

“Rising”

by Gregory B. Huffstutter

“And the answer is... this Valley was the final resting place of Tutankhamun.”

Ooo, ooo, I knew that one. I was sure of it. Geraldo did a special there last year... it was... it was...

The law professor from Northwestern hit his buzzer. “What is the Valley of the Kings?”

Alex, always the benevolent host, smiled at his returning champion. “You are correct — and you still control the board, Wallace.”

“I’ll take Egyptian Archeology for \$200.”

The front door jingled.

“For \$200; this man re-discovered the tomb now called KV-5.”

Man, that was a toughie. I couldn’t wait to see Mr.-Smarty-Pants-Legal-Eagle try to get that — *Ewww!*

The rancid smell broke my concentration on the 4” Zenith mounted underneath my front counter. Before looking up, my brain conjured up an image of a wet cat who’d rolled through a puddle of rotten eggs, gorgonzola cheese, and Absolut.

“Yuzz Micknald?” a voice said from the lobby.

Ping! That arrogant prick, Wallace, buzzed in with the question: “Who is Dr. Kent Weeks?”

“You are correct again,” Alex said.

Damn! Lucky guess. I hoped Wallace stayed with the category. I could tell that my man Alex Trebek was waiting for the \$300 question to unleash a doozy.

Pissed by the interruption into my Jeopardy time, I gave the owner of that god-awful the once-over. The bum didn’t even come close to filling out his military surplus jacket, which was pulled tight against his scruffy neck. His hair was mostly hidden under a black ski cap, but a few oily bangs hung down over pale blue eyes. An ugly bruise radiated across his left cheekbone.

“Yuzz Micknald?” he repeated while pointing to the reversed lettering on my front windows that read: MacDonell’s Quick Copies & Packing.

“Yeah, I’m MacDonell. What of it?”

I slipped my hand under the counter and fingered the alarm switch. It wasn’t actually hooked up with the automatic ringer to the police station. Those bastards wanted \$57 a month plus free

copies for advertising their BBQ fundraisers. But the switch was connected to an ear-splitting siren that would run off this lowlife in seconds.

On the TV, a cocky-sounding Wallace went for the \$300 question in Egyptian Archaeology. Alex said this was the temple that inspired the Percy Bysshe Shelly poem ‘Ozymandias.’

The bum smacked his lips. I noticed a crust of dried blood in the corners of his mouth. “Ima juzz wunderun s’fa anyunne kinda work t’be hadinnhere, ‘cause—”

“What happened to your face?” I asked.

“Heh. Wuzz rolled good, yessir. Dem guys didinna get much fer th’ troubles, ifinyaknowattimean.”

Ping! The 9th grade science teacher from Wichita buzzed in. “What is Karnak?”

“I’m sorry, that’s incorrect,” Alex said.

“Hah! Go back to school, Kansas Boy!” I cackled. Raising my eyes again, I was amazed that such a tiny sack of bones could carry such a foul odor. “Hey, buddy, I gotta breathe here all day. Why don’cha beat it before I call the cops.”

The podiatrist from Tacoma gave it a shot. “What is Luxor Temple?”

“I’m afraid that’s also incorrect. It’s yours if you want it, Wallace.”

The pussy declined to guess, so Alex gave the correct response — what was the temple now called The Ramesseum.

Going for the big bucks, Wallace jumped to Philosophy for \$500.

“This German philosopher effected what he called a second Copernician revolution.”

I was eating up the befuddled look on Wallace’s face when the bum placed his dirty hands on my white counter. “Ima needing sum work.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said. “Tell you what, I’ll give you some work if you get this Jeopardy question right.”

“Kannnt,” he slurred.

“Well, that’s a shame. And we don’t even have any parting gifts for you. Bye now.” I switched my gaze back to the TV. None of the contestants were willing to venture a guess, which triggered the studio’s ‘boop-boop’ timer.

Alex said: “Who was Immanuel Kant?”

My jaw dropped. Before I could declare it a freak coincidence, the dirtbag backed towards the door. “Be seeinya tomorrow then.”

I shouted that, according to Jeopardy rules, he’d failed to phrase his response in the form of a question, but with a wave, he was gone.

* * *

I was taking inventory of the glue sticks the next afternoon when I heard someone come through my front door. From the smell alone, I could tell the bum was back.

He was wearing the same green jacket and black ski cap. Turning to me, I could see that the bruise on his cheekbone was beginning to yellow.

I crossed the empty lobby to put myself directly between the vagrant and my cash register. “Get lost. I don’t have any work for you.”

“Ima juzz needin’ sum cash, ifinyaknowattimean.”

“I don’t hire drunkards.” I crossed my arms and puffed out my not-inconsiderable chest.

“But we haddina bet.”

“I don’t care about no bet. You smell like a gol-danged distillery. Come back when you’re off the sauce and maybe we’ll talk.”

Without complaining, the bum clicked the heels of his torn sneakers, gave me a crisp salute, and stumbled his way out my glass door.

Once he was gone, I walked back to the storage area. Maneuvering around the haphazard piles of Avery labels and empty toner cartridges, I ducked into the washroom. My wife kept several cans of air freshener under the sink.

I picked one that had a picture of a snowy mountain range on its label, hoping that the power of the Rockies would be enough to rid my lobby of the smell.

* * *

Mary was on her coin-operated Laundromat kick again.

“You don’t even have to be there, that’s the beautiful thing of it. All you have to do is swing by once a night, pick up the cash, turn off the lights, and lock the door.”

I shifted the phone to my other ear. “Punkin, what do I know about Laundromats? Besides, there’s already one on Ashwood Lane.”

“**Punkin**,” she spat back with more venom than I expected, “it don’t have to be Ashwood! What about Old Mill, or Highway 52?”

“You know what the rents are like over there, Mary,” I said into the phone. After getting shot down on the Punkin, I knew better than to call her Toodles or Snickerpoo, which only worked on rare occasions anymore. “There’s no way we could afford the kind of space you’d need for—”

“We could afford that kind of space if your stupid copy store did more than break even. I’m tired of this go-nowhere, dead-end, nickle-and-dime—”

The front door tinkled, saving me from the rest of her rant. “I’ve got to go, there’s a customer here.”

My relief at getting off the phone was so profound that I almost didn’t notice the incoming blast of putrescence.

“Colonel Tiddings reporting for work detail.”

The bum was wearing the same hat, coat, and grubby jeans as yesterday. His hands were still streaked with dirt, but his blue eyes were clear and more focused.

“Why do you insist on ruining my afternoons?” I asked. Jeopardy was on in five minutes.

“I haven’t had a drink in 24 hours.”

“That’s beautiful. Do you want a medal, or should I just notify the Nobel Prize committee instead?”

“Look, Mr. MacDonell, I jus’ need some bread. You got any odd jobs that need doin’? Stacking boxes, cleaning windows, whatever.”

I was glad the shop was empty because I was beginning to feel lightheaded from his body odor.

“Hang on.” A minute later I came back with a broom and trash bag. “I’ll give you five bucks if you sweep the sidewalks and parking lot.”

The bum smiled and reached for the broom. “You drive a hard bargain, Captain.”

I waved him off and switched on my small TV just in time to hear the opening bars of the Jeopardy theme. Today was definitely the day that Wallace, the pompous ass, was going to get dethroned.

Thirty minutes later, I was in a foul mood because Wallace got a lucky guess on Final Jeopardy (turns out that ‘EFTA’ has nothing to do with the ethical treatment of animals, and actually stands for the ‘European Free Trade Association’). He squeaked by the pretty chemical engineer from Boston by a mere \$50.

To ease my sorrows, I broke into the tuna sandwich that Mary packed for my lunch. I was mid chew when the bum poked his head through the door and announced that he was finished.

I opened my register, took out five singles, and went out to inspect his handiwork. The dozen spaces in the asphalt parking lot were immaculate. He’d also swept all the walkways to the front door and loading area, as well as the sidewalk that ran along Ashwood Lane towards the Taco Bell and bowling alley.

“I also picked up the trash in your flower beds,” he said. “Turns out you had a whole collection of used 7-11 coffee cups under those rhododendrons.”

Handing over the money, I mumbled thanks and started up the walkway. I’ve always given Mary a hard time for being a softie about strays. Cats, dogs, squirrels, raccoons; if it showed up on our back porch, Mary would put out some food, water, and a blanket. So she would’ve laughed when I found myself turning around and asking the bum if he was hungry.

“Don’t think I’ve eaten in two days, Captain.”

“Hang on. I’ve got a half a tuna sandwich inside. My wife puts celery chunks in it, even though I keep telling her it’s better with relish. But it’s still pretty good.”

Bringing the sandwich and a paper cup of water out to the parking lot, I watched as he devoured the meal.

“Best tuna sandwich I think I’ve ever had,” he said.

“Tell you what... come by tomorrow and I’ll give you another \$5 to rake the leaves and clear out the rain gutters.”

He wiped a smudged sleeve across his mouth. “Much obliged.”

* * *

I was starting to like having a handyman around. The day after cleaning my gutters, he washed all my windows and trimmed the front hedges. The day after that, he repaired the sliding track on the loading door and repainted the building’s wood trim.

For less than \$50, I’d taken care of all the odd jobs on Mary’s nag list. The best thing about Colonel Tiddings — as he had me call him — was that once you told him to do something, he’d disappear until the job was done. It was completely opposite of my daughter, Nora. Whenever Nora was forced to put in time at the store, she’d mope around and wear out my eardrums asking “Is this right?” and “Is this how you do it?” It was a relief when she moved out and started junior college full time.

Unfortunately for Colonel Tiddings, I was running out of outdoor projects. I waited until he fixed that leak in my roof before breaking the news.

“I’m afraid that’s about all the work I’ve got for you.”

It seemed to take him a long time to process that information. He finally said, “I’ve seen your stock room. You really could organize it a lot better.”

“I agree. But I’m afraid you can’t help me with that.”

“Why not? Afraid I’ll steal some manila envelopes?”

I didn't necessarily want to be mean, but I'm not the kind of guy who will tell you that something is a tangerine when it's really a turd.

"How long has it been since you've taken a shower?"

The Colonel shrugged. "Couple a days, I suppose."

"Well it smells like a couple of months. I'm not having you stink up the inside of my store and have you drive away the few regular customers I've got left." I reached into my wallet and pulled out a twenty. "Here. Consider this your severance bonus."

He tucked the money into the front pocket of his army surplus coat and pulled down his stocking hat below his eyebrows. "Alrighty then. If that's the way it's gotta be."

"That's the way it's gotta be," I echoed.

When he shook my hand goodbye, I fully expected never to see him again.

* * *

The next afternoon was the busiest I'd had in weeks. Easter was coming up, and a half dozen ladies came in to make their brunch invitations. I was about to restock the scotch tape dispensers when the front door jingled again.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a youngish, brown-haired man in a green flannel shirt and pressed jeans walk towards the counter.

"Can I help you?"

The man's blue eyes sparkled and he asked, "You got any more of those tuna sandwiches?"

I was slightly taken aback, until I realized it was Colonel Tiddings standing in front of me. Scrubbed, shaved, combed — it was as dramatic as watching Alice Cooper do a quick change into a thin Brad Pitt. Without the bruises and dirt, his cheeks had natural dimples when he smiled.

"Colonel, I hardly recognize you."

"Well, Captain, I used the twenty bucks you gave me to buy a razor and take a shower at the YMCA. I had enough left over to get some new threads at the Salvation Army. You like?"

"It's a step in the right direction."

"So, you still needing someone to help organize your stock room?"

I lifted the swinging partition that led behind the counter. "Come on back."

* * *

The next day he was waiting outside when I opened at 9 am. Instead of attacking the jumbled piles of office supplies in the back, he started by cleaning my washroom. He wore the same flannel shirt and jeans as yesterday.

I tried to make small talk when he emerged from the washroom and began mopping the tile floor behind the counter. “So, Colonel, where you from?”

“Oh, around. Seen my share of YMCAs, that’s for sure. You know, Mr. MacDonnell, if you don’t mind me saying so, I think your P.O.P. is backwards.”

“Say what?”

“P.O.P. — your Point Of Purchase signage.” He dunked the mop head into a bucket of soapy water and wrung out the sponge.

I looked puzzled, so he pointed to the back of the hand-painted sign in my front window. “What do people see when they drive by your store?”

“They see ‘5¢ Copies’ in big ol’ red letters.”

“Now tell me, Mr. MacDonnell, what do your customers see when they come and pay for their copies?”

I glanced down at the laminated card next to my cash register that read:

** Today’s Special **
All Your Copies 3¢ Each!

“How long has that sign been there?” Tiddings asked.

“A few years, I guess. You can’t get copies anywhere in town for less than 5¢, so I thought 3¢ would encourage people to make more copies than they would’ve otherwise.”

The Colonel nodded and continued mopping. “But you see, because of the sign on your window, your customers have already come in expecting to pay 5¢ a copy. It’s not until they make it to your register that they find out you’re going to charge them a fraction of what they were prepared to pay. You are leaving money on the table with every transaction. What’s your margin on each copy?”

I wasn’t sure if it was a trick question, but I kind of wanted to hear where he was going with this. “I figure that with my lease agreements on those Canons, the paper, toner, and rent, it costs me about 2¢ to make a copy.”

“So your margin is only a penny, instead of the 3¢ per copy you could’ve had if you didn’t have this sign beside your register. Have you tried running a test to see if your average copies per customer would be negatively affected by taking it down?”

All of a sudden, my ulcer began to kick into overdrive. I could taste the acid rising up into the back of my throat. “Um, not exactly.”

Colonel Tiddings fixed me with a stare. “You don’t have to get rid of the 3¢ per copy if that truly is the lowest price in town. But that should be your exterior message, to get customers off the street and into your store. Then, once they’re inside, all your P.O.P. should be focused on up-selling them.”

“Up-selling?”

“Trading them up into a larger purchase. You could have a sign next to the copiers that has a ‘Make 50 Copies, Get 10 Free’ offer. Or you could give customers a 10% discount on the purchase of school supplies when they spend more than \$5 on copiers. Offers like that help drive up your average check, instead of giving them a last-second 40% discount.”

The possibilities were bubbling around my brain. It seemed silly to be taking financial advice from somebody I was paying a few bucks to disinfect my washroom, but everything the Colonel was saying had the ring of truth. I asked him where he learned about this P.O.P. stuff.

“I worked for a copy store a few months ago, back in Hickory. No wait, Hickory was the Quickie Mart. I think the copy store was outside of Richmond. It all seems to run together, you know.”

“Tell me about it,” I said. “My wife has to remind me what month it is. Say, where are you sleeping now? At the Y?”

“I wish. But they’re all out of bunks. I’ve got my bedroll set up over in Roosevelt Park. There’s an overhang near the soda machines that provides some good cover.”

I stroked the gray-flecked whiskers that covered my Adam’s apple. “You know, now that we’re going to organize the stock room, I don’t see why we couldn’t make a little space for you back there. It wouldn’t be much, but you’d have the washroom, and it certainly would be warmer than Roosevelt Park.”

The Colonel seemed to tense up. “And what would you be wanting for that?”

“We could work out a trade for three hours of work a day. Anything you do above and beyond that, I’d pay you \$5 an hour. How’s that sound?” I offered my hand.

After a second, he broke into a toothy grin and shook my hand with a firm grip. “Deal. You know, I was getting sick of those skateboard punks waking me up every time they come by for a midnight Mountain Dew. When can I move in?”

“Bring your stuff by this evening if you want. Now, tell me some more about this P.O.P. stuff.”

* * *

I settled into my Lay-Z-Boy and cranked it back with a horrific squeak. Mary wanted to toss the chair, but the springs and leather were now perfectly contoured to my outline, and it seemed a shame to ruin such a perfect fit. I reached for the remote and asked, “What’s for dinner, honeybunch?”

It was almost 7 pm and time for Cheers re-runs on Channel 12. Mary yawned and shifted her feet from the end of the couch to the middle of the glass coffee table. I always wondered how she could get so tired after staying home all day.

“We got some meatloaf I could nuke. There’s also a couple of leftover spareribs, and half of that corn on the cob.”

I noticed that she was wearing an old pair of my ski socks — ones that got a lot of use back when I was 75 pounds lighter and had healthy knees. Now the sock on her left foot had a gaping hole between the second and third toes, revealing a flash of chipped orange polish.

The past few years, I’d been feeling like that old sock: ratty, torn, and getting lost in the Kenmore washer of life. But yesterday my deposit at First Union was nearly double what it had been a week ago.

“Why don’t we order Domino’s tonight,” I said.

Mary quickly brightened. “Really?”

“Sure. We can even get that twisty bread you like so much.”

* * *

“What do you think about my exterior signage?”

Colonel Tiddings was teaching me all kinds of things about lobby zones, pricing strategies, and transaction drivers.

“Frankly, Mr. MacDonnell, your exterior signage sucks.”

“Don’t say that. It cost me \$250 to paint those windows last January.”

The Colonel gave me all the sympathy of a parole board. “Your storefront should be inviting to customers. Maximum light. Uncluttered. Even though we’ve cleaned up your lobby, nobody can tell because all the windows are blocked. Plus, it’s less of a security risk when the police can see through your windows while they’re cruising by.”

“Aw, I got nothing to steal here anyway.”

“I just want to know... why do you have ‘MacDonell’s Quick Copies & Packing’ painted on your glass windows, instead of having a permanent sign that shows to street traffic?”

I grunted. “The guy wanted two grand for mounting a basic sign with lettering on plywood. I can’t afford that.”

“You’re leaving money on the table.”

The Colonel seemed to say that to me a lot. “How do you figure?”

“If it were me, I’d spend five grand on a sign designed by a professional. Your building is your most valuable asset. How many people drive up and down this street every day and night? Which is why your sign needs to be back-lit and easily seen from both directions.”

“But I’m almost never open after dark.”

“It doesn’t matter. Your sign should constantly remind people that you’re here. Maybe they don’t need copies at that exact minute, but when they do, you want them to instantly think of MacDonnell’s.”

“I don’t know,” I said. There was no way that I could afford five grand, even with the way the shop was running now.

“Furthermore, if you get a professionally-designed sign,” the Colonel continued, “you could use that as the basis for your own letterhead and business cards. Those *might* be good things to have in a store that sells stationery and card stock.”

I was so focused on the figure of a large five — followed by three zeroes before the decimal point — that I almost missed the sarcasm in his voice. “I don’t know,” I repeated.

The Colonel picked up a pen and sat down next to me. “Tell you what... if you bring another one of Mary’s cherry pies tomorrow, maybe I could take a crack at sketching out a logo for you. That way, if you like it, you’ve saved all the design charges and can just subcontract the production. It would probably cut the cost of a new sign in half.”

I was still in sticker shock, but twenty-five hundred sounded better than the five grand. I mumbled that he was welcome to give the logo a shot.

“Good. You know, I’ve got another idea for your lobby.”

“What’s that?” I dug my thumbs into my throbbing temples.

“You could use something to keep kids entertained while their parents are making copies or browsing the aisles.”

“Like some toys or Legos?”

“I’m thinking along the lines of video games. Something that is both a distraction and has profit-generating potential.”

I shook my head. “There was one of those arcades down on Highway 52 that just went out of business last month.”

“Perfect. Then they’re probably wanting to dump inventory. Now I’m not suggesting you turn your store into an arcade. Kids are fickle, and you can kill your overhead by trying to keep up with the newest games. But you’d be surprised how quickly you can break even on a used video game if it’s in the right place. I’m talking about add-on sales. That’s the key.”

“I thought correct P.O.P. placement was the key.”

“That’s also the key. You’ve gotta be hitting on all cylinders, or else—“

“Or else you’re leaving money on the table,” I finished for him.

He smiled and playfully punched my beefy shoulder. “Exactly.”

* * *

“So he liked the pie?”

“Ate the whole thing in one sitting.”

Mary turned on our dishwasher. “You know, you can’t keep paying him in baked goods forever.”

I didn’t respond. The Colonel had only been sleeping in the stock room for seven weeks, but in that time I’d cleared enough profit from the used Donkey Kong game to pay off the new sign and get a new Johnny Morris Titanium Baitcast fishing rod. The one with the premium cork handles.

It was getting harder to keep the size of the weekly bank deposits from Mary. Just yesterday she dropped a hint about a sub-zero freezer for the garage.

And next month was looking even better. The Colonel helped me set up a corporate account with the school district, so now the teachers could come in whenever they needed copies of their lessons or exams, and I just billed the appropriate school at the end of the month.

To top it off, some administrators at Madison Middle School told me they were short on computers, so I bought a used Macintosh, hooked it up to that Internet thing, and started charging a buck an hour.

“Did you know how many envelopes I sold last week?”

Mary shrugged.

“Two. That whole east wall of my lobby is taken up by boxes of white, colored, and packing envelopes... and last week I sold a grand total of two. The Colonel went through all my register tapes and counted.”

I didn’t tell Mary that he’d also shrieked at me for not tracking product movements on a daily basis.

“Well, you can’t get rid of the envelopes,” Mary said. “You sell packing supplies. What if someone wants to mail something?”

“But they don’t need to take up so much room in the lobby, that’s the point. I’m thinking of making a display of all the different envelopes we sell, then moving all the inventory to the back room. That way I can put a coffee bar in that area.”

“Coffee bar? What do you know about coffee?”

“Not a damn thing. But I could sublet the space to someone who does. Maybe someone who wants to start their own business and would be willing to trade a cut of their profits for free rent. It would be risk-free to me, and the Colonel says that you wouldn’t believe how cheap it is to brew a cup of coffee. Huge margins on every cup.”

Mary came over and nuzzled my neck. Evidently the prospect of that sub-zero freezer was getting her frisky. I could smell the apricot shampoo she’d used that morning. Her hands reached behind my back and started massaging my shoulders.

“What’s the matter, punkin?” she asked. “You’re all tense.”

“I like the idea of the coffee bar, especially with more of those teachers coming around. But if I move all those boxes of envelopes to the stock room, I’m going to have to put them where the Colonel is sleeping.”

Mary nibbled on my ear just the way I like it. “I’ve got an idea... why don’t you check with Uncle Jerry about that apartment complex he’s at now. I always see that sign for furnished singles. Maybe you could set up that young man in his own apartment.”

“But Mary, those go for at least \$325 a month!”

She kept nibbling and I could hear her breathing get faster. “I’m sure you could work out some kind of trade. He keeps working at the store — you cover his rent.”

Mary’s hands were working magic against my shoulder and neck muscles. I could feel myself relaxing into her embrace.

“I suppose that might work. If this coffee bar idea takes off, I could use the profits to buy down his rent payments,” I murmured.

“Exactly. Now why don’t you ask that Tiddings fellow if he wants to come over for dinner next Friday. Nora is on break and coming home for the weekend. He might enjoy meeting her.”

* * *

I bought a bottle of champagne for the christening. The champagne was a cheap Cold Duck — with a plastic cork no less — but that didn't matter because we were just going to break it anyway.

The Colonel inspected the pole's cement base and proclaimed it all set. We both stepped back and took in the new sign.

The pole had been set away from the shop, in a narrow strip between the parking lot and sidewalk. The sign's two-sided face was angled to street traffic, and bordered with blue and red stripes. Inside the white plastic shell, the word "MacDonnell's" stretched across the top with bold blue letters. The "Quick" was big, red, and slanted in a way that suggested the word was about to sprint off. "Copies & Packing" were done with smaller, thin black letters in a font the Colonel had called 'Copperplate Gothic.'

Having the Colonel design the logo did save some money, but it had still cost nearly three grand for the whole shebang. I'd taken out a small business loan, with two years to slowly pay it off. The Colonel said I'd thank him for this later, but I wasn't totally convinced. It seemed to me that after this many years, everyone in town should know where I was by now.

"Hang on. Let me fire it up." The Colonel jogged back to the shop to adjust the timer.

The final rays of the setting sun faded from the tree line. Spring was my favorite time of the year. The rains had mostly stopped, and it would still be another few months before the summer hit with its double-barrel blast of heat and sticky humidity. Nights were getting longer now. It was nearly six thirty, and you could still read your watch by the purple hue of the cloudless sky.

Suddenly, the sign blazed to life.

The light box glowed with an incandescence that made me catch my breath. Against the white backdrop, the logo seemed to pop out and scream, "I'm here! I'm fast! I'm legit!"

I'm not an egotistical man, but I must admit that seeing my name up there, lit up for the whole world to see, my heart swelled with pride. I know this sounds cheesy to say, but at that moment I realized that my shop was more to me than a paycheck; it was my life. And looking up at that new sign, I saw a bright future — my hopes rising, phoenix-like, from where there had only been mind-numbing drudgery and stale despair — a future complete with two-week fishing trips to Alaska, a new deck for the backyard, a direct-line gas BBQ instead of propane, spoiled grandchildren, one of those Nautilus machines for Mary, and a new VCR and big-screen TV so that I'd never miss another Jeopardy.

I said, "It's beautiful."

The Colonel nodded in agreement.

Grasping the champagne bottle by its neck, I stepped forward and prepared to strike.

“You know, we could just drink this instead.”

“Nah. I’m not thirsty,” Tiddings replied.

Searching his eyes, I saw no trace of the desire. Maybe it was a small test, but before bringing him into my home, I had to know. “Don’t forget dinner tomorrow night. I’ll pick you up around seven.”

I brought the bottle down. It shattered against the sign post, spraying my arm with liquid and ringing in my new future.

* * *

I slowly backed my truck out of my driveway and switched on the headlights.

“That sure was a fine meal, Mr. MacDonnell. Thankee kindly.”

“No problem, Colonel. Mary loves to cook, and I know Nora enjoyed your company as well.”

“Really? I rather got the impression that she didn’t like me.”

I laughed. “Oh, that’s just Nora. She can come off as real standoffish, but I can tell when she fancies someone.”

“She certainly is a looker, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

“Yep. Don’t know where she got it from. Certainly wasn’t Mary or me. You know, Nora’s going to be staying with us all weekend — why don’t you two borrow the truck and catch a movie tomorrow night.”

The Colonel eyed me warily. “Are you trying to set us up?”

“Oh, no, no, no... well, maybe a little. But only because I think Nora could use a friend closer to her own age while she’s home. She gets bored with us fuddydiddies. Who knows, you two could hit it off...”

I let the thought trail off and the Colonel didn’t respond. Pretending to be checking cross-traffic, I glanced over at his clean-shaven profile. He was wearing a new J.C. Penny sweater, and I could tell in the past months he’d put on at least fifteen pounds from Mary’s tuna sandwiches and cherry pies.

To break the silence, I asked: “So how’s the Lakeside Apartments treating you?”

“Just dandy. Although I must say they are a bit of a misnomer. There isn’t a lake anywhere in sight, unless you count the puddle in the courtyard from the leaky water heater. Don’t get me wrong... I’m not complaining. It sure as hell beats sleeping in your stock room. Thanks again for setting me up with my own pad, Mr. MacDonnell.”

I kept my eyes on the road. “Call me Bill.”

He paused. “OK, then. Bill.”

We continued along 3rd Street before turning onto Ashwood Lane. Colonel Tiddings seemed lost in thought until we passed the store. Abruptly, he said, “Stop the car.”

I skidded to a halt in front of the Taco Bell. Thankfully, nobody was on the road this late.

“The front light is off,” he said. “I distinctly remember leaving on the lobby lights before locking up.”

“Could be a fuse.”

“Could be. Why don’t you pull up here and park.”

He was starting to make me nervous. “You think I should call the police?”

“Naw, it’s probably nothing. But it couldn’t hurt to check.”

We parked and looped around to the back of the store. The Colonel used his set of keys to unlock the loading door. He quietly lifted it high enough for us to both duck under, and I was thankful he’d recently oiled the rollers.

There was just enough moonlight sneaking in for us to navigate the darkness of the stock room without banging into the neat rows of boxes. We were passing the shelves of 20# copy paper when we heard a sharp bang from the front of the store.

I looked over at the gray outline of Colonel Tiddings and saw him freeze. He leaned close and whispered, “Be right back.” Before I could protest, he disappeared down one of the dark aisles of the stock room.

Scraping noises began to emanate from my lobby. My throat filled with bile and I could feel my heart thudding in my chest.

The Colonel returned seconds later — even though it felt like hours — with something in his hand the size of a ping-pong paddle.

Tapping me on the shoulder, he moved forward silently. Reluctantly, I followed. We inched past the washroom and the scraping noises got louder. The hallway opened up to the back side of the counter and cash register. My eyes had adjusted to the gloom enough for me to make out a pair of shadows moving around the spot where I was planning to put the coffee bar. I could see that the front door was slightly ajar. A sliver of light ran down the side of the glass.

It was definitely time to sneak back the way we came and call the authorities. I reached for the Colonel, but he was already ducking under the counter’s swinging partition.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Every fiber in my being was screaming for me to run, but I couldn’t leave the Colonel. Why did I keep my shotgun in the attic at home? I would’ve given my left nut for it right now.

Before I could think of an alternative weapon, there was a flurry of movement. A dark shape shot across the lobby and I heard a muffled “oof” and a cry of pain.

The room filled with a furious ripping sound, as though someone was taking a machete to a fancy set of curtains.

I was afraid to turn on the lights. Afraid to have the imprint of a blood-spattered scene — complete with disemboweled guts and crimson flaps of flesh — permanently seared into my brain, bringing with it the full knowledge that my days of peaceful, uninterrupted slumber were forever a thing of the past.

The ripping only got faster and more insistent. With all my will, I forced my hand to move to the light switches above the electric scale and postage meter.

I thought I’d prepared myself for the scene that would unfold before my eyes, but I was wrong.

In the glare of the overhead lobby lights, Colonel Tiddings was sitting on a long-haired teenager, who was tussled up like a rodeo calf. In his hand, the Colonel had a plastic tape dispenser. He took advantage of the sudden illumination by wrapping another layer of strapping tape around the mouth and wrists of the pimply-faced boy.

A second youngster, who was wearing a black Judas Priest t-shirt, stood in shock a few feet away from his fallen partner. He cradled my Macintosh computer in his skinny pale hands. The monitor, printer, modem, keyboard, and cables were already stacked neatly by the front door, which had a yellow-handled screwdriver stuck into the lock.

Blinking rapidly, the computer-toting teen made a move as though he was going to throw the Macintosh at the Colonel. There was no time to prevent an assault, so instead I reached under the counter and pressed the alarm.

The lobby immediately reverberated with a deafening siren. The young punk dropped the computer in surprise and bolted for the door.

Without dismounting or dropping the tape dispenser, the Colonel stuck out his leg. The fleeing teen lost his balance and tumbled into the upright Donkey Kong game. His face hit the screen with a sickening thwack, and he crumpled into a heap at the base of the machine.

“He’s really got to learn how to jump the barrels a little faster if he wants to beat my high score,” the Colonel said with a grin.

* * *

I glanced at the headline again while turning into the Lakeside Apartments. It was the first time I'd ever had my name in the daily paper. Business had been gangbusters all afternoon. The publicity was more than making up for the cost of the busted Macintosh.

The only problem was that, for the first time, the Colonel had failed to show up for his shift. His phone wasn't scheduled to be hooked up until next week, and the store was so busy that I could barely breathe, let alone track him down. Mary and Nora were both feeling ill from last night's double-fudge funnel cake, so they were no help to me at all.

I parked my truck in front of his ground-floor apartment and set the parking brake. With a flush of pride, I ran my finger over the newspaper photo of me and the Colonel standing in front of the store and re-read the top of the article again.

Would-Be Robbers Taped Up During Bungled Heist Of Packing Store

MacDonnell's Quick Copies and Packing was the site of a bizarre heist-gone-wrong last Friday night.

At approximately 11:15 pm, store owner William MacDonnell, 48, and an employee surprised the thieves as they were attempting to steal some computer equipment.

"My man Colonel Tiddings here grabbed a big roll of tape and started wrapping up one of the kids like he was a big Christmas present," said MacDonnell, who has run the store on Ashwood Lane since 1984. "Then he knocked the other one out by tripping him into my Donkey Kong game. It was just about the funniest damn thing I've ever seen."

The store employee who helped halt the robbery declined to comment on his actions or elaborate on his current military status.

The alleged robbers, who are both underclassmen at Truman High, are being held at the juvenile detention center pending a hearing.

Folding up the newspaper, I walked up and rang the Colonel's doorbell.

"Come out, come out! We're famous!" I yelled.

I stood there for several seconds before starting to knock. "Hey, Colonel, you okay in there?"

There was no response from the inside of the apartment and the vertical blinds were drawn tight. More knocking and doorbell-ringing elicited the same response. I wasn't sure if the Colonel was just out for a sunset stroll — or had fallen sick like my wife and daughter — but something told me to check it out.

Fortunately, the rental office was still open and the guy behind the desk remembered me from when I paid the Colonel's security deposit. He brought out a master key and we headed back across the parking lot.

"Hello," the apartment manager said as he unlocked the Colonel's door and crossed the threshold.

I pushed past him. "Colonel? Are you here?"

Aside from the overstuffed couch, ancient TV, and circular dining room set, the main room was empty. Peeking into the kitchen, I could see the metal rack by the sink was full of clean dishes and silverware.

In the rear bedroom, the pillows had been straightened, and the blankets were pulled tight against the headboard. Opening the mirrored closet door, I saw that the Colonel's bedroll and few articles of clothing were gone.

"What's going on?" the apartment manager asked.

I slid the closet door shut. "Beats the hell out of me."

* * *

It was almost closing time when the blonde walked through the front door. I could tell she was from out of town by the cut of her stylish black leather jacket. It looked like something you'd wear out there in New York or Los Angeles.

She quickly scanned the room, then headed straight for me. "Where is he? Where's Peter?"

"Who?"

She slapped a color picture down on my counter. It was a scene from a party; the blonde standing behind a lit birthday cake, snuggled up against a younger man. In the photo, he was tan, wearing glasses, and had a fuller face that suggested lots of high-calorie dinners — but the resemblance was unmistakable.

"The Colonel?"

She seemed momentarily confused. "The Colonel? Oh, right. That's a new one for him. I'm here for my brother, Peter. Peter Tiddings."

Now that she mentioned it, I saw the family resemblance. They had the same strong jaw, dimpled cheeks, and pale blue eyes. Her hair was throwing me off, though. I've always been a sucker for blondes. "Miss, I hate to tell you this... but I haven't seen the Colonel — I mean, Peter — for the past two days. He never showed up for work and moved out of his apartment without telling anyone."

Her pretty white-blond eyebrows collapsed under the weight of my words. Her taut cheeks and neck followed; the muscles going completely slack.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the effect was gone. The blonde composed herself, removed her leather gloves, and asked, "How long was he here?"

"Couple a months."

"And how did he look?"

"Came in smelling like a dumpster. But he cleaned up really well and was starting to put on some weight."

"That's good. I just wish I could've made it sooner. My clipping service was a little late finding the story. Evidently your newspaper isn't hooked up with the major wire services."

"Say what?"

She reached into her leather jacket and pulled out a copy of the article on the robbery. "It could be worse, I suppose. Every time the service gets a hit on Peter, I'm convinced it's going to be in the obit section."

I was having a hard time following her, so I cut to the chase. "Is he coming back?"

She fixed me with those pale blue eyes and said with certainty: "No."

Now it was my turn to feel the crush of disappointment. "I don't understand. He had it real good here. He stopped drinking. He had his own apartment. He was working full time for me."

"I'm sure you treated him well. You must have, since he usually doesn't stay in one place for longer than a week or two."

I glanced over to the Donkey Kong game, the computer table, and the envelope display that was going to help me make room for that coffee bar. "Is he really gone? He wasn't done teaching me how to work the spreadsheet program on my computer."

"I'm sorry."

"Damn," I said, shuffling my feet. "He sure was good with numbers."

"I should hope so. Before Peter dropped out of sight the first time, he was the brand manager for the Nuprin account."

"Brand manager?"

“Yes... he managed a \$125 million marketing budget. But that was a while ago. He’s been living on the streets, more or less, for the past five years. Every few towns, Peter stops into a Mom & Pop store and tries to make a little money. Sometimes he stays a while and cleans up. By the way, I like your sign. Did he do that?”

I nodded.

“Peter was always into logos and tag-lines,” she said. “He’s the one who came up with the ‘Little, yellow, better’ campaign.”

“So he’s not really a Colonel?”

The blonde laughed for the first time since entering my store. “No, but I think he did work on the KFC account for a few months. That would’ve been at J. Walter Thompson, right after he graduated from college. They thought he was quite the rising star and made him the youngest V.P. in the agency.”

“I guess he must’ve had some kind of breakdown, huh?”

She shrugged. “Really, who knows why anybody does what they do? Our mom got married a lot — I lost track after the seventh time — and we were always moving into a new town and new house. Is that the kind of excuse you’re looking for?”

“But you seem to be okay.”

“I don’t know, what seems crazier to you... quitting your job and dropping out, or spending over five years tracking down someone who doesn’t want to be found?”

I got the feeling that she wasn’t really expecting an answer. Instead, I asked, “So where is he now?”

“Pete’s probably crawled up inside a very large bottle of very cheap Vodka right now. And when he emerges, it could be anywhere.”

“But he didn’t touch a drop of booze since the first day he worked for me.”

The blonde gathered up her photo and newspaper clipping. “Oh, he’s not really an alcoholic. I think he’s just addicted to starting over.”

She turned to walk away, so I stopped her with my voice. “I still don’t get it. He was talking about going out with my daughter. I set him up with his own apartment and would’ve happily made him a partner. Now why would someone give that up to go back to the streets again?”

“I wish Peter could be happy with turning his life around just once,” she said with a sad grin. “But it seems it’s only satisfying to him when he’s sunk so low, there’s nowhere to go but up.”