with no problem at all."

"I've heard of that guy," said Recall, "and it's true – he is remarkable. But my guess is that if we all perform up to our individual maximum skill levels, we can take him – otherwise, he wins."

"There's another guy over there with the Elm Street gang who worries me," said Cuticle. "I think his name is Bela, and he looks to be in charge of things. He was very suspicious of Dimples and me nosing around, especially when he found out we were from The Barracks. He gave me such a look. . . ."

"Let's keep an eye on him," said Ears. "Good work girls – and make sure the rest of the sisters stay in a tight circle around us, so we don't have any nosy onlookers."

Minutes later, the mistress of ceremonies made a few brief remarks to get things going. She then called the six contestants and three judges to the stage to begin the competition.

The Fab Four came together inside the F-F Groupies circle, linked their hands in the middle – as teams do before a basketball game – and uttered a resounding "let's go!" After a final quick test of the radio transmitters and receiver, they sent Legs out to do battle on their behalf.

Fortunately, the contest began with the mobility test, a ten-trip circuit around some spaced chairs. Legs was in his element. *Hell, I can run a marathon – this is a piece of cake.* With quick strides, Legs took the lead

around the first turn, leaving four of his competitors strung out behind. But not Otto, who was right up there on his shoulder.

Outstripping the others, Legs and Otto were locked in a tight two-man race. The Elm Street and Barracks rooting sections erupted in shouts of encouragement to their candidates. "Go, Otto!" "Hang in there, Legs!" At one point, when Eyes noticed that Recall was about to clap his hands, he whispered, "Don't! – you may wreck your transmitter."

With a burst of speed around the last turn, Legs pulled away to finish a few feet ahead of his adversary at the finish line. The F-F Groupies cheered wildly. On the stage, an out-of-breath Legs beamed in the direction of Dimples. *I showed you, Dimples, didn't I? I put your good-looking Otto in his place. It's time for you to focus on me – the spryest senior around over 90."*

Ears clapped Recall on the back with his non-transmitter hand. 'How about that?!'

Recall replied, "Yeah, that's great. But mobility is Legs' strong suit – the real tests are yet to come."

The vision competition was next. The first four contestants achieved moderately good results. Then came Otto, and he wasted no time showing his excellent eyesight. Clearly the class of the competition, he had almost 20-20 vision, reading flawlessly down the page of diminishing-size letters to one line from the bottom.

Now it was Legs' turn. By a pre-arranged signal, Eyes mouthed the word "Testing" into his fist transmitter. It came out loud and clear, which Legs acknowledged by touching his nose with his right index finger. If he had needed Eyes to speak louder, he would have used his left

index finger. If he didn't touch his nose, that would mean the "testing" password wasn't coming through at all – or alternatively, as Cuticle had whispered to Dimples at the dress rehearsal, that Legs, whose memory was suspect, had received the signal but forgotten the code response.

Eyes had stationed himself as close to the eye chart as he could get within the F-F Groupies circle, but he was almost 15 feet further from it than where Otto and Legs stood on the stage. His eyesight was remarkable though, and he proceeded smoothly down the chart to the smaller print.

Eyes spoke slowly into his transmitter, pausing before each letter to give Legs time to hear and repeat it without needing to memorize anything – "Okay, third line, left to right, E. . . P. . . M. . . Q. . ." Legs could hear Eyes clearly. As Legs voiced each smaller letter for the judges, he made a little show of squinting at the chart to pretend he was verifying his selection.

"Look at that ham," whispered Cuticle to Dimples – "a little over the top, don't you think?"

Had Eyes been located in the same place as Otto, he would have nosed him out, going all the way to the bottom of the chart. But due to his further distance away from the screen, the best Eyes could do was to tie Otto's effort – to lusty cheers from both The Barracks and Elm Street supporters.

For the hearing test, which came next, the on-stage contestants had a relatively quiet environment to work in. Again, Otto outstripped the competition, identifying the softest sounds. Ears, however, soon realized he'd be hampered by the crowd noise around him on the auditorium floor. He alerted Cuticle and Dimples, who proceeded to stomp around outside the F-F



Groupies circle, shushing the nearby spectators. The electronics worked fine, and Legs hammed it up some more as he passed along the transmitted words. But Ears still labored under a noise disadvantage, so that Legs' score here was slightly below that posted by Otto.

At this point, the judges of the competition called for a brief intermission before the final memory test. A scoreboard on the stage showed Legs and Otto in a dead heat for first place, with the four others trailing at a distance.

Otto came down off the stage and rejoined his Elm Street buddies, who were standing not far from The Barracks circle. Cuticle sashayed over there to eavesdrop and reported back that she overheard Otto performing some warm-up exercises for the memory contest – "1492, Columbus discovers America; 1941, DiMaggio hits safely in 56 consecutive games. . . ."

She continued. "I've got to tell you, though – that guy Bela really spooks me. I watched him and Otto having a lively conversation, but they were talking a different language so I couldn't tell what it was about. They kept looking over at our circle, though, and Bela was tapping his ear to make a point. Then Bela spotted me near their group, and came over to ask me what I was doing there. I was polite, of course – I told him, 'It's none of your goddamn business!' – but I thought it was time to come back here."

Recall was about to say that she was right to be worried – that Bela sounded like the pompous linguist at the ball in *My Fair Lady* who was bent on labeling Liza as an imposter – when Legs entered The Barracks circle. Recall decided to say nothing, so as not to alarm their spear-carrier with such fears.

His colleagues congratulated Legs on a fine performance thus far. They told him his sprint had been exemplary, and he was doing a good job of disguising his assisted responses in the other categories.

At first, Legs wallowed in their approbation. Then, without warning, his eyes seemed to widen, his lips flared below the mustache, he faced in Dimple's direction, and all semblance of modesty disappeared as he jabbered on: "Did you see how I outran Otto in the mobility test – that final burst of speed? . . . Could you tell how well I heard those sounds, even when the decibels got low? . . . Did you notice how handily I came up with those numbers for the eye test? . . . And now, I'm going to whip Otto's butt in the memory department, and the prize for Spryest Senior Over 90 will be *mine*...."

Legs went on in that vein until called back to the stage for the final memory event. After he left, his colleagues compared notes.

"What an asshole that Legs turned out to be," said Recall. "He didn't even acknowledge the superb job you two guys did on the vision and hearing."

"Can you believe it?" said Eyes. "This goofball thinks he actually read that chart. . . ."

"Such hubris!" said Ears. "If he wins, he'll probably want to be elected president of the Fab Four and have us all kowtow to him."

Ears then summed up the general sentiment. "All Legs is good for is to go get us pizza and such. He can't see, hear, or remember a thing. When we send him out, we have to write down the directions and the order, and then worry whether he can even read them."

"You're right," said Recall. "But now he's become insufferable, and it'll only get worse. We've got to take him down a peg."

"Exactly," said Eyes – "and speaking of that, Recall, I think you and I know just how to do it. . . ."

\* \* \*

The memory phase of the contest now began. A dozen numbers were written on a blackboard which had a sheet-like covering attached. The contestants all started out backstage, and then one at a time were brought forward to view the blackboard. After two minutes of their viewing and committing the numbers to memory, the emcee lowered the covering over the blackboard. The contestant then had to remember the numbers for three minutes, at which time he was asked to write down on a pad as many as he could recall.

The four other contestants went first, producing mixed but generally unexceptional results. Then Otto came on and was able to remember nine of the dozen numbers – all six of the two digits and three of the threes – a fine performance, loudly applauded by the spectators.

Legs was the last contestant. He took his place and proceeded to make a show of peering intensely at the numbers on the blackboard, although he couldn't see a thing at this distance, let alone memorize any of them. But he wasn't concerned because he knew Eyes was reading the numbers and relaying them to Recall, who was committing them to memory – and then, after three minutes, Recall would speak the numbers into Legs' earpiece, and Legs would write them down on his pad.

In fact, Legs was so cocky that well before his two-minute viewing period was up, he signaled the

emcee to cover the blackboard – he had seen enough and was ready to begin the memory phase.

But when that three minute period passed and the emcee indicated it was time for Legs to write down the remembered numbers on his pad, there was no voice in Legs' ear. Suddenly he became worried. He muttered a series of sounds and coughed a few times to justify his delay. He tried the left-finger-to-nose password in case the volume had been turned down. But alas, he heard nothing. When the emcee called on him once more to record the numbers he remembered, Legs gave up all pretense and slapped his receiver ear several times, just in case a temporary malfunction had occurred.

At that point, Recall finally started feeding him numbers. Legs' face broke into a broad smile. As each number came into his ear, the now confident Legs – recovered from his distress and full of beans – wrote it onto his pad with broad strokes.

The only problem was that most of what was coming into Legs' receiver from Recall were *wrong* numbers. They weren't wrong because Recall couldn't remember them; Eyes had accurately fed him the dozen numbers from the initial sighting, and Recall was able to recall ten of them correctly, which would have resulted in victory over Otto's nine. But Recall only transmitted three correct ones to Legs.

Legs finished entering the mistaken numbers onto his pad, and then preened to the crowd in anticipation of soon raising his arms in victory. The judges checked Legs' numbers against those on the blackboard and announced Legs' low score. Legs let out a howl, reflecting his astonishment at this turn of events. And his mood quickly turned to outright anger when the emcee held up his fierce rival's hand, proclaiming him the

winner of the contest – Otto from the Elm Street house, the *Spryest Senior Over 90*.

\* \* \*

While the contestants were being herded to the side of the stage for photos, the other three members of the Fab Four caucused. Eyes passed along his visual report of how upset Legs was with what had just happened. The question they debated was how to handle things with Legs upon his return to The Barracks group.

"We could lie," said Eyes. "Recall could just say he had a brain freeze."

"I don't like that idea," said Recall. "I'm proud that I remembered ten of the dozen numbers – I don't want to plead failure. How would you like it, Eyes, if I told him the original numbers I got from you were wrong – you hadn't seen them clearly – so I was giving him right answers to the wrong numbers."

"No," said Eyes, "I wouldn't like that – since I saw the numbers perfectly and passed each of them on to you."

Then Recall said, "How about *this* lie, which would be supported by the fact that he had to bang on the receiver – namely, I gave him the right numbers, but because he didn't hear me so well through the transmitter, he wrote down the wrong numbers he thought he heard."

Ears, protective of his own turf, said, "I don't like that one. My devices worked great – I don't want to disparage them."

Eyes said, "How about just telling him the truth –

that we didn't like one bit how he was hogging all the credit."

"No," said Ears, ever the pragmatist, "we'd lose him as a friend – and let's face it, we need Legs for the pizza. . . . I've got a better idea. . . ."

\* \* \*

When Legs finally rejoined the group, he was furious. "What the hell's going on here – why did you guys sabotage my big win?"

Ears put his arm around Legs' shoulder and spoke in a soothing manner. "Legs," he said, "you did a fine job up there – we're all proud of you. Truth be told, though, we did give you the wrong information on the memory portion. But before you explode, let me tell you why we did it."

Legs, still twitching perceptibly, calmed down just enough for Ears to continue.

"The problem was that during the intermission, Cuticle overheard this guy Bela from Otto's Elm Street group talking to one of his cronies. And guess what he was saying – that he was sure we were feeding you information through a gizmo in your ear. When Cuticle reported this to us, you had already gone back on stage, so we weren't able to warn you.

"The three of us huddled and decided the risk was too great. If you had won, the Otto camp would have claimed foul, which would be easy for them to prove. Even if they didn't object, we also worried about what might happen if you won. You may have been called upon to read or hear or remember something during the post-contest festivities and been unable to do it – so the

judges would discover on their own that we cheated. And that would be terrible."

"That's right," said Eyes, "we'd be outcasts in the community."

"So," said Ears, "we sabotaged you to save all of us – and to preserve the reputation of the Fab Four. But we do have the satisfaction of knowing – since, in fact, Recall remembered ten of the numbers, one more than Otto – that if we'd gone all the way through with our scheme, we'd have won."

"Damn straight," said Recall, muttering something that sounded like "428,751. . . ."

Dimples, on the periphery of the group, then chimed in with, "And Legs, at least when it come to mobility, you're still the spryest senior over 90 around – my hero!"

Legs blew a kiss in Dimples' direction, her adulation helping him to reluctantly accept the group's explanation. "Well," he said evenly – although not without a tinge of regret – "I guess I see your point."

"Good man," said Ears in the same soothing tone. But then, abruptly, his voice became all business. "And now, let's make some good use of those great feet of yours, Legs. Since the food they're serving here is crap, we want you to run down to that little fish-and-chips shop three blocks south and get us and the F-F Groupies a dozen orders to go. Here's the money, and we've even written down the directions for you. . . ."

Back in harness again, Legs took the money and directions and dutifully turned to head for the exit. At which point, Eyes added – just so there was no chance of

Legs' hubris ever resurfacing to undermine the mutual dependency of the group – "And here's a magnifying glass for you to see what we wrote. . . ."



## IS THERE A LAWYER IN THE HOUSE?

Wesley Milford was about to doze off on the flight from San Francisco to New York when he was startled to hear some unfamiliar words over the p.a. system. "Is there a *lawyer* on the plane? If so, please push the call button over your seat."

*That's a new one*, thought Wesley, who at 50 was indeed a lawyer – a partner in a prominent New York firm with impeccable professional credentials. His face was unmemorable, neither handsome nor homely, but with noticeable wrinkles under the eyes and a widening bald spot on the back of the head. Although sufficiently slim to avoid the need for diets, he lacked the muscular tone of someone who worked out regularly.

Never one to shirk responsibility, Milford pushed the button. A youthful and attractive female flight attendant, decidedly agitated, arrived at his row within seconds.

"Oh, sir," she said, her gamin-like face wreathed with concern, "please help us. We have a terrible problem in the rear of the plane."

Milford followed her down the aisle. *She walks with such an alluring stride*, he noted. *Now that's what I used to call a "stewardess."*

As he passed each row, the passengers looked up at him with a uniform gaze of respect. In the last row of the plane sat a small elderly man, staring straight ahead, his face ashen.

"Here we are," whispered the comely stewardess in Wesley's ear. "This old man is convinced he's going to

die before the plane lands. Another passenger, a doctor, checked his vital signs, but found no specific ailment or impairment. The old man keeps insisting he has to speak to a lawyer."

Milford's eyes widened. *She's also quite well-spoken.* . . . Wesley leaned over the seat. The old man looked up at him, speaking in a barely perceptible but lucid voice. "I'm dying," he said, "and I have no Will. My children will inherit my property, but I don't want them to – they've been unkind to their father. Can you help me?"

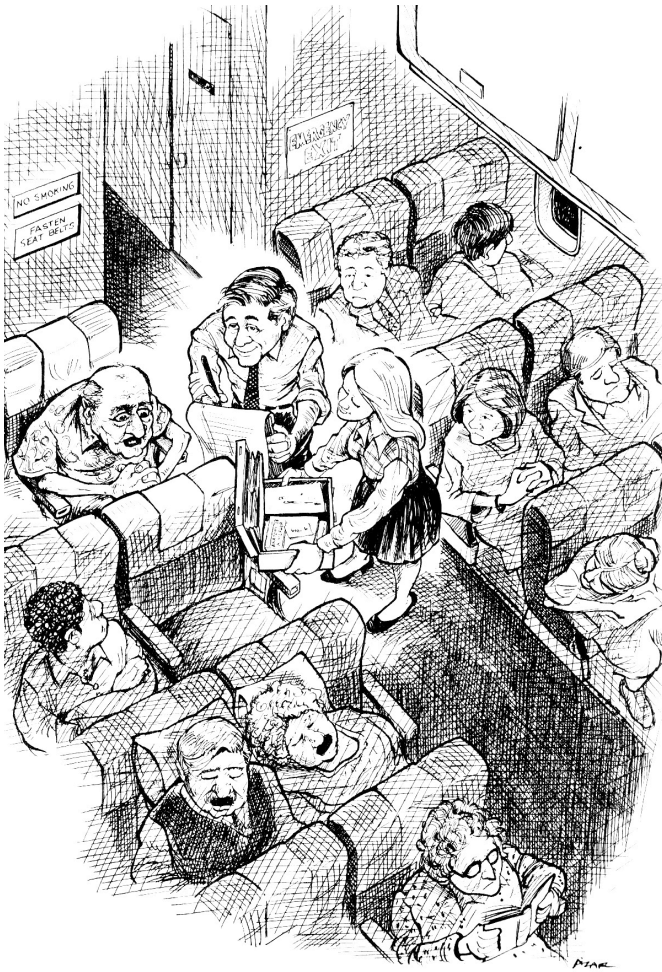
Wesley turned to the stewardess. "Did anyone else answer your appeal for a lawyer?"

"No," she replied, "you're the only one, sir. It's up to you." The gratitude that shone through her winsome expression gave Milford devilish ideas. *I wonder if she has a date tonight.* . . .

Wesley didn't hesitate. "I'll handle this," he said, rolling up his shirtsleeves. "Miss, would you please fetch my attaché case."

Milford now went to work in earnest. He made a checklist of the requisite issues to be covered in the document. With gentle but probing questions, he divined the old man's intentions. The provisions of the Will took shape in rapid pen strokes on his yellow pad.

He was aware, of course, that serious questions of applicable law were being posed repeatedly as the plane crossed each state line. But this, he reckoned, was no time to be plagued by self-doubt. *I have to act, and I'll do what it takes.*



As the plane passed over Omaha, Nebraska, the Will was signed – witnessed by the doctor, the flight engineer, and the fetching young stewardess whose face, as she handed Milford back his pen, radiated hero worship. The document may have been improvised, but Wesley was certain it was fit for filing in probate court.

"How can I ever thank you?" sobbed the old man, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I have travelers' checks. . . ."

"No, no," replied Wesley in a voice devoid of ego. "The legal profession has been good to me. This one," he said over his shoulder, as he began to walk back down the aisle, "is on the house."

"PLEASE RETURN TO YOUR SEATS AND FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELTS."

The loud voice over the plane's p.a. system woke Milford up with a start. The old man – the handwritten Will – the alluring stewardess – it had all been a dream....

"But what a dream!" exclaimed Wesley Milford the next day, seated behind the desk in his disheveled law office. "Just think, Madge, in one fell swoop I was able to indulge every lawyer's secret fantasy – the joy of being really needed, the satisfaction of coming through under pressure, the fulfillment of easing an old man's last hours, the exhilaration of screwing his heirs. . . ."

"This was definitely one of your best," said Madge Clark, Milford's long-time secretary and confidant, who was perched on the arm of a pull-up chair. Madge – pretty, with a perky manner, lively mind and good sense of humor – was in her mid-30's and happily married to an architect. "You're getting more and more imaginative."

As the day wore on, Wesley made some progress with the mountain of minutiae on his desk. But by mid-afternoon, he was drowsy from the effort and the rigors of the long flight from the coast. . . .

A little later that afternoon, Madge appeared at the door. "Wesley, there's a Miss Vernon here to see you. She says she met you at a dinner party last week. She knows what a busy man you are, but she thinks you'll remember her – and, forgive me for saying so, but if you don't re- member her, you must be brain dead!"

Wesley, intrigued, put aside the tedious papers he'd been working on. "Okay, I'll make time for her." When Madge left, he took out a comb and ran it through his hair so as to minimize the bald spot.

Two minutes later, in pranced a knockout redhead with luscious lips and curves to die for. Milford, who hadn't been able to place Vernon's name, now recalled her in Technicolor. They had indeed chatted over cocktails at the home of a mutual friend last Friday, only to be separated at dinner by an inflexible seating arrangement. Wesley couldn't recollect the particulars of their conversation, but once again he found himself awash in the tantalizing perfume that marked her presence.

Laura Vernon sashayed over to Wesley's desk, her ample bosom jiggling with each step. She held out a manicured hand across the document sprawl. "Wesley Milford," she began, the cornpone huskiness of her voice sending vibrations through his spinal column, "I hope I'm not troubling you too much. But I recalled what you said to me last week – that if I ever needed legal assistance, I should look you up. Well, sugar, I need some now, and I need it bad."

Wesley replied, in a tone designed to inspire confidence, "Miss Vernon, it's no trouble at all. You've come to the right place. Tell me your problem, and let's see what I can do to help you out."

Miss Vernon sat down on the small couch and crossed her legs. Wesley's gaze took in the deep slit in her skirt riding high up on her shapely thighs, then swung down to her trim ankles and spike-heeled shoes. "Please call me Laura," she said. "And I'd find it easier to talk about this delicate subject, if you would come out from behind your big desk and join me over here on the loveseat."

Wesley dutifully complied, although there was barely room for the two of them. The physical contact between their bodies sent a frisson of forbidden pleasure across his midsection. *Oh*, he thought, *wait 'til I tell Madge about this one. . . .*

"The thing is," said Laura Vernon, her voice now a pitiable lament, "my husband has left me – just like that." She placed her hand on Wesley's knee. "I'm all alone in the world."

"I'm sorry to hear that Laura," said Wesley, attempting to shoe-horn some genuine empathy into the carnal craving that possessed him. His lawyer's instincts then turned to a more practical consideration – his fee. "Did the rotter leave you . . . uh . . . broke?"

"Oh, no," said Miss Vernon. "As a matter of fact" – and here she moved her mouth so close to Wesley's ear that her whispered words echoed like a thunderbolt – "I'm worth millions. . . ."

"WESLEY, YOUR FIVE O'CLOCK HIRING INTERVIEW IS HERE."

It was Madge's voice over the intercom, jolting Milford back to the reality of his Laura-less office. Miss Vernon's ample curves and big bucks lay tantalizingly beyond his grasp. *Dammit*, he thought, *that was*

*primetime – I wonder if I'll be able to resuscitate her after I finish the hiring interview. . . .*

Not that Milford was a ladies' man. Like the President of his youth, Jimmy Carter, Wesley's occasional bouts of lusting were confined to the heart. For the last 18 years, he had been married to an exemplary woman, an admirable wife and mother to their two children, who fulfilled all his needs – except that she was the most literal, unimaginative person he'd ever known. And that meant there was no way he could possibly regale her with sprightly tales of his fantasy adventures.

Yet he felt the need to confide these hi-jinks to someone – that was half the fun. He couldn't share them with his partners – they would have thought he was crazy, and probably taken a nibble or two off his share of the firm pie. So Madge was the perfect choice – interested, imaginative, non-judgmental, and reliably discreet.

"Okay, Madge," he replied over the intercom. "Bring the student in. But remind me, I've got a real good one to tell you about later on – you even have a small cameo role with a great line of dialogue."

The following day, Milford was sitting by himself in a small conference room at another downtown law firm, about to begin what he anticipated would be an arduous negotiation. His adversary was a stubborn quick-tempered lawyer named Biff Bullpit, with whom Wesley had tangled on several other unpleasant occasions. *It's just like Bullpit*, Wesley mused, *to keep me waiting like this*. The conference room was borderline claustrophobic and the temperature unusually warm – *probably another Bullpit gambit*, thought Wesley, as he sank lower in the soft swivel chair. . . .

When all 250 pounds of a scowling Biff Bullpit finally made an appearance at the door and negotiations began, it was just as Wesley had foreseen – a titanic clash of wills between the two of them over an important disputed issue. Neither man gave any sign of yielding an inch. The decibel level began to rise precipitously.

"Enough of this," thundered Wesley. "I won't listen to any more threats from the likes of you, Bullpit. You know what my position is on this issue. It constitutes an equitable resolution of our clients' dispute – and I'm absolutely immovable."

Bullpit exploded out of his seat and headed directly for Milford. "Why, you lowdown dirty skunk, how dare you talk to me like that! As for your immovable position, here's what I think of it –" and with that, Bullpit smashed his fist into the table right next to Wesley's water glass, spilling the contents over a file of vital papers.

Wesley was stunned by Biff's precipitous assault and slow to react. *Holy cow*, he thought, *Madge will get some kick out of my latest touch – water-drenched documents*. He finally pushed his chair back from the table and attempted to stand up. But before he could rise, Bullpit was all over him – arms flailing, elbows in his midsection, the huge bulk of the man smothering Milford's slim body.

As he struggled, Wesley's mind raced ahead. *This will never do. I didn't start this, but by God, I'll finish it*. And summoning heretofore untapped sources of strength from his flaccid body, he proceeded to execute a tricky maneuver he had once seen in an action movie. With a lightning fast lunge, he hurtled out of his chair and whipped around to the rear of Bullpit. In a flash, Wesley had pinned the bully's arms and gained a choke- hold so



devastating that Bullpit cried out for mercy. . . .

"CHRIST, THE AIR CONDITIONING MUST BE ON THE FRITZ IN HERE – IT'S LIKE AN OVEN!"

It was Biff Bullpit, standing just inside the door of the conference room, his well-tailored jacket showing no signs of their titanic struggle. Milford had to suppress an urge to lecture him – *Listen, Bullpit, don't you dare knock over my water glass ever again.* . . .

Following the actual negotiations – which were indeed heated but never turned physical – Wesley returned to his office and entertained Madge with a detailed recap of the fantasy brawl. "Oh my gosh!" she exclaimed, getting into the spirit of the occasion, "I would have had to resurrect your documents with a hair dryer!"

Wesley busied himself with catch-up work for the remainder of the afternoon and, after Madge left, into the early evening. When he felt he'd toiled enough, he turned on his stereo and listened dreamily to Sinatra's *Only for Lovers* album. Putting his feet up on the desk and closing his eyes, he envisioned himself pub-crawling in Vegas with Frank and the rest of the Ratpack. . . .

A little later, when Milford left the office, he took the elevator down to the building's underground garage. It was a private unattended parking area, empty except for his car and one or two others. As he approached his vehicle, Wesley noticed a man lurking in the shadows just behind a concrete pillar.

Milford had no time to react before the man emerged, aiming a pistol at Wesley's midsection. The man was squat with a menacing look and a large scar curling down the left side of his face. "Remember me,

Mil- ford?" he said in a snarling tone.

Wesley peered intently at the man's face, especially at the scar, and then it all came back to him. The man, whose name was Nestor Wolf, was the ne'er-do-well brother of Wesley's client, Rutherford Wolf. Or his *former* client, to be more precise, since Rutherford had died some six months ago. "Why, you're Nestor Wolf," said Wesley.

"That's right, counselor. And since you've got such a good memory, you must also remember the reason I'm aiming this gun at you now."

Wesley quickly recalled the situation that was the probable cause of his present predicament. Rutherford Wolf had owned a farm a few hours outside New York City. His brother Nestor lived and worked on the farm for most of his adult life. Rutherford's original Will bequeathed the farm to Nestor outright upon Rutherford's death. But then Rutherford, a widower, remarried. Shortly thereafter, he suffered a mild stroke. His new wife, deeply concerned over his health, pressured Rutherford to change the Will provision. So Rutherford called upon Wesley to write a codicil, leaving the farm to the new wife. Less than a year later, Rutherford had a major stroke and died. Nestor, expecting to receive the farm, found himself frozen out of his brother's estate.

"You recall, don't you, Milford? Using your damned lawyer's wiles, you deprived me of what was rightfully mine." Nestor trembled with emotion as he spoke. "So now it's your turn to feel some deprivation.

We're going to take a little drive out to the farm. You like that soil so much – let's see how you like being six feet under it!"

*Oh, thought Wesley, this is a good one today. And I have to remember to tell Madge that juicy 'six feet under' line. . . .*

Although the situation appeared to call for desperate measures, Milford decided to display a calm exterior. "Well, I'm game for a pleasant excursion to the country," he said. "Now, Nestor, please don't be alarmed – I'm just reaching into my jacket for the keys to my car." Wesley's hand slid slowly inside his jacket pocket.

Nestor, remarkably agile for his rotundity, lunged forward and whacked Wesley's arm with the butt of the pistol. "Don't pull that stuff on me, wise guy – I'm up to your tricks. Take your hand out of your pocket. I'll reach in there myself for the keys."

The swiftness of the blow surprised Wesley, and he even felt something resembling actual pain. *I'll have to admit*, he thought, *these are getting more and more realistic. . . .*

Wesley removed his hand from the pocket, and allowed Nestor to retrieve the keys. Nestor unlocked the car and opened the driver's side front door. Wesley, seeing his opportunity, made a lightning move to slam the door on Nestor's arm. But Nestor easily deflected the effort, and this time belted Wesley across the forehead with the gun butt, drawing blood.

The blood felt to Wesley like real blood – reality run rampant – and the pain was so intense that Wesley decided he'd had enough of this particular fantasy adventure. *There's not even a pretty girl in sight. . . .* Still, he liked to end these capers with a special flourish, and for this one, he had a sudden inspiration.

Milford got into the driver's seat and fastened his seatbelt. Nestor, pistol drawn, sat on the passenger side, ignoring his own seatbelt. As they exited the garage, Wesley mentally reviewed his plan. The idea was to smack the car into a wall – his seatbelt protecting him, while the un- tethered Nestor would either crash head-first into the windshield or be smothered by the airbag, but in either case, rendered impotent.

A few blocks later, Wesley spied the perfect wall for the planned operation. No pedestrians were nearby. He swung the steering wheel sharply to the right and hit the gas pedal hard. But Nestor, ever alert, reached over and yanked on the emergency brake, bringing the vehicle to a sudden stop. No airbag deployed. Nestor's right shoulder was wedged against the dashboard, which cushioned the blow for him. But Wesley's seatbelt had been loosely fastened and didn't fully restrain him – he was impaled on the steering wheel and knocked temporarily unconscious.

As he regained consciousness with a splitting headache, Wesley had one of those light bulb moments of total clarity. *Hey, wait a minute. I wanted this adventure to end and it didn't. Meanwhile, I'm taking a lot of physical punishment that hurts like hell. . . .* And suddenly, through his pain, Milford reached the startling conclusion – *This is no fantasy. . . .*

As the initial shock of his realization began to wear off, Mil- ford's mind started functioning again. Life can and does imitate art, he realized. He recalled his favorite example of that axiom – the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island in the late 70's, occurring within months after the re- lease of *The China Syndrome*, a movie based on the same subject matter.

Nestor took over the wheel for the balance of the trip, driving with one hand and pointing the gun across the seat at Wesley with the other. Conversation subsided and the journey was uneventful. But like the car itself, Wesley's brain was going a mile a minute, desperately trying to devise some means to extricate himself from this imminent peril. It was a real challenge – Nestor may not have been a rocket scientist, but he was holding the pistol and appeared to be quite resolute.

They arrived at the farm, set in a desolate landscape and seemingly unoccupied. Nestor ignored the main house and headed for the barn. Locating an old shovel in the tool shed, he used it like a cattle prod, herding Wesley into a wooded grove a hundred yards away. "Here's the spot," said Nestor with a snarl. "Start digging your grave."

Wesley began to dig, half-heartedly at first until Nestor pistol-whipped him for moving at too slow a pace.

The first tactic Wesley attempted was simply an unabashed plea for his life. "It wasn't my fault, Nestor. I was just carrying out orders. Your brother was under the influence of that woman. . . ."

"Shut up and dig," said Nestor. "I'll be taking care of *that woman* next."

A few minutes later, Wesley tried a different approach. "If you kill me, Nestor, the authorities will get you."

"No, they won't," Nestor replied, his voice full of confidence.

"Yes, they will." Wesley Milford, who considered himself to be an officer of the court, disliked dissembling – but certainly, in these dire circumstances, a small lie was permissible. "I managed to leave a clue back at the garage that will lead the police right to your doorstep."

"Bullshit!" roared Nestor, although his next words suggested to Wesley some uncertainty. "What goddamn clue?"

Wesley stopped digging and looked up at his captor. "Come on, Nestor, do you think I'd be so stupid as to reveal the clue to you – so you can go back later and undo the thing?"

Nestor gave Wesley a whack with the pistol, but it wasn't full strength, and although it stung, Wesley felt he was making progress. Now he took another tack. "Besides, Nestor, even if the police don't find you, killing me won't get you the farm."

"I know that," said Nestor, "but at least I'll have my revenge."

Wesley shook his head slowly from side to side. "Revenge may be sweet, but it's not as good as ending up with the property. If you let me live, I can get you the farm."

This time, there was no "bullshit" eruption from Nestor, who was obviously intrigued. After a moment, he asked, "How?"

*Aha*, thought Wesley, *he's hooked*. "I can say that Rutherford's initial stroke was more serious than people realized, so that he was not of sound mind when he made the codicil."

"But you testified in the probate court that he was." "I can say that I lied." Nestor's tone was skeptical. "Why in hell would you have lied?"

Wesley had anticipated the question and was ready with his response. "Look, Nestor, another law firm had done Rutherford's original Will. I needed to validate the codicil in order to take over the handling of his estate. It meant a big fee for me, which provided plenty of financial motivation to lie."

Nestor tested him further. "But you'll be disbarred for lying – maybe even have to go to prison."

"Perhaps, although I have a good law firm behind me. But even so, that's preferable to being six feet under. . . . Think about it, Nestor."

Wagging the pistol slowly in his hand, Nestor mulled over the prospects for a minute before asking the obvious question. "If I let you go, how do I know you'll do what you say? How can I be sure you won't turn me in for kidnapping and attempted murder?"

Once again, Wesley was prepared. "Good question, Nestor – I might have expected someone as intelligent as you to ask just that. I've given this some thought and here's how it works. I have a yellow pad in my briefcase in the car. I'll write out a confession about how I lied in court, and then I'll outline the steps I'm committing myself to take in order to undo the damage. You'll have the pad, and you can hold me to it."

Nestor pondered this without comment for several moments. Wesley, worried that his flimsy rationale wouldn't stand up, moved to bolster it. "And I'd have to be crazy to go to the police – the minute I revealed to

them that I'd lied in probate court, they'd lock me up and throw away the key."

Nestor thought for another minute and then said, "Okay, you've got a point – the revenge would be sweet, but I really want the farm more. Let's do it. . . . But first, take your shovel and fill up this hole."

When the ground was level again, they returned to the car. Wesley's attaché case was in the back seat. He opened the rear door, got in, and put the case on his lap. Nestor, pistol still in hand, sat in the driver's seat, swinging half-way around to maintain surveillance.

Wesley opened the attaché, held up the yellow pad for Nestor to see, and then lowered it back into the case which he would use as a desk to write on. Unbeknownst to Nestor, however, as Wesley was performing this maneuver, he managed to flick on a small digital voice recorder that he always kept in the case.

"Let's see," said Wesley, narrating his efforts loud enough for Nestor – and the recorder – to hear. "Obviously, I'm *not* going to write anything in here about you kidnapping and attempting to murder me. . . . I'll just start out in a neutral tone by saying something like this" – and he began to write as he spoke – "I, Wesley Milford, feeling contrition at the unfair result of my wrongful action, hereby confess that I lied when I testified in probate court that Rutherford Wolf was of sound mind at the time of executing his codicil. In fact, Rutherford did not, at that time, have the requisite mental capacity to perform this act. . . . How's that for a start, Nestor?"

Nestor grunted acquiescence. Wesley kept drafting and narrating aloud – providing a thorough statement of the circumstances surrounding the codicil,



but interspersed with some offhand remarks ("I could write this more easily, Nestor, if you didn't point that pistol directly at my head") to indicate that he was being held under duress.

When he had completed and signed the document, Wesley handed the yellow pad to Nestor and closed his attaché case. Nestor read the full text and appeared satisfied. They then drove back to town without further incident, Wesley dropping Nestor off at a seedy hotel where he'd taken up temporary residence. "I congratulate you, Nestor," said Wesley through the open window, "on letting your head rule your heart."

Upon arriving home, Wesley called the police to arrest Nestor, which they promptly did. Nestor indignantly produced the yellow pad, but the telltale voice recording did him in. The tabloids picked up the story, and Wesley became a 15-minutes-of-fame folk hero for his clever handling of such a dire plight. His wife and kids cheered his appearances on TV interviews. His partners gave him a standing ovation when he appeared at their weekly luncheon.

"I'm so proud of you," said Madge, after Wesley had finished regaling his secretary with all the gory details. "It must have been a tremendous shock – when you first realized this was real and not just one of your daydreams."

"You're not kidding," said Wesley. "As a matter of fact, I consider this incident to be – if you'll pardon the pun – a real wake-up call. I've undergone a life-altering conversion, Madge. It's time that I grew up and put those childish fantasies behind me. . . ."

And, true to his word, Wesley Milford changed overnight into a staid and serious attorney, playing it by

the book, eschewing every temptation to re-enter the heretofore vibrant world of daydreams. "I'm boring this way, I know," he confessed to Madge, "but at the same time I'm experiencing a renewed sense of self-esteem, such as one feels when he's kicked the nicotine habit."

A few weeks later, Milford was in court to argue a complicated motion in a case unrelated to the Rutherford-Nestor affair. The judge presiding over the hearing was a beady-eyed pompous man named Pringle, who Wesley despised from prior bad experiences. The courtroom was stuffy and overheated.

During a recess in the tedious proceedings, Wesley's co- counsel Ed Philips went out to get them some much-needed coffee. Wesley remained at the counsel table, forcing himself to pore over some complex documents. . . .

When the hearing resumed, Wesley attempted to introduce one of the documents into evidence. Opposing counsel objected on the ground that she hadn't been provided with a copy of the document in the pre-motion discovery process.

Judge Pringle gave Wesley a disapproving look and said, "I'm sustaining counsel's objection, Mr. Milford. And I must say, I find your behavior – attempting to strong-arm the court with a document that you didn't even have the courtesy to reveal in advance to opposing counsel – to be extremely shady."

"Now, just one minute." Wesley was up on his feet, gesticulating wildly at the judge. "I won't accept that kind of slur on *my* honor from *your honor* or from anyone else. Just who do you think you are – sitting up there in an ill-fitting black robe on your miniscule throne! What

gives you the right to be so goddamned high and mighty  
...?"

"PSST! HERE'S THE COFFEE, WESLEY...."

It was Ed Philips, shaking Milford's shoulder as  
he placed a cardboard cup on the counsel table. . . .