

ATLAS SNUBBED

AN UNSANCTIONED PASTICHE PARODY

BOOK ONE: SEPARATING SOCIETY AND STATE

KEN V. KRAWCHUK



ATLAS SNUBBED

The Point in Time

A Moment Beyond Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged

The Story

**America has fallen, but Las Vegas survives,
protected by impassable deserts.**

**That isolation permits the town
to rebuild Society and State from scratch.**

But how would they deal with criminals?

With the indigent?

With business regulation?

With money?

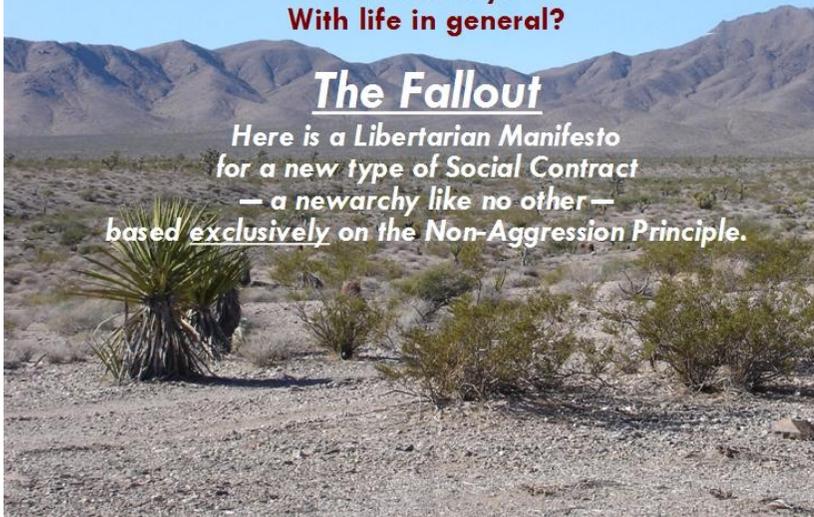
With life in general?

The Fallout

*Here is a Libertarian Manifesto
for a new type of Social Contract*

— a newarchy like no other —

based exclusively on the Non-Aggression Principle.



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Book One: Separating Society and State
Book Two: Galt's Gulch Eats Their Young
Book Three: How the East Was Lost
Book Four: Back For God

To our four grandchildren: Jade, Ian, Niko, and Vera, in the hope that they experience some of the ideas in this book firsthand.

FOREWARD

Imagine, if you will, the world as Ayn Rand left it at the end of *Atlas Shrugged*: America has fallen. There is fighting in the streets, masses of starving refugees everywhere, and a complete collapse of law and order. As a result, millions die over the course of a few months, and only a few widely-spaced pockets of humanity survive.

One such pocket is Las Vegas, isolated from the global mayhem by a virtually-impassable desert. That extreme isolation permits the town to rebuild both Society and State from a fresh start.

But what would such a reformed city look like? How would it defend itself? What about its body of law, its system of judgment? How would it regulate business, deal with criminals, and help the indigent? And how can it be accomplished without holding a gun to the collective heads of its citizenry?

This, then, is that story.

CHAPTER 1 – UNDERTURE

Eddie smiled in his sleep.

His smile was not so much due to any chance dream, but rather in instinctive response to the slight tickle of perspiration trickling down his cheek. In an ironic twist, the persistent tickling caused the smile to fade, along with the last traces of sleep.

Waking, he felt the cold reality of the warm metal floor of the Diesel's cab pressing against his cheek, its angled, grey flatness filling half his field of view. With a start, he realized he was still aboard Transcontinental Railroad's *Meteor*, the fastest train in the nation, but stalled and stranded somewhere in the middle of an Arizona desert. His back and neck were sore from having slept for hours on the bare metal floor.

Even though the desert sun had not yet risen very far above the horizon, it was already oppressively hot inside the cab. His clothes were drenched with perspiration. When he climbed into the engine the night before, he distinctly recalled closing the cab's hatch against the night's chill. But right now if he spent another half hour inside the enclosed Diesel, he feared he would melt like a tallow candle on a hotplate.

Eddie lifted himself painfully, opened the hatch, and climbed down the still-shadowed side of the silent *Meteor*. The flinty odor of dry sand hung in the breezeless air. Shading his eyes with his hand, he gazed out across the vast, unimpeded expanse of lonely desert. Except for occasional dots of cacti and scrub, the only feature on the limitless gravelly sand was the dusty road at his feet, running parallel to the track. It was the same road that had brought the covered wagons the night before—*covered wagons!*—that had carried away the last passengers to ever ride the *Meteor*. All the passengers except him, that is.

He looked back along the length of the train, back toward San Francisco from which the *Meteor* had recently departed. The train stretched in a straight line away from him: a mail car, two baggage cars, a sleeper, two day coaches, and an ornate observation car coupled to its end. Waves of heat streamed from their roofs, wavering starkly against the featureless crystal blue sky. A growing menagerie of mice, rabbits and prairie dogs had taken refuge from the sun in the shadow of the train. The nearer ones eyed Eddie nervously.

"I am a fool," he told himself out loud, carefully enunciating each word. He knew now that he should have accepted the wagonmaster's offer the night before to join up with their wagon train rather than remaining alone aboard the train. In the light of the new day, he saw the naked folly of his grand gesture to the *Meteor* and to Transcontinental Railroad. He took a deep breath and pulled himself together. *No! Not a fool!* he reminded himself sternly within the confines of his mind. *I am the Special Assistant to the Vice-President in Charge of Operations for Transcontinental Railroad, and this train is my responsibility!* Despite his proud words, there was no denying that he and the *Meteor* were stranded together, and it was becoming increasingly clear that they would likely die together as he went down with his ship. His shoulders slumped perceptibly. *But still a fool...*

His mind refused to accept the unbelievable news that the wagonmaster had brought him the night before, news that the famous Transcontinental Bridge which had once spanned the mighty Mississippi River was now gone, blasted to bits by some unimaginable mishap at the

secretive X Project in Iowa. He looked eastward, past the silent Diesel, his gaze following the track across the nondescript desert stretching beyond his ability to see. He shook his head; the *Meteor* had originally set out for New York City, but even the waypoint of Chicago was now unattainable. Eddie and the *Meteor* were left to fend for themselves.

A rumble from his stomach interrupted his reverie, but he gave it no further thought. He knew there was no food on board; diner service on all Transcontinental trains had been “temporarily suspended” months ago; in fact, he had personally relayed the order suspending service. Still, while there may be no food, he knew there would be plenty of potable water in the lavatory holding tanks of the sleeper and day coaches. He might starve, but he certainly wouldn’t die of thirst. Looking again at the living smorgasbord still eying him warily from behind the safety of the train’s wheels, he considered that perhaps he wouldn’t starve either.

Suddenly aware of his thirst, Eddie turned his back on thoughts of unreachable destinations and climbed aboard the sleeper car, ignoring the scuttling of creatures scrambling at his approach. Heat poured out of the sleeper’s door as he opened it, almost a physical wall pressing hot against his sweaty clothes. Entering the sweltering car, he walked down the corridor to the porter’s cubbyhole, opened an access panel, and pulled a dipstick from the main water holding tank. The expertly-calibrated, scored stick indicated that almost ninety gallons remained. He nodded with satisfaction. After replacing the dipstick and conscientiously closing the access panel, he walked further down the hot corridor to the first lavatory, entered it, and turned on the faucet over the sink. Driven by the immutable force of gravity, lukewarm water splashed cheerfully into the bottom of the basin, down the drain, and onto the trackbed below. Eddie pulled a paper cup from its dispenser alongside the sink and felt no guilt as he drank heavily. Ninety gallons would last him for many weeks, maybe months; and there was likely even more water in the day coaches. He knew his bigger problem would be food.

Rather than filling the void in his stomach, drinking so much water made him more acutely aware of the lack of solid food. Inevitably, he found his thoughts returning to the creatures outside. How could he go about catching one? Skinning one? Cooking one? The realization suddenly came to him that he didn’t even have a penknife, let alone any matches to build a fire. What would he do? It appeared he was about to learn, or perhaps die trying.

Searching the entire train, he could find neither a knife nor anything else with a sharp edge. He did, however, discover some watery ice cubes in a refrigerator that was softly humming on fading battery power in an elegantly-paneled recess aboard the observation car. But the best and only weapons he could locate were a screwdriver and a rusted hammer; he wondered how he would be able to get close enough to any animal to be able to use either of them effectively.

Eddie knew it would be no use, but also knew he had to try. He constructed a crude, screwdriver-tipped spear out of a broom handle and some hemp twine he found on board, but it quickly became obvious that he lacked the hunting skills necessary to use it capably; none of his thrusts came anywhere close to his prey. They would always maintain a respectful distance, whiskers twitching, sitting in the shade of the train, easily scurrying out of the path of his ineffectual lunges. Frustrated, he would throw his homemade weapon aside, only to pick it up a short while later to try his hand once again. But the end result always remained the same, and his hunger mounted.

As the desert day wore on, Eddie took occasional breaks from his fruitless hunting to tinker equally in vain with the dead Diesel. In his long career with Transcontinental, he had learned much about Diesels. He put that knowledge to use by making up lengthy lists of items to check, proceeded to check every single thing on his list, then check them all again. But for all his experience, checking, and lists, he could not discover the reason for the engine's untimely demise. It simply would not start.

Frustrated, Eddie plopped into the engineer's seat; it creaked geriatrically under the sudden weight. He sat immobile for several minutes when something in front of the train caught his eye. Through the windshield, ahead he could see a prairie dog standing upright in the middle of the track, the sun glinting off its copper-colored fur. Several of its species gathered fearlessly behind it. The lead prairie dog eyed Eddie dispassionately, nose twitching slightly, its tiny arms protruding at ease from its copper pelage. Eddie watched the critter's tiny whiskers with an almost morbid interest before finally tearing his gaze away. *No!* he cried silently. *We can't let it go! Not the Meteor!* Angrily, he turned his attention back to the task at hand with a renewed vigor, as if the prairie dog's very existence was an affront to him, driving him on. But the inspiration proved to be a hollow promise; the motor that could save his life persisted in remaining silent.

Come evening, it became impossible for him to ignore the hunger pangs which wracked him. He felt miserable. When the cold of the winter desert night started him shivering, he retired to a sleeper compartment and the shelter of worn, woolen blankets. Remembering how his day had begun in the oven of the Diesel's cab, he left both the cabin's window and its door open to the night air. Pulling the covers tightly about his neck, his hunger, fatigue, and frustration quickly drove him into a fitful sleep.

CHAPTER 2 – ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Eddie awoke.

His second day stranded in the desert was much like the first, and just as fruitless. No matter what he tried, the Diesel could not be started. He would often pause from his tinkering to gaze distantly up and down the sandy road that paralleled the track, looking for some new passerby, maybe even another train. But he knew the idea of a rescue train to be a pipe dream; this was the track of the Pacific Southern, and they no longer operated any trains at all in this part of the country. The only train to use this rail these days was the *Meteor*. The setting sun found him as alone as he was at its dawn, and no less hungry.

One after another, the days quickly slipped past for Eddie, not only because of the time of the year, but also because he kept himself busy with the single-mindedness of someone who buries himself in his work. Yet all his best efforts bore no fruit. The only metric that marked the passing of his days was an increasing weakness from a lack of food. He had begun to nap more, and it became increasingly difficult for him to concentrate; his eyes would no longer focus readily, and the strength in his fingers had diminished so badly that he sometimes found it to be a challenge merely holding onto a cup of water. He had originally considered keeping a tally of the disappearing days, but had immediately dismissed the thought—it smacked too much of being a prisoner in a cell, and unnecessary as well. But now he wished he had; due to his fading faculties he had completely lost track.

One morning like all the others, he awoke around dawn, thirsty and undeniably weak with hunger. He tossed off the blankets, feeling the cool morning air that nevertheless held the promise of yet another scorcher to come. As he sat on the edge of the bed, his head swam wildly for a moment; but he steadied himself, and was eventually able to muster sufficient strength and composure to complete the mundane task of dressing. Emerging from the sleeper car into the morning shade, in his weakness he staggered, stumbled down the last two steps, slipped, and fell face first into the desert sand alongside the track. Several rabbits bolted from the scene, startled by his sudden, dramatic entrance, but a copper-colored prairie dog stood its ground, studying Eddie impassively. Weakly, Eddie lifted his head, spitting some of the gritty sand from his mouth in the direction of the indifferent animal. Ignoring its pitiless scrutiny, he scanned the terrain slowly, first left, then right. Nothing had changed from the days before; there was nothing *to* change. He laid his head back down, the shaded sand coarse and cool against his cheek.

“If I don’t do something besides just sitting here, I’m going to be a dead man really soon,” he observed out loud, his voice raspy from disuse. Raising his head slightly to face his animal audience, he repeated more loudly, “A sitting dead man!” partly in defiance, partly out of light-headedness. The prairie dog watched his soliloquy in silence, without pity and without mercy, as Eddie laid his face once again against the cool sand. “A dead man...,” he trailed off.

In one swift motion, Eddie suddenly snapped to a kneeling position on all fours, fatigue forgotten, his head turned sharply toward the engine, his eyes wide. “*A sitting dead man!*” he yelled hoarsely, startling the pitiless prairie dog into a quick retreat to the safety of the shadow of the *Meteor*.

Eddie scrambled to his feet, fell, scrambled up again, fell again, finally settling on a half-crawl, half stumble, through the shifting sands as he

hastened to reach the silent Diesel. Starting from all fours, he clambered weakly up the ladder into the cab, and fell panting to the floor, pausing briefly to catch his breath and muster his meager strength. He rolled over, sat up on crossed legs, and grabbed the shabby, scruffy seat cushion of the engineer's chair that floated in front of his face, not to pull himself up, but rather to pull it down. He rocked the chair back and forth on its hollow cylindrical pedestal, back and forth, the rivets at its base losing more and more of their iron grip on the floor with every push. Then with one final effort, he crashed his shoulder against the side of the chair, the force ripping it from the last of its moorings. Together, Eddie and the chair toppled to the cab floor. Shaking slightly from the effort, his weakened hands groped around inside the chair's pedestal. With a quick jerk, he pulled two copper wires out of the seat's cushion, wires which led to the dead man's switch installed inside the worn padding of the cushion.

The dead man's switch was a crucial safety device installed inside the engineer's chair on every Transcontinental train engine, its purpose to verify the presence of a living man sitting at the controls. If the engineer should slump unconscious in his seat, the dead man's switch would take note of the shift in weight and automatically halt the train. But this particular switch had served the safety of its masters for far too many miles; it was beyond repair and had become the enemy of motion rather than its ally.

Despite his hunger-induced handicaps, Eddie swiftly and expertly stripped the lead wires and shorted the circuit around the defective switch. The vital surgery completed, he pushed the broken seat out of his way. Kneeling now in front of the Diesel's control panel, like some acolyte performing a ritual at a religious shrine, Eddie quickly performed the start-up sequence for the Diesel one more time, flipping switches, turning knobs, and pulling levers in a deliberate, planned sequence. When the crucial moment came to engage the motor generators, he paused, took a deep breath, and punched the final button. Without hesitation, and with the banality of the ordinary, the Diesel roared to life. The black smoke of half-combusted hydrocarbons darkened the air around the Diesel, the acrid odor of exhaust permeating the cab. Startled animals fled in all directions from the unexpectedly-reincarnated behemoth.

A triumphant Eddie righted the engineer's seat as best could be done, and sat himself properly in front of the controls to complete the start-up procedure. As the Diesel warmed up, its black exhaust rapidly transitioned to grey, then thinned to transparency. The quivering needles on the gauges and the green lights winking across the control panel confirmed that all was well inside the engine. The *Meteor* was coming to life once again, and with more than enough fuel to reach distant Denver.

Denver? Eddie peered ahead down the track, out to the East, trying to force his hunger-befuddled mind to think. The *Meteor* sat about halfway between San Francisco and Denver, with the tallest mountains still to come. It was somewhere around the end of February, or perhaps early March—at least he *thought* it might be!—and he knew from past experience that the mountain passes would all be choked with snow—and an avalanche could always bring more without warning. Even if he made it as far as Denver, beyond that was the ultimate barrier of the destroyed Transcontinental Bridge barring his path into Illinois. *No*, he thought. *Not Denver. It'll have to be back to San Francisco for now.* He knew the risk it would pose, running the train in reverse safely, but he was confident he would be up to the challenge. For the first time in weeks, he began to feel he was once again in control of his world.

He rose to his feet easily now. Starting the Diesel had started something inside Eddie as well. He found he was able to walk steadily

through the train as he readied each car for departure. As he passed through the mail car, a glimpse of motion caught his eye. In one corner huddled a stowaway: the copper-haired prairie dog. Eddie froze, his eyes casting about for a weapon, any weapon. No luck; except for a few meager sacks of mail, the car was empty.

Without thinking, without waiting, working purely on instinct, Eddie immediately lunged at the frightened, cornered creature. So lightning quick was his blitz that he had both hands wrapped firmly around its fuzzy body before its tiny brain even registered that Eddie had started moving. Without stopping or even thinking about the fact that he had caught his prey, his hands continued their flight and twisted in their arc to hurl his prize at a nearby wall, crushing the animal's skull on impact. It fell to the floor with a tiny thump, lifeless and defeated. Surprised at himself, Eddie gawked wide-eyed at the dead creature lying on the floor. The entire episode had taken less than two seconds; and not many minutes later, with the help of a porter's hotplate, Eddie sat down to a welcome breakfast of boiled prairie dog. No Thanksgiving feast ever tasted so good, he told himself as he gnawed at the animal's gamy carcass.

Rejuvenated physically by the meal and mentally by the restarting of the engine, Eddie turned to completing the task of preparing the train for departure. Before long all was ready, and with a final loud hiss, the train's air brakes released their iron grip on the steel rails. The *Meteor* was ready to roll once more.

Hanging precariously out of the engineer's window to improve his view toward the rear of the train, he set the Diesel's throttle into a slow reverse. The *Meteor* began to move in response to Eddie's hand, slowly at first, then a little faster. The sharp *clack-clack* of the wheels could be heard clearly over the droning of the Diesel, a percussive reminder of the train's steady progress; and as the sun rose high over the Arizona desert, the *Meteor* began to retrace its path back toward San Francisco, the scenario resembling more a movie played in reverse than the stark reality it was; and for the first time since the *Meteor* stalled so many uncounted days ago, Eddie felt somewhat at peace.

It was exactly what he was looking for, and he saw it coming long before the train reached it—a passing track branching off to parallel the main line. He parked the *Meteor* next to the siding, uncoupled the engine, then used the passing track to move the engine to the other end of the train, re-coupling it behind the curved railing of the observation car. Moments later he was underway once again. With the Diesel now in the lead, albeit still facing backwards, forward visibility improved to the point where Eddie was able to safely increase his speed to the fastest that the worn track of the Pacific Southern would allow. The pace of his journey to San Francisco increased markedly.

The hours passed without incident. As he traversed the miles back toward California, Eddie caught sight of no other travelers on the parallel road or at the infrequent grade crossings, neither automobile nor pedestrian, not even a covered wagon. He realized what an incredible coincidence it must have been to run across that wagon train on the night the *Meteor* died, the sort of coincidence that only happened in second-rate, dime store novels and pathetic, contemptible movies.

The backward Diesel continued its return journey uneventfully. Sunset found the *Meteor* crossing the state line from Arizona back into Nevada. With the coming of darkness Eddie was surprised to see the electric glow of Las Vegas far ahead on the horizon. His own plight had led him to believe that the entire world had perished, not merely one safety switch. *Of course they'd have electricity*, he told himself. *Boulder Dam*

isn't about to crumble! He recalled how Las Vegas was a growing tourist town, and the image of its bright lights and the thought of him having a feast in one of their fine restaurants brought a physical pain to his long-empty stomach. He briefly considered halting the Diesel for the night and resting, but immediately dismissed the idea. He felt himself the master of his fate, the captain of not only his own soul but also that of the *Meteor*, and the exhilarating feeling imparted to him a near-superhuman strength. He resolved to continue his journey until he reached at least Las Vegas, or for however long his abused physical body could hold out.

* * *

Eddie held out.

Dawn found the *Meteor* at the junction where the track of the Pacific Southern met that of Transcontinental. The train wheels clattered noisily over the track switch which marked the connection between the two railroads, the noise of the wheels diminishing noticeably once they shifted to the higher-quality Transcontinental rail. It felt good to be back on his own track again, its Miracle Metal rails glittering greenish-blue in the early morning sun, and Eddie's spirits lifted even more.

As the day wore on, he began to encounter signs of civilized life: pedestrians, horse traffic, even an occasional automobile. Most people just watched dully as the inverted train passed them by. Some folks waved to him, friendly-like, and Eddie waved back. Others tried desperately to flag him down, but Eddie ignored them. At one point, gunfire erupted from a lonely freight station as he passed it, shattering several windows in one of the day coaches, and pocking its metal flank. *A nice welcome back*, he thought bitterly, recalling his recent visit to San Francisco and the widespread fighting there. Idly, he wondered how the new terminal manager there was getting along, and if the truce he had brokered for the Transcontinental terminal in San Francisco still held. But with all the factions that were warring in California, he seriously doubted that it did.

It was late afternoon when Eddie finally pulled the *Meteor* into Transcontinental's Las Vegas station, and brought the train to a halt. The tracks and platforms of the station were deserted; he was not surprised, as few trains ran nowadays. As he performed the motions to idle the powerful motor, Eddie caught sight of a stout stationmaster tottering in the direction of the backward Diesel, eyes wide and wondering. The very ordinary sight of the stationmaster wearing the livery of a Transcontinental trainman instilled an illusion of normalcy in Eddie; but the illusion lasted for only a brief moment. With an almost physical impact, all the recent events descended upon his consciousness in a massive heap: his hunger, his personal brush with death, the *Meteor's* near-demise, and the deserted Las Vegas station reminding him of the wider, continuing collapse of Transcontinental Railroad, of the nation, and the entire world. It was suddenly too much for any one man to bear. With a loud moan, Eddie simply crumbled and broke, like an overstressed dam, his body sinking slowly against the Diesel's control panel, his head falling across his arm.

Adding one final, impersonal insult, with the slumping of Eddie's shoulders, the unsecured base of the uprooted engineer's chair suddenly slid sideways across the smooth metal surface of the floor, shifting swiftly and dumping him unceremoniously onto the hard, unyielding metal floor of the Diesel's cab.

It was there that the stationmaster found him, sobbing softly.

CHAPTER 3 – WHAT NOW MY LOVE?

Eddie sighed contentedly.

He sat at a corner table in the cafeteria of Transcontinental's Las Vegas station, dawdling over his second cup of coffee. The meal he had just finished was undoubtedly one of the best of his entire life; and had the world not been crashing down around his ears, he was certain he would have enjoyed it all the more. But he felt a nagging disquiet, not stemming merely from all his recent troubles or those of the world around him, but rather from recalling with whom he had last shared a meal in a Transcontinental cafeteria—the Worker.

But it wasn't the Worker who now sat across the table from him; it was the Transcontinental stationmaster, his dour, chubby face reflecting the same doom that Eddie knew was on his own. Together they sat pooling what meager knowledge of the outside world they possessed.

"It's not a pretty picture, Mr. Eddie," warned the stationmaster. "Not pretty at all. The whole town is nervous and on edge. Nobody knows what's going on, and that makes them even more nervous. All the tourists have long gone, and people are quitting their jobs and leaving town—important people, too. Even the Mayor's gone!"

Eddie only nodded. The story was a familiar one. Similar tales spanned the nation.

"Some of them up and quit, just like that, claiming they're going to join up with a secret enclave up in the mountains someplace, and we never see or hear from them again. Others go off looking for jobs they say the Unificating Board doesn't know about. I know a lot of people worried about their kinfolk out in California, and some of them go off looking to help." He paused momentarily, then looked directly into Eddie's eyes. "Is it as bad as they say it is out there, Mr. Eddie? You know, with the fighting and all? You were there."

Eddie sighed; the news he knew was not good. "I don't know about the rest of California, but it was pretty bad in San Francisco."

"Real bad?" the stationmaster asked worriedly, his jaw slack. It was obvious that he was one of those who had family there.

Eddie considered briefly that he should put the best face on the fighting—as if such a thing were possible!—but decided honesty was the best policy, even when the truth was hard to bear. He paused respectfully before continuing in a flat voice, "I'm sorry. Yes, it is bad. Very bad. When I left, there were three factions warring over our terminal there—actually shooting at each other! I had to pay tribute to get the *Meteor* out of town."

The stationmaster hung his head. "I see," he said.

"There's more bad news," cautioned Eddie, placing a sympathetic hand on the stationmaster's slumping shoulder. "But not about California. I was told that the Transcontinental Bridge over the Mississippi is gone. 'Blasted to bits,' I heard."

The stationmaster looked up again, his face still full of concern. "That, we knew about, Mr. Eddie. We heard about it on the radio—before they stopped broadcasting, that is. They said that the X Project blew up the whole middle of the country!"

"Then it's true?" asked Eddie, slowly retracting his hand from the stationmaster's shoulder. "The Transcontinental Bridge is gone?"

"Radio said so, Mr. Eddie."

Eddie did not speak for several seconds before he mounted the courage to ask the question that had hovered at the edge of his consciousness since the night the *Meteor* had died. "And what of New York City?"

The stationmaster shook his head. “No word since the night the X Project blew up. We heard the broadcast about the Worker’s plan, then nothing since.”

“No word from New York, you say?”

“No, sir.”

“Not at all?”

“No, sir, not at all. No radio, no television, no long-distance, not for almost two weeks now.” He shook his head. “And it’s not just New York—the rest of the country is silent, too. And now even our local telephones are starting to go.”

No word! Eddie had stopped listening to the stationmaster, stunned into a shocked silence. His mind was a whirl in the face of the unimaginable conclusion: *New York City blasted to bits!* His mind balked at the horrendous scene he visualized; then his eyes widened as he followed the horror to its ultimate conclusion: *Dagny!*

The thought of her fell upon Eddie like a physical blow, and he reeled under its impact, falling back in his chair. His ears rang as the room tilted out from under him as if his head had been separated from his body and restored with odd connections. His arms and legs felt remote and rubbery. His field of vision swiftly narrowed until perception vanished entirely, leaving him a motionless rock sitting in his chair, his brain numbed into rejecting any sensory inputs. Only a single thought seared itself echoingly across his mind: *Dagny!*

“Mr. Eddie? Are you all right?”

Unbidden, memories poured into his consciousness, like water rushing through a breached levee, recollections of Dagny’s formal debut ball at New York’s exclusive Falkland Hotel when she was seventeen, and Eddie two years her junior. Although he had known her since early childhood, he had never before imagined her so elegantly clad as she was that evening; and without a doubt she was stunning. The little girl he had known had clearly grown up—and so had Eddie. For days afterwards, his thoughts were dominated by her enchanting image and the intimacy of the single dance that they had shared; he could think of nothing else except the touch of his bare hand against her naked back as they danced, the soft pressure of her breasts flattened against his chest, the way her natural scent flooded his awareness, her soft, brown hair gently tickling his ear. Eddie had stopped the moment in his mind that night, the very picture of paradise, a precious mixture of both bliss and torture; bliss for the pure perfection of the moment, yet torture for its ephemeral transience. He carried that cherished moment with him throughout his life; for never again in the intervening decades did they share such close physical contact—even their final parting last month had been consummated by a mere handshake. Yet the memory of the dance had remained, sharp and clear, untarnished by time despite the frequent handling it received. But with a sharp *crack!* the mental image of the bright lights of the ballroom at the Falkland suddenly shattered, blasted to bits, splinters flying in all directions as the city around the hotel disintegrated, another victim of the destructive energies of the X Project. *Dagny!* he screamed wordlessly in his mind, again and again. *Dagny!* Tears welled up in his eyes, driven by his certainty regarding her fate. He felt drained and hollow, crushed by an anguished despair, his distress reverberating dazzlingly inside his head. *Gone! She’s gone!* Eddie had never felt so utterly alone in his entire life. *Gone! Oh my God! Dagny, Dagny!*

“Mr. Eddie?”

Awareness of his surroundings returned slowly: first, the feel of the warm cup of coffee in his hand, next its invigorating aroma, followed by the

blurry figure of the stationmaster finally swimming into view. Once, then twice, Eddie blinked before the tears in his eyes cleared sufficiently to discern the stationmaster's concerned gaze. Taking a ragged, deep breath, Eddie needlessly pushed back his short blonde hair with his free hand and replied weakly, his voice shaking, "I... I haven't eaten much in... in... what, over a week?" he temporized. "I guess I'm still pretty weak." Finding the coffee in his hand, he took another sip without thinking and without tasting it; the paralyzing vision of Dagny's demise still dominated his consciousness.

"You ought to get some sleep, Mr. Eddie."

Again, he sighed heavily, looking at but not seeing the coffee in his hand. *Get a grip!* he scolded himself. *Maybe she survived!* he told himself, although he couldn't imagine how. With a Herculean effort, and with limited success, he set aside his turmoil and grief, his thoughts turning back to matters at hand. With a start, Eddie's ears finally caught up with his stunned mind.

"The Worker's plan? What do you mean, the Worker's plan? What broadcast?" He set his coffee down, his eyes suddenly wide. "Has he given in to them? What was his plan?"

"You mean the Worker's Plan for Profit, Prosperity, and Peace?"

"Is that what he called it?"

The stationmaster shrugged. "Radio said so," he repeated.

"What was the plan?"

The stationmaster smiled for the first time since Eddie's arrival. "'Get the hell out of my way,'" he quoted.

"What?" Eddie was perplexed, with traces of an offended expression flickering across his face.

"'Get the hell out of my way!' That was his plan. They did this big build-up at some gala event, and that was all he had to say."

As the words sunk in, Eddie found himself incapable of smiling in return. "Just that?"

The stationmaster nodded, the smile on his own face broadening. "Just that."

Eddie did not react to the stationmaster's mirth. "And then the X Project blew up."

"Yes, sir," he replied, his smile disintegrating. "The same night. Right after, in fact."

Eddie returned his attention to his coffee. Reluctantly, he was forced to face the unimaginable truth that much, if not most of the nation lay in ruins. Las Vegas would likely be left to its own devices, at least for the next few weeks, perhaps longer. But that brought to mind a whole host of new concerns; he glanced at the remnants of the meal in front of him, then pursed a new tangent. "How reliable is the food supply here?"

"The food supply?" The sudden shift of subject took the stationmaster by surprise. He considered the question a moment before replying. "I guess it's a mixed bag, Mr. Eddie. There's an awful lot of cattle and sheep all around the city, and a lot of fruit, too. Most people grow their own vegetables—I've got my own truck patch, too, you know—but there's not much in the way of grain or flour. Most of that used to come in by train, but we haven't seen a shipment in months. I think it's due to all that trouble on our Minnesota Division back in September. Less than half the wheat harvest made it to the mills, I hear, and we haven't seen hardly any of it. At least it didn't come in by train, or I'd have heard about it."

Eddie assimilated the news, then nodded. If Las Vegas were left to her own devices, the fare might become monotonous, but they wouldn't likely starve. And water and electricity shouldn't be a problem; so long as the

massive Boulder Dam remained, there would be enough of both to last a hundred lifetimes. Eddie stared into space as he considered their tactical situation. "People are leaving town, you say? How many do you think have left?"

The stationmaster barely hesitated. "I've lived here all my life, and I'd guess almost half of them have already gone, and more are leaving all the time, especially since the X Project blew up a few weeks ago. Some neighborhoods are like ghost towns—especially in the worst parts of town. Last census put us around eight or nine thousand, so it could be three, maybe five thousand left? Hard to say. The tourists always made the town seem more crowded than it really is."

"Many people coming into town?"

He spread his pudgy hands and raised his eyebrows in surprise. "From where? How would they get here? The nearest big city is a hundred miles away!"

Eddie nodded again; the stationmaster's surprise made sense. The chances of Las Vegas being invaded from across the desert were slim to none, and being located in the middle of a desert would give them a badly-needed, strategic remoteness from the fighting to their west.

It seemed as if the stationmaster was reading Eddie's thoughts, saying, "There is a big Army base not too far north of here if we need help, although the telephones aren't working that far out any more."

"What about Transcontinental Railroad? What sort of motive power do we have here?"

Again, the stationmaster shook his head. "Nothing near like the Diesel you brought in with you, that's for sure! She's a real beauty! The only motive power left around here is a switcher and a yard engine, both of them steam powered—and I wouldn't trust either one of them one inch beyond the yard limit. I can't see either one of them making it over the Rockies or the Sierras now, not after all the winter snows."

"Do you have any fuel for the Diesel?"

The stationmaster's eyes lit up. "That, we have, Mr. Eddie. Lots of it, too! There are over a dozen tank cars full of diesel fuel out in the yard!" He chuckled without mirth. "If you ask me, I think those tank cars got forgotten. And I wasn't going to stick my neck out and tell anyone about them..." He trailed off, remembering the presence of his superior sitting across the table from him. "...not unless someone asked, that is."

Eddie let it ride. "What about the men? Are there crews to run a train? Mechanics? Clerks? Who's left? How many?"

The stationmaster shook his head slowly. "Not many, Mr. Eddie. Not many at all. Out of the forty-two we had last May when Directive 289-10 went into effect, we're down to an even dozen men who haven't deserted, and none of them are mechanics. Most are the sort who aren't good for much, if you know what I mean, and the rest only show up out of habit. None of them are engineers either, and I don't know that any of them could actually run a train if they wanted to—not that there's anyplace for a train to go to these days."

Neither man said anything for most of a minute. Coming to a decision, Eddie unconsciously sat up straight and squared his shoulders, abandoning for the first time his original plan to return to San Francisco. "You're right. There's nowhere else *to* go. We'll have to make our stand here as best we can until the country can get back on its feet."

The stationmaster had long since come to the same conclusion, but for different reasons. Although intelligent, he was no leader of men, nor imaginative enough to even make the attempt to lead; and leaving Las Vegas was inconceivable for this town's native son. With Eddie's

unexpected appearance on the scene, the stationmaster felt the great, unwanted burden of responsibility dissipating, as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He had always been better at taking orders than giving them, so he welcomed Eddie's leadership gratefully, blindly, and with open arms.

"There's no point in keeping the station open without any trains," continued Eddie. "But we can use it as our base of operations." He stared off into space for a moment, considering how best he could utilize the dozen men of uncertain talents left to him.

What would Dagny do? he asked himself; but he knew the question was rhetorical as well as unnecessary. Through his long association with the Vice-President of Operations for Transcontinental Railroad, Eddie knew precisely what Dagny would do, and in fine detail, even down to the expression on her face when she'd give the orders. *Dagny, Dagny!* he thought with another sudden surge of emotion, his eyes clouding. Pulling himself together once again, he turned his attention back to the stationmaster. "Send two men up to the Army base. We need to find out what's happening with the rest of the country." He sipped at his coffee, taking a moment to think, and more became clear to him. "As I recall, there are only four roads leading into town."

"That's right—except for a few dirt tracks through the mountains here and there."

"Station one man on each of the main roads just outside of town and have them keep an eye on what's going on. They shouldn't interfere with anyone, probably stay out of sight, too. Tell them to keep their eyes and ears open. Put them on two twelve-hour shifts, and give them the train crew's walkie-talkies from the *Meteor* so they can keep in touch with us. Use your own judgment who's best for each task."

"Yes, sir," replied the stationmaster, relieved that someone else had taken charge.

But Eddie did not notice. He was looking out the tall, wide windows of the cafeteria at the westering sun, the end of a long day. It was no surprise that he felt exhausted; he had been up all night the night before guiding the *Meteor* back to Las Vegas. "I'll find someplace here where I can catch some sleep," he continued. "We'll get together again after breakfast tomorrow morning and go over what's next."

The stationmaster stood up with a measure of confidence. "I'll get on it right away, Mr. Eddie," he assured him as he turned to go, the relief still obvious in his voice.

After the stationmaster had left, Eddie remained at the table, swirling the dregs of coffee in his cup and watching the brown grounds spin. He hadn't felt the pressure of command weigh this heavily upon him since Dagny had taken a month-long hiatus from the railroad last May and retreated to her cabin in the Berkshires, leaving him to run the Operating Department of Transcontinental Railroad all on his own. But he had coped during her absence then, he reminded himself, and he would cope now. Should he and Dagny chance to finally meet again, he wanted her to be proud of him, of how he lived up to his childhood promise to her, to do "whatever is right."

With great difficulty, Eddie tried in vain to put all thoughts of Dagny out of his mind. He drained what was left of his coffee, made a bitter face that matched its bottom-of-the-cup taste, then rose wearily to his feet. Once he completed shutting down the still-idling Diesel, he'd retire to his compartment in the *Meteor's* sleeper car for some badly-needed rest.

CHAPTER 4 – ALL BY MYSELF

Eddie set up housekeeping.

Even though there was an overabundance of vacant houses readily available throughout Las Vegas that were his for the taking, he continued to spend his nights in the largest of the compartments in the sleeper car on the *Meteor*, still parked in the Transcontinental station. Although he inspected several abandoned dwellings in one of the nicer parts of town with an eye toward making one of them his home, he felt himself the trespasser, whereas the *Meteor* somehow seemed more “his.” In the end, he decided to retain the *Meteor* as his permanent address, rationalizing his claiming of the boon by considering it a part of his salary; he felt more at home on board in any case. So the sleeper car became his bedroom and kitchen, the baggage car his attic, and the observation car his parlor and dining room. The mail car, day coaches, and the second baggage car he left empty and parked, for now, on one of the more out-of-the-way platforms. He kept the Diesel uncoupled from the rest of the train, and once every week he would start it up and let it idle for several hours, sometimes running it out to the yard limit and back, just to reassure himself that it still functioned. Beyond that, he had no plan to run the *Meteor* any further than that, nor any idea as to where he might go, nor why. But his sense of duty to Transcontinental Railroad was strong, and keeping the Diesel in an operational state gave the feeling an outlet. It was only late at night that he would admit to himself that his underlying reason was to keep alive a portion of his life that he knew for certain was forever dead. His only wish was that he could do more for her memory.

* * *

Eddie was perplexed.

“Closed? What do you mean, closed?”

“That’s what they told me, Mr. Eddie,” the stationmaster insisted none too patiently, gesturing at the walkie-talkie base station. “Last time they checked in, they told me there’s this big sign in front of the Army base, and that’s what they said it says, and it says, ‘Closed.’”

Eddie took a deep breath, suddenly realizing how vulnerable Las Vegas lay. *Closed!* A precious few refugees from the fighting on the West Coast had survived the trek across the desert to wander into town, and their stories were not for the faint-hearted; even Eddie had a few of his own nasty tales he could tell. He hadn’t realized how much he had been depending on the defensive prop of the Army base until it had been abruptly kicked out from under them. The last thing they needed was a full-scale invasion of Las Vegas with no means to repel it. Or even a small-scale invasion!

“Anything new from our sentries watching the roads?” asked Eddie, shifting the subject, not wanting to dwell further on their vulnerabilities.

“They’re reporting the same thing they reported when you first put them out there two weeks ago, Mr. Eddie,” the stationmaster summarized, an impatient edge remaining in his voice. “It’s all one way traffic. Still a few people leaving, and no one’s coming back. They say not nearly as many are leaving as when you first put them out there, though.”

Eddie couldn’t understand why people would leave; there was really nowhere else to go. While it was no New York City, life in Las Vegas had proved relatively comfortable; still, its character had changed dramatically in the few weeks since he had first arrived in town. The most noticeable transformation was how quickly horse traffic had displaced motorized vehicles as the fuel supply evaporated.

One thing hadn't changed, though, and that was electricity. It continued to flow from the turbines at the massive Boulder Dam southeast of town, even though regular maintenance of the equipment and transmission wires had long since fallen by the wayside. Although the Dam itself still stood strong and tall, figurative cracks were beginning to show. Some portions of town had been without electricity since before Eddie arrived, mostly due to downed wires which no one had bothered to repair. More ominously, the control room of the Dam and its powerplant went frequently unattended as more and more of the technicians walked off the job. The situation was increasingly ripe for disaster, and it was not long after the last technician quit that calamity fell.

It started with a minor temperature rise within one of the electric turbines, owing to a lack of proper periodic lubrication. As its temperature slowly rose unchecked, the governor on the turbine began to slip, allowing the turbine's speed to increase well beyond its design limit until finally its bearings overheated and melted into a worthless lump of metal. No one had been on duty at the Dam when the mishap occurred; only the automatic failsafe mechanisms noted the failure and dutifully shut down both banks of turbines. The Dam's powerplant had saved itself, but Las Vegas was left without electricity.

It was early evening when the lights died. Eddie was awake, wrestling with some new plumbing for his sleeper car. As with the turbines, it was a situation that sorely needed attention. Ordinarily, lavatory effluvia from the sleeper would simply dump out on the trackbed, but since it appeared the *Meteor* wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, a more permanent hookup was definitely in order. He wasn't half completed his task when the lights unexpectedly flickered once; he glanced up and watched them slowly fade to orange, to brown, then vanish to nothing. A ghostly twilight seeped through the windows of the sleeper, barely enough to make out dim shapes, and surely not enough for installing the rest of his new plumbing. Eddie set down his tools, grateful for the mandatory rest break, and waited patiently for the power to return. Almost an hour later, now sitting in total darkness, he decided he may as well call it a night.

He awoke the next morning later than he expected—the sleeper's electric alarm clock did not sound; the electricity had still not returned. He dressed, stepped down from his sleeper car, and walked up the long, sloping tunnel into the station building, then into the stationmaster's office. The stationmaster was already there, sitting at his desk doing nothing—not that there was much to do in any case, even when the electricity was flowing.

"Morning, Mr. Eddie."

"Good morning. Any word when the electricity is coming back on?"

"No, sir. Matter of fact, I'm wondering if anyone's even trying to fix it."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Let me say rather that I'm not sure there's anyone who *can* fix it! Like I told you, most of the technicians quit back when they passed Directive 289-10, and the ones who stayed on weren't exactly the brightest bulbs on the marquee, if you know what I mean. Not sure they'd know how to fix things if they broke." He snorted his derision. "They're more like caretakers who would be helpless if a single tube in all that vast structure burnt out." He shrugged. "Doesn't matter what'd break, though, because it'd stay broken."

"Even so, do you know if anyone's out there to try to fix the problem?"

The stationmaster spread his pudgy hands helplessly and stared at Eddie owlishly. "How could I know? It's thirty-five miles away!"

“Use the telephone?” Eddie suggested blankly.

“Out,” he replied simply. “No electricity, remember?”

“Oh.”

The seconds passed in silence. Eddie found himself at a complete loss. *No electricity, and probably no one fixing it. Worse yet, there may be no one TO fix it!* Finally, he spoke again, the despair evident in his voice. “What are we going to do?” It was almost a cry.

Again the stationmaster shrugged. “Who is John Galt?”

Eddie’s mind remained stubbornly blank. In the past there had always been men whose responsibility it was to keep the electricity flowing. But where were they now? Were they all gone for good? And if they were indeed gone for good, where did that leave Eddie and the rest of Las Vegas? In the dark forever? His shoulders drooped dejectedly; he had no idea how to proceed. Unbidden, a bittersweet notion crossed his mind. *Dagny would have known what to do. She’d never allow random happenstance to divert her from her goals. And if something like this happened to her, she’d—* His reverie halted at a sudden realization. Pursuing it, Eddie thoughts raced down familiar paths for a moment, then he nodded. *She’d take matters into her own hands, that’s what!*

He stood in thought for a moment longer, then faced the stationmaster. “All right, here’s what we’ll do. Send your best man out to the Dam on horseback immediately to see if there’s a technician on duty. If there is, find out if he needs help to restore electricity. Send another man along to act as a messenger to come back immediately and report to me once they see what the situation is.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And have two other men search the city for any of the old Dam technicians who may still be around. We’ve got to get this fixed!”

“Yes sir, Mr. Eddie.” He turned to comply.

Eddie remained standing in the stationmaster’s office a while longer, then unceremoniously turned to go. It would take all day for the messenger to reach the Dam on horseback and return, perhaps longer; Eddie figured he may as well take advantage of the daylight and complete his plumbing task. But something tickled at the back of his mind for a moment before he finally recognized the thought: listening to himself giving orders to the stationmaster, he realized with a start that he had sounded just like Dagny. He would have smiled, if he could.

* * *

The news was mixed.

It was mid-afternoon the following day before the messenger returned from the Dam—and he did not return alone. His companion who had gone out with him had also returned. They had discovered that the Dam powerplant was silent and deserted; no one was on site effecting repairs. Lacking the ability to troubleshoot the turbines’ troubles themselves, and with no one more knowledgeable on the scene to direct the repair activities, both men had no other choice but to return to Las Vegas together.

Fortunately, the men who were searching the city for technicians had better luck; they had found one—apparently the only one left in town—but the man wanted nothing more to do with the Dam. He had long since tired of his lonely vigil so far from his home in the city, a solitude made unbearable by the recent loss of mechanized transportation to and from the distant Dam. For a while he had persevered at his job despite being abandoned by all his co-workers; but when his regular paychecks had

ceased to arrive, that was the final straw. The man quit out of necessity to seek his sustenance elsewhere.

Again taking matters into his own hands, Eddie decided to pay the technician a visit. Drawing on the technician's limited civic virtue, Eddie was able to convince him to at least make an attempt to repair the damage. The next morning, he personally accompanied the man to the Dam, riding on horseback the entire thirty-five-mile distance—a first for Eddie—and together the two of them were quickly able to isolate the troubled turbine and bring the remaining ones back on line. In short order electricity flowed once again through the copper wires that stretched across the desert to light the homes and shops of Las Vegas.

On the long ride back, Eddie tried in vain to convince the technician to man his post on a regular basis, or at least to begin training others in his craft; Eddie knew that if anything were to happen to the technician before he passed on his knowledge, Las Vegas would be sunk. But the technician was adamant; it was simply too much responsibility for any one man. Besides, he had a new job now, and could not leave it behind. He had a family to support!

Driven by need, Eddie devised a questionable method to re-establish some semblance of responsible stewardship over the Dam and its electric powerplant. Although he was well aware that he had no real right to do so, he appointed himself in charge of the Dam and commissioned the printing of ten thousand shares of stock, a hundred crude-looking, one-hundred-share certificates that represented not shares of ownership in the Dam—that was not his to give—but rather shares of the responsibility for keeping the electricity flowing, and an entitlement to a share of the rewards. Half of the certificates Eddie simply gave to the technician as an incentive for him to re-assume his post. Unsurprisingly, the incentive worked. The thought of being effectively half-owner of the massive Boulder Dam—and entitled to half the revenue it generated—eliminated any objections the technician could possibly conjure up.

To raise capital for the maintenance of the Dam, the other half of the shares Eddie offered for sale to the citizens of Las Vegas; the sale would also serve as a vehicle to add a measure of legitimacy to his dubious scheme by increasing its constituency.

From behind the ornate railing of the observation platform at the rear of the *Meteor*, Eddie inaugurated the town's first stock exchange. Checkbooks in hand, potential investors lined up on the station platform to bid for the shares; and for his trouble, Eddie retained a small percentage of the certificates for himself. With the capital raised through the sale, he and the technician were able to hire and train the assistants needed to perform regular maintenance and billing. Within the month, electric service to the town became as reliable as it was inexpensive, and with profits mounting, a modest dividend for shareholders was soon declared.

Eddie was pleased with the outcome of his efforts. With only a trivial amount of initiative on his part, he was able to establish a reliable routine to ensure that electricity continued to flow—plus he had turned a smart profit by collecting his broker's fee on the stock transactions, and now received dividends as well. Everyone won, and it was one less worry for Eddie and Las Vegas.

CHAPTER 5 – RIDERS ON THE STORM

The radio blared.

“Raiders! Raiders!” came the startled cry from the speaker grille. It echoed menacingly within the vaulted confines of the Las Vegas station of Transcontinental Railroad.

Eddie was working in the station’s cafeteria when the warning arrived, in the process of converting its windowed side into a vast greenhouse. He froze, eyes wide in alarm, then dropped his tools and ran to the ticket booth where the walkie-talkie’s base station was installed. He grabbed the microphone clumsily, almost dropping it twice. His thumb finally found the talk button; he pressed it savagely and called out, “Report!”

The stationmaster emerged from his office and hurried up behind him, his face reflecting the same alarm that was on Eddie’s.

“Mr. Eddie!” echoed the booming electronic voice. “There’s about a dozen men riding up from the south. Ain’t got no automobiles or wagons, just men on horses headed this way. Can’t say for sure how many—it’s tough to make out all the details with these pathetic hockshop field glasses.”

“Stay out of sight!” he warned. “And I’ll get help. Meet us on the road at the edge of town, if you can.”

“I’ll try, sir.”

Eddie set the microphone down, lost in worried thought for the moment.

“It sure does sound like it could be raiders, Mr. Eddie,” prompted the stationmaster anxiously. “What’ll we do?”

“We’ll have to be ready for them!” he cried. “Follow me!” He grabbed his hat and rifle from their perch alongside the front door of the station, and bursting out onto the street, he stopped the first man he saw. “Raiders riding up from the south!” he cried. “Get your rifle and some more men and meet me at the edge of town! Spread the word!” Without a word, the man reared his horse around and galloped away as Eddie raced off to the south, repeating his call to arms to each man he passed, and meeting with similar reactions.

Soon he reached the south end of town; he was the second to arrive; the lookout was already waiting for him. Out across the desert Eddie could plainly see the cluster of mounted men even though they were still almost a mile away. The group was not moving; it appeared they were waiting for something.

“Thirteen of them, Mr. Eddie,” reported the lookout, gesturing with the field glasses. “And it looks like every one of them is only carrying a rifle, saddlebags, and not much else. Doesn’t look good!”

Eddie nodded. Behind him he heard the sound of hoof beats. His makeshift militia was starting to arrive, at first by ones and twos, then by fours and fives. Soon there was a large crowd, over fifty men assembled, and still more came. Eddie assumed command.

“Okay, listen up!” he called out. “We have to be sure if they mean us good or ill before we—” Gunshots could be heard in the distance along with whoops and catcalls; the raiders were closing in on the town at a gallop. Eddie’s face turned grim. There could be no parlay with the likes of men who fired first. “Okay, listen up!” he began again. “We don’t have much time! Here’s what we’ll do...”

* * *

The raiders approached.

They had been riding hard for several days now, their food gone, their water low, and their tempers short. They had fled the Arizona town where they had once been part of a vicious ruling clique; but their fortunes had abruptly taken a turn for the worse when outlaws even more vicious than they had laid siege to the town, driving them out in a hasty retreat, leaving behind many casualties. They had chosen Las Vegas as a destination in desperation, that being the only town of size within a hundred miles. They had nowhere else to go.

As they approached, they could see the homes and shops of Las Vegas appearing as if they were sprouting out of the gravelly desert sands. Their leader held up a dusty, gloved hand, halting the motley crew. For a moment he eyed the edge of town from under the broad brim of a battered hat. Two riders came up beside him, identical twins riding completely dissimilar horses.

“How’s it look, boss?” one of them asked eagerly.

Seconds passed before he murmured gruffly, “Quiet.” It wasn’t clear if it were an answer or a command.

“Deserted?” the twin prodded.

He pointed to a larger structure toward the eastern edge of town. “Nah—see that smoke?” He turned to the twin and snickered. “Don’t worry. There’s people there.”

“Women, too, ya think?” His eyes glowed.

The boss did not reply; he returned his attention to the town in the distance.

The twin pulled out his revolver in one quick, practiced motion, its barrel angled toward the clear blue sky. “Let’s take over, boss!” he hissed eagerly, eyes large.

The boss rested his hands unhurriedly on the saddle horn and slowly faced the twin. He was weary to the bone, and it showed in his voice. “Not so fast, pal. I’m thinking maybe we should take it slow. Ride in like we’re tourists or something. Look around first, then get the drop on them.”

The other twin chimed in. “But the men are hungry, boss! We got no time for them subtle niceties.” He pulled out his own revolver with a speed that rivaled his brother’s. “Let’s just grab some hostages and take over!”

The boss pointedly turned his attention back toward the town and spat upon the sand; but that was the limit of any display of his disdain for their opinion. Had he been more secure in his status as “boss,” he would have berated them in angry exasperation and simply followed his own counsel. But the brothers were birds of a feather, hotheads through and through, more inclined to take than to ask, to shoot than to talk, and never a regret afterward. He was all too aware that it was only through their tacit support that he held his command; one major disagreement between him and them and that would be that; there would be a new boss—and he could already sense the seeds of their discontent with his leadership. So it was no surprise that as he kept a watchful eye on the town ahead, he could feel his authority ebbing away; in its place a knot of dread coalesced in his stomach. It was the same feeling he would experience back in the old days when he worked as a bureaucrat for the Unificating Board, and the feeling had a similar cause: his superiors were always countermanning his orders without rhyme or reason until it reached the point where the flunkies under his command would no longer pay him any heed. Rather, they would look at him askance with closed faces plainly revealing their lack of faith in his authority. He had hated the feeling then, and he hated it just as much now; but making matters worse, there was no Directive 289-10 here and now to guarantee him a continued position as boss. In this new world, he had to be flexible

above all else. Cornered, he reacted as he always had—he stifled his exasperation and capitulated.

Still facing town, the decision made, the boss forced a wide, false grin. “Well, let’s take over, then!” Louder, so the others could plainly hear, he reared his horse around and cried out, “Welcome to your new home, boys!” He let out with a loud whoop, pulled out his revolver, and fired several shots in the air. His horse reared again with a loud neighing. “And it’s time we move in!”

Whooping in imitation, without hesitation the raiders charged toward town, guns blazing, the twins taking the lead. In short order they closed the distance, galloping along the main boulevard into town.

They encountered no one on the street; the town appeared deserted. Soon, guns still blazing, they reached the first traffic signal. It glowed red, but the lead riders paid its command no mind, nor, for that matter, did they note its presence even when a chance shot exploded the brightly-lit bulb into a thousand sparkling fragments. The raiders burst through the empty intersection and up the broad boulevard heading for the heart of town, but they never reached the end of the next block. From every alley, window, and rooftop along the right side of the street the makeshift militia’s guns suddenly blazed. It took less than five seconds before the cacophony of gunshots ended as abruptly as it had begun; there were no targets left. Every single raider was down; to a man, they had all been slain, each felled by multiple bullets of varying caliber. Many horses also lay among the dead, innocent victims of some poorly-aimed shot, while an unhurt minority aimlessly ambled about, riderless and apparently unconcerned, as if they were accustomed to sudden bursts of gunfire.

Slowly, silently, the members of the militia peered out from behind their cover, then made their way cautiously into the street. Eddie was there at their head, taking in the gruesome, hushed scene. He swayed a little, and had to turn away from the slaughter; he had begun to feel sick at his stomach. Having turned, in front of him stood the men of Las Vegas. They studied Eddie in silence for a moment, then someone in the back of the crowd cried suddenly, with enthusiasm, “Three cheers for Eddie!”

An explosion answered him. The men laughed, they cheered, they broke into applause; they surged forward to surround Eddie, mobbing him, slapping him on the back, shaking his free hand, almost shaking his rifle out of the other.

“God bless you, Mr. Eddie!”

“They were going to eat us alive!”

“I’ll never think it’s hopeless again!”

They continued to crowd around him, pressing close. Eddie wasn’t sure how it happened, but one second he was standing firmly on the ground on his own two feet, the next he found himself held high, perched on the shoulders of two burly militiamen. He became aware of a rhythmic, repeated shout that was spreading from a small beginning and pulsing into what Eddie could only call insanity. Spontaneously, the crowd began to chant: “*Long live Eddie... Long live Eddie...*,” over and over. It was like watching an old movie, from back in the days when the stories were still about heroes, except that this story was real.

Eddie winced, embarrassed and red-faced. He was a railroad executive, the Special Assistant to the Vice-President of Operations for Transcontinental Railroad, not some barrel-chested champion from the Saturday matinees. But seeing the triumphant sea of jubilant faces that surrounded him, he was forced to face his true self and the hero’s role he had played in their victory. Giving himself up to it, deliberately and self-consciously he forced a wan smile and waved back, sparking all the more

fervor in their cheers. Eventually the rally wound down, but still with scattered backslapping, laughter, and excited discussion.

“Well done, men!” cried Eddie, still seated on the militiamen’s shoulders. “Well done!” The crowd roared their agreement, then fell silent to hear his words. “Let’s be honest—we got lucky today.” Grumbling murmurs rose from the crowd; clearly, they were not convinced, but Eddie charged ahead nonetheless. “I say we need to be better organized so that the next time this sort of thing happens, we’ll be ready. We need to set up squads and lines of communication so that we can get into action on a moment’s notice.” This time it was nodding heads and a rumble of assent that drifted up to him. “No more of this ‘seat of the pants’ planning. Let’s meet at the Transcontinental station tonight at sunset and we’ll see what we can do to get ourselves better organized. Any questions?”

After a pause, some wisecracker yelled out, “Eddie for Mayor!” The crowd laughed at Eddie’s manifest embarrassment amid scattered applause.

“Then I’ll see you all tonight,” Eddie called out in reply, as if he hadn’t heard, then slid clumsily from his human perch.

Slowly, the militia began to disperse, and their hero turned away to return to tending his garden.

“Hey, wait a minute!” called out an angry voice.

The exodus halted. Heads turned in the direction of the cry. Standing in the doorway of a modest butcher shop stood a balding shopkeeper, his little remaining hair a frazzled, dark-grey fringe. He wore a stained, full-length white apron and held a long rifle by the end of the barrel in one hand as if it were a broom. He swept his free hand across the carnage lying in the street and demanded, “Who’s gonna clean up this mess?” He set his jaw firm and his eyes scanned the crowd. When no one volunteered an answer, he pressed the issue. “Well?”

Instinctively, every eye turned to Eddie.

Taking his cue from the crowd, the butcher put his free hand on his hip, glared at Eddie as well and repeated, “Well? How am I supposed to run a business here when you leave such an awful mess behind?” Clearly agitated, his hand swept the street again.

Eddie’s eyes followed the gesture to its subject, but his stomach rose again and he was forced to quickly look away. “I... I don’t know,” he admitted uncertainly.

“Well, somebody better do *something!*”

Doubtfully, Eddie suggested, “Call the police?”

The butcher snorted. “What planet are *you* from, kid? Ain’t been no real policing in this town since long before the Mayor left.” He leaned on his rifle, again as if leaning on a broom. “Fat chance they’d do anything about anything! And let me tell you another thing—” He was warming to his audience. “—I’ve been robbed twice in the last month, and ain’t nobody done nothing about it, police or otherwise. As if I didn’t have enough troubles! Now *you* come in here, guns blazing, and you want to leave *me* with the mess to clean up? What do you have to say for yourself?”

Eddie was dumbfounded. Here he had just saved countless innocent lives, and was now being called on the carpet for his initiative. Instinctively, from long practice, Eddie turned the problem over in the back of his mind; unsurprisingly, it produced an answer; with a small start, he realized how he might rectify things. “Do you own a horse?” he asked incongruously.

“A what?” The butcher was taken aback by the sudden turn of conversation.

“A horse.”

“Nope. Can’t afford one. But what’s that got to do with—” He stopped abruptly, as if his mother had caught him uttering a naughty word. Silently, the butcher pulled at his chin; his keen shopkeeper’s mind had already gotten the drift, and was quickly running far ahead of Eddie’s.

“Tell you what,” barked the butcher in a businesslike tone, raising his voice and taking in the entire crowd. “Why don’t you fellows just leave this to me, and I’ll take care of everything. An altruistic public service!” As he spoke, his eyes were surreptitiously scanning the battlefield, mentally tallying the number of unhurt animals and multiplying that number by the market price for a horse. He saw numerous rifles held by cold, dead hands, and his calculations skyrocketed. He began to sweep off the crowd with broom-like motions of the stock of his rifle. “Go on, boys, go on. You did your part, now I’ll do mine. This is a butcher’s job. You just leave it to me.”

“What about their—,” Eddie began.

“No, no! Not another word!” The butcher feared someone else might catch on and cut into his bounty. “On your way, now. Off! Just leave it to me, I tell you.” His eyes shone gleefully. “Git!”

* * *

Darkness came.

The inaugural meeting of the makeshift militia had gone well. A crowd almost three times the number of defenders had converged on the Transcontinental station, a worthy troop, staunch and strong. So many had gathered that the waiting room could not accommodate them all, and they were forced to gather on the large boulevard in front of the station. Eddie wished there were some large structure that could house everyone, something the size of an airplane hangar, but the streets in front of Transcontinental station were the best they had. Regardless, in short order, lines of communication were established, leaders chosen, stock strategies hammered out, and training scheduled. With only a single meeting, Eddie felt that they were far better prepared to face the next challenge, whether it came from raiders, religious radicals, or any random rabble who might make the mistake of invading Las Vegas.

In spite of his confidence, it was no contradiction that Eddie returned to the scene of the day’s skirmish with some trepidation. He steeled himself for the worst when he rounded the last corner, but the precaution was not necessary. Aside from scattered splotches of blood, the overhead street lights revealed no overt evidence that a deadly confrontation had taken place earlier that day.

No one was about. As he walked down the lamp-lit, empty street, he heard the sound of neighs escaping from a darkened garage. It was locked with an oversized padlock; in fact, the lock was so large and out of proportion that it appeared as if the owner were deliberately advertising the fact that the garage was locked. Curious, Eddie peered through a dusty, eye-level window; several horses stood in close formation, their reins secured to a long piece of lumber crudely nailed along the rear wall. He nodded to himself and turned away. Alongside the garage, electric lights burned within the butcher’s shop; the neighboring buildings were dark at this late hour. Eddie walked up to the door; it was unlocked. He let himself in, a tiny bell affixed to the inside of the door cheerfully announcing his entrance.

The butcher was crouching at the back of the store, his back to the door. He whirled around and bolted stiffly upright at the sound, eyes wide, as if expecting the worst, his hand shooting to the weapon at his hip.

Behind the startled shopkeeper, Eddie could see a broad array of rifles leaning against the back wall, and several boxes brimming with revolvers, holsters, ammunition, saddlebags, and random livery.

The proprietor lowered his hand when he recognized Eddie. "Thought you might be that bandit fellow come back for more," he explained nervously.

"No. It's just me. I wanted to see how you were coming along cleaning up, and I had a couple of questions besides."

The butcher beamed a broad smile and swept a hand across the array of armaments behind him. "I'm doing quite well, as you can see. *Quite* well, thank you!"

"Are those your horses locked up in the garage next door?"

"They are now," he laughed, slapping his hip. He was in high humor. "That was a good idea you had there, kid."

"Thanks. You deserve it." After a respectful pause, he added, "What happened to our raider friends?"

"Loaded them into an old wagon and hauled them up into the mountains."

"The mountains?" Eddie looked confused. "Why bury them in the mountains? Isn't the ground a lot rockier up there?"

"Bury them?" The butcher barked a short laugh. "Who said anything about burying them? I just carted them up there and *dumped* them!" He swirled an index finger at the ceiling. "It's the buzzards for their like! And more's the pity!" Sporting a wicked grin, he glared at Eddie with eyes unnaturally wide.

Eddie took a reeling step backwards. He was shaken by the sheer barbarism of the butcher's solution, yet somehow could not find it in himself to condemn it. In the weeks since he had come to Las Vegas he had noticed innumerable other such small changes in himself—not to mention several larger ones! Surviving the collapse of civilization could tend to change a man—and here he faced yet another change, but he let it pass with only the mental note. He wondered how soon the mental notes might also pass. Recovering his composure, he managed to keep his voice level. "How about the dead horses?" he asked reluctantly, not wanting to know.

The butcher eyed him warily, his strange smile quickly fading. "You look like you don't really want to know," he offered generously.

Moments passed in silence before Eddie finally mustered an answer. "You're an interesting fellow," was all he could manage.

"Let's just say that I recognize a bargain when I see one." He turned to face the wall of rifles, hands on his hips.

Gratefully changing the subject, Eddie interjected, "Not meaning to change the subject, but I wanted to ask you about something you said this morning about bandits."

"What about 'em?" he asked apprehensively.

"You've been held up?"

"Twice. This month. So far." He was plainly angry.

"Who was it?"

The butcher shrugged.

"You said the police were no help?"

"The police!" He made as if to spit on the floor of his own shop, but caught himself. "The police?" he repeated. He stalked over to the counter and seized his telephone with both hands. "Go on, try to telephone them!" Angrily he shoved the device at Eddie. When Eddie hesitated, he gestured again. "Go on and call them, I tell you!"

Slowly, Eddie took the instrument from the butcher's outstretched hands and dialed the number posted alongside the cash register. He heard

the repeated burring on the line: once, twice, three times. On the sixth ring, he hung up and handed the device back. "I see," he said.

"And let me tell you another thing: even when they do answer—which ain't often!—they still won't come!"

"Why not?"

"Busy... scared... lost... How the hell should I know? Maybe it's because I'm all the way down here on the south side of town." He chuckled dryly. "It's not like I'm living in one of them abandoned neighborhoods. All I know is that they don't come."

"Maybe I ought to go and have a talk with them."

"Why not?" The butcher chuckled dryly. "You already have your finger in a lot of pies, kid. What's one more?"

* * *

The policeman prevaricated.

"Now, Mr. Eddie, be reasonable! There are only three of us for... For what? Oh, I don't know, thousands of people? Of course we're not here all the time!"

"Did you know that the butcher on the south side has been robbed twice this month?"

The policeman sighed. He knew what was coming. "Yes, sir. I knew."

"Have you any leads?"

The policeman looked down, reddening slightly. "Well, really, we haven't had the time to do much about it." He looked up again. "Not that there were many clues! Whoever did it pulled it off real smooth—a real smooth smarty, he is. The only thing we know is that he was average height and wore jeans, work shirt and a mask over his entire head. It could have been anybody... or nobody!"

"Nobody? You doubt the butcher's word?"

"No, no," he retreated. "I'm just saying we have nothing to go on."

"But it's happened twice. Maybe there'll be a third time. Couldn't you post a watch?"

From under the brim of his blue cap he looked up at Eddie reproachfully. "Every night? There are only three of us, Mr. Eddie. Nobody wants to sit out all night waiting for something that'll probably never happen." He took a deep breath bordering on a sigh. "Besides," he explained patiently. "We're in the business of law enforcement. Crime prevention is something else entirely."

Eddie was struck momentarily speechless. He had never stopped to consider the nuance before. "But wouldn't you want to try to prevent crime, too?"

The comment struck a chord in the policeman. His eyes brightened, but the fire immediately died, as if someone had poured a large bucket of water over a small match. "The short answer is that we would love to, Mr. Eddie. But the reality is that the Mayor always held us back. Our job devolved into crime *reporting* rather than law enforcement—and the last year or two we were under orders to stop even the reporting, and ignore way too many illegal doings." He shook his head at the memory.

"But the Mayor's left town, I hear. What's holding you back?"

This time he did sigh. "It's too late to matter, Mr. Eddie. We just don't have the manpower these days. Most of those on the force that didn't light out with the Mayor have up and quit. Like I said, there's only three of us left."

“Why not hire deputies, then?” He gestured to the telephone. “Or a dispatcher to take calls?”

The question struck another chord; it was just what the policeman had wanted to hear, a pet peeve he longed to slaughter, and he seized the chance. Theatrically, he scratched the back of his head, tipping his cap forward a little in the process. “Well, now, you touch upon something there that’s becoming a real issue with me and the men.” He paused for effect, waiting to be prompted.

Eddie was still distracted considering the difference between enforcement and prevention; unconsciously, he did the officer the favor. “What issue? Crime prevention?”

“Huh? No, no. Hiring deputies. We should have at least a score of officers for a town this size, but...” He paused and looked upward as if seeking strength. “...but it seems we haven’t been paid in over a month!”

“Not paid?” Recalling his experiences with the Dam technician, Eddie was only half surprised.

“Over a month, Mr. Eddie. That’s why we’re down to three—everyone else quit. When a man isn’t getting paid, it’s nigh on impossible to get him to stay. And there’s no way to stop anyone from quitting these days—Directive 289-10 doesn’t mean anything anymore—and we’re the ones who are supposed to be enforcing it!”

Eddie let the observation pass. “Who’s supposed to be paying you?”

“The Mayor, of course.” He chuckled dryly. “But if you go down to City Hall, you won’t find anyone there—or any *thing!* Maybe I shouldn’t be telling tales out of school, but when the Mayor bugged out of town last month, he loaded everything into his limousine that wasn’t nailed down. Like the best furniture. Like the artwork off the walls. Like the entire city treasury.”

“But that’s against the law!”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” he responded wearily.

“Well, what did you do about it? Why didn’t you arrest him?”

The policeman shrugged. “Who is John Galt?”

Eddie blinked twice before deciding to let that pass as well. Instead, he repeated his question. “So who’s paying you now?”

Again, the policeman shrugged. “Nobody! That’s why there are only three of us left, each pulling an eight hour shift. If any of us happens to be here at the station when the phone rings, we answer it. But fact is we’re out more than in. You were lucky to catch me here tonight at all, Mr. Eddie. We’re stretched pretty thin.”

“But you have a town to protect! How will you do it?”

The policeman sighed. “Mr. Eddie, I’m only a little guy. I do what I’m told and get what I can, just like everyone else. But let me tell you: the wife won’t let me keep up this job much longer unless I start getting paid real soon. Same’s for the other men, too. We love police work, or we wouldn’t still be here. But a man’s got to eat, you know.”

Again, Eddie could think of nothing to say. As with most people, to him policemen were a constant presence that required no thought, like breathing the air. The police force simply *was*, a prosaic commodity always taken for granted, like electricity or street lights, but here the officer was calmly predicting its demise. Eddie couldn’t imagine a world without police; but apparently he was to experience it for himself soon enough. *No!* he shouted to himself inside his head. *Not if I have anything to say about it!* To the policeman, he replied evenly, “Don’t worry. I’ll think of something.”

“Somebody better,” the policeman warned darkly. “And soon.”

The Diesel rumbled.

Eddie sat at the controls of the throbbing engine and piloted it slowly along the rails of Las Vegas at restricted speed, its yard bell clanking a rhythmic, flat, off-key warning of his approach. Before long the buildings of the town fell behind him, as did the need for caution. He flipped an overhead toggle switch to kill the bell, then advanced the throttle further, increasing his velocity first to medium speed then to limited speed; it was the fastest he had operated the Diesel since arriving in Las Vegas. In no time the town fell far behind, leaving him alone with the moving desert under his clicking wheels as his only companion.

Eddie reveled in the moment. His bonhomie came from a mixture of joys: the feel of the powerful, living engine tamed to his whim, the stark splendor of the desert landscape, the beautiful blue sky, and the blessed solitude. It was the last which he had sought this day; he needed time to think, and indulging himself, for the first time since his arrival he took the last living remnant of Transcontinental Railroad out on the road it no longer served.

Many miles north of town, he came to a track switch where the rails split into two directions: northwest toward what used to be San Francisco, and northeast into the uncrossable, snow-clogged Colorado Rockies. Rolling a little beyond the switch in the northwesterly direction, he brought the Diesel to a gentle halt, dumped air to set the brake, and climbed out, letting it idle noisily. He slogged the short distance through the shifting sands back to the switch, and with a great heave on its lever, flipped it to the other track. His maps told him that a spur track connected the left and right branches less than a mile further up, forming a triangle of track; Eddie planned to back the Diesel along the spur to the easterly track, then head back to town facing forward again. The track switch would already be correctly positioned for his return when he reached it.

He trudged through the gravelly sand back to the Diesel, but did not climb aboard. He knew from personal experience that the Diesel's cab would quickly become as hot as an oven if it sat immobile for very long under the unforgiving desert sun. Instead he perched on a ladder rung on the shadowed side of the idling train admiring the scenery, taking the time to sit and think.

In the hazy distance, he could make out the jagged mountain range that surrounded the tan flatness of the featureless desert. The towering ring gave him the impression that he sat in the bottom of a gigantic sandy saucer many miles in diameter, the massive granite arms of the mountains protecting him and all Las Vegas from the multitude of disasters that had apparently befallen the outside world. But raiders and other troubles still managed to seep in, with the police situation being the latest and most urgent incarnation.

He felt that his conversation with the policeman—and the butcher before that—had opened up a hornets' nest of interrelated troubles. He knew that what made the issue complex wasn't merely paying policemen; it spanned all that those payments implied: setting tax rates, collecting the taxes, and enforcing compliance, not to mention all the other functions once performed by the now-defunct Las Vegas government. Even if he had the authority—which he knew he hadn't—he wasn't eager to see the old status quo re-established in any case. Death and taxes, it was said, were inescapable evils; but Eddie by nature was unable to accept any evil, inescapable or otherwise. Neither choice was a course of action he would wish to initiate; in fact, the very idea of re-instituting taxation revolted him.

Although he never entertained any second thoughts about the authority of government to levy taxes, when it became personal—when it was *he* who had to levy them—and *collect* them!—it became another matter entirely. What right did he have to take money from one person and give it to another, even for something as important as police protection? He felt that if he should ever attempt to enforce a tax, he would thereby become a thief himself. Nor was he willing to accept the idea of letting people vote to authorize him to collect a tax; it only diffused the blame and made everyone who voted for him a thief as well, partners in crime, with Eddie as their patsy. What right did a group of people have to take money from others when none of the individual members of that group had that right?

He shook his head in weariness. *Are taxes really necessary?* he asked himself, but he knew the question to be rhetorical. Because if not through taxation, how else could the police possibly be paid? He briefly considered establishing a volunteer police force modeled after the town's volunteer firemen, but the problem was an inherently different one—firemen only served active duty once in a while; they could go about their everyday lives even while they remained on alert. The same could be said for the newly-formed Las Vegas militia. But police work was completely different; they needed to be on the job around the clock. He also considered but immediately dismissed a Boulder Dam style of solution; he knew there would be no income to cover expenses, no dividends to distribute.

Eddie sighed. He was fresh out of ideas. Where, then, was the money to pay the police to come from? What else was there besides coercive taxation? He halted, wide eyes staring unseeing at the distant desert horizon, his mind grasping an unexpected corollary statement—what about *non-coercive* taxation?

Excited now, he unconsciously stood up and took two steps forward into the bright sunshine, his eyes still unfocused as his mind focused on the unusual concept. Details of its implementation clicked neatly together of their own accord, one after another, all of the pieces falling into their proper place. It simply stood to reason, and he wouldn't have to rob anyone.

He lingered another moment in the sunshine, his eyes refocusing on the distant mountains. Satisfied with his answer, he climbed aboard the steamy, idling Diesel, released the brakes, advanced the throttle, and slowly began to navigate the triangle of track to head back into town. There was much to do.

* * *

The butcher complained.

“What do you mean, I have to pay for police protection?” he demanded. “What do I pay taxes for?”

“You're not paying taxes anymore, now are you?” Eddie pointed out. The butcher did not reply; they both knew that Las Vegas had not bothered with tax collection since the Mayor had left town; besides, there was no one left in City Hall to pay the taxes to.

“So who are you, the new taxman?”

“No!” cried Eddie with an unexpected vehemence. “I'm only a citizen who believes in law enforcement.” After a pause, he added, “Don't you?”

The answer was quick in coming. “A fat lot of protection I got when I was robbed twice in the last month!”

“That's crime prevention,” Eddie pointed out, just as quickly. “Not law enforcement. But with my new approach you'll get that and enforcement, too.” When the shopkeeper did not immediately reply, he prompted, “So are you on board?”

Apprehensively, the butcher countered, "And what if I'm not?"

"Then you're not," he replied flatly. "But if you're not and you want the police to investigate a crime, you'll have to pay the going rate. Crime prevention is billed per hour. The cost of law enforcement depends upon the crime." He brandished a sheet of paper listing the various rates, gesturing slightly in emphasis. "It's all spelled out here in detail."

The butcher threw up his hands in exaggerated, exasperated anger. "This is extortion!"

"No it isn't. Nobody is going to beat you up or anything. You don't have to pay."

"Yes I do! I either have to pay in advance or pay after the fact."

"True—if you want the service. But you could always do it yourself."

The butcher scoffed. "Who, me? Chase crooks?" He ran his fingers through what was left of his grey fringe. "Maybe once upon a time, but I ain't as young as I used to be, you know."

"All the more reason why you should sign up. And by paying in advance, it's an awful lot cheaper."

The butcher eyed him warily. "Yeah? How much cheaper?"

Hearing that question, Eddie felt he was on the home stretch. Once he moved beyond the question of whether or not police services were needed, it became only a question of price; and the rates he established were deliberately set far lower than the taxes the butcher once paid to the city. The benevolent trap was set; Eddie moved in to close the deal, naming his price. "For that low monthly fee, you get unlimited law enforcement, plus prevention at a ninety percent discount."

"Ninety percent!" The butcher pulled on his chin thoughtfully for a moment, then sarcastically added, "Will the police bother to answer the phone?"

"Guaranteed," Eddie replied easily. "One month of enforcement free if they don't answer by the third ring." He waved the paper in his hand. "Like I said: it's all spelled out here in black and white."

Running out of arguments, the butcher retreated into innuendo. "But this is nothing but a protection racket!"

Eddie was momentarily shocked; he hadn't thought of putting it into those exact words, but what the butcher said was true. "Yes... I guess it is..." he said softly to himself.

"And what if I want to start my own protection racket?" he demanded belligerently.

"Go ahead," Eddie replied unreservedly. "I'd think that the more men this town has protecting us from crooks, the better. No one should have a monopoly on chasing crooks." He paused a moment, considering a tangential notion. "And I'm not sure where they would get such a monopolistic power anyhow," he murmured to himself. Shaking off the thought, he returned to the issue at hand. "Yes, you could always do it yourself, but don't you think it would be better to hire experts to handle it for you?"

The butcher stood mute and stared at Eddie with a stone face. Obviously the man had finished arguing.

Eddie sighed. He had done all he could. "As you wish." He turned to leave, but before he could reach the door, the butcher came back to life.

"No, wait!"

Patiently, Eddie halted and faced the shopkeeper.

The butcher said nothing for a moment, then asked, "Will you catch my bandit?"

"We can try."

"At a ninety percent discount, remember!"

Eddie nodded.

The butcher stood silent for another moment, then threw up his hands again, this time in surrender. “All right, all right! Sign me up! And good luck, kid—you’re going to need it!”

* * *

Sponsorship grew.

Starting with the butcher had been a good idea, Eddie told himself. He was a man whose keen business sense would make him the most difficult of the lot, to be sure. But the man had inadvertently helped define for him the pattern of people’s resistance, and that gave Eddie an accurate map to navigate around the more obvious obstacles with subsequent recalcitrants.

At first Eddie had gone door to door peddling his scheme, a practice he found that he loathed—he had never done it before—but fortunately it did not take him long to solicit sufficient seed capital. With that, he hired several former policemen to spread the word. That solved three problems for him simultaneously—putting more policemen on the pay rolls, spreading the new gospel, and sparing Eddie the embarrassing drudgery of knocking on the doors of strangers.

He had no idea in advance how many people would take him up on his commercialized police protection. He had priced his business model on the assumption that one out of ten would buy into his scheme, and he was astonished when he surpassed that goal with the first week’s subscriptions. Ultimately, more than half of those who were approached accepted Eddie’s “protection racket.” There was money for salaries and equipment, and to spare.

Truth be told, he had an unaffiliated salesman drumming up business for him, namely the anonymous local bandit who had twice robbed the butcher and many other merchants and homes; and he was still prowling the streets, striking one unfortunate victim after another, once or twice a week. In response to his illegal activities, Eddie’s venture boomed. Given the number of policemen he could now afford to put on the streets, it came as no surprise that it didn’t take long for his crime prevention unit to present a suspect for his law enforcement unit.

CHAPTER 6 – DID YOU EVER HAVE TO MAKE UP YOUR MIND?

All was quiet.

The bandit peeked out from behind a dusty curtain to make certain the coast was clear. Satisfied, he donned his mask and slunk out the back door of the abandoned house, soundlessly closing the door behind him. He was a careful bandit, intelligent far beyond his ilk, the type of man to leave nothing to chance. Weak and disorganized though they were, there was still an off chance that the Las Vegas police might accidentally stumble across him. Instinctively and consciously, by carefully cultivated habit and by deliberate intent, he took every opportunity not to get caught. That had once been an easily-attained goal, but not any longer; times had changed. Back in the days when tourists had outnumbered residents many times over, there were a great number of easy opportunities for petty banditry. But in these new times, the pool of potential prey had grown paltry indeed, pressing him to pursue more perilous plans, including robbing the same establishments multiple times or stretching far beyond his usual territory, as was the case tonight.

He slithered easily into the overgrown bushes that ringed the unkempt yard. It wasn't a large yard; but the bushes were high, and he was confident no one would see him shift. But then, they weren't supposed to see him at all. To help make sure that everything happened according to his careful plan, he had practiced his motions there in the wee hours twice in the past week, several times each night, aiming to be the epitome of the master in action. He was honed; he was ready.

He was also hungry and sober, a bad combination, and he knew it. Either of them would be sufficient reason to drive him to the streets to seek his next victim, something he was always reluctant to chance, but the overpowering combination of needs easily removed his reluctance, as usual. But insistent though the twin drives were, they could not remove his inherent caution and predisposition to meticulous planning and orchestrated execution.

From his hiding place in the bushes, he studied the street through the gaps between the houses trying to catch a glimpse of any foot traffic, but as expected, there was none. It was an average residential neighborhood, its streets deserted, and given the hour he knew they would remain that way until the last lone pedestrian came by. *A pretty lady*, he predicted. *And all alone, too!* He knew the residents and their schedules; he knew there'd be no one to see.

As time passed, the street empty, he waited patiently according to his plan. *There she is!* In the crack of unobstructed vision between the third and fourth houses distant he saw his quarry momentarily appear then disappear. She was an unusually beautiful woman in her late twenties, shapely, with long, luxurious hair a light auburn in color. But it wasn't her physical attributes that interested him; it was her monetary ones. He looked all four ways before moving, as was his wont—left, right, back, forward—then quickly half-crawled behind a large, leafy bush alongside the house, again looking all four ways when he arrived. *So far, so good.*

He counted. He knew precisely how long it would take her to reach his hiding spot. When he had counted a third of the total, again there was the characteristic four-way glance followed by a quick shift to another overgrown bush and the follow-up glance. Still, no one else was in sight. He smiled in the darkness. *This is it!*

She was close enough that he could hear her shoes clacking against the sidewalk. He counted down the seconds to the surprise planned rendezvous. *Three... Two... One...* He scanned one last four-way and prepared to pounce.

* * *

The policeman smiled.

It wasn't the significant raise in pay he had received by joining up with Eddie's police force that made him smile; it wasn't the clear, cold drop they had on their suspect; it wasn't that he and his wife were no longer quarreling over money troubles; it wasn't even the pleasantly warm Nevada night. Any of them were good reasons to smile in and of themselves, and their combination made the evening all the more enjoyable. But what really filled his soul with joy was a feeling he hadn't experienced since he was a teenager, on the day that he swore an oath to his late mother that he would become a peace officer: it was the undeniable desire to help others, to do good and thwart evil, and to unflinchingly deliver on that promise. That desire had propelled him to excel in school, and held firm through his rigorous training at the Police Academy. Given his powerful drive, it was no surprise he was the top of his class in every course; and when graduation day came, his pride burst forth and lit up the entire room, for he had been awarded the highest honor, Trainee of the Cycle, and not in the entire history of the Academy had there been such a stellar student.

Then, just like that, it was over. After so many years of preparation and dedicated effort, in much less than a month they took his dreams and smashed them to bits. They twisted his actions, his mind, and his very soul in unspeakable ways. Rather than enforcing the law, he found himself ordered to ignore it. Rather than an advocate for good, he had unwittingly been transformed into the involuntary agent of good's enemy. Faced with such unspeakable evil, he did what any red-blooded American of his day would do—he knuckled under. He did as he was told. He clipped his own wings. He got along to get along. The love of his career was perverted into a hatred of his job, a sorry trap from which there was no escape.

But that was then; this was now. The policeman smiled again. *Those days are gone forever!* Quietly excited, he sat in a comfortable chair in the third-story bedroom of a comfortable house across the street from the bandit's expected rendezvous point. From here he could scan the entire tableau and react to unexpected events as necessary. But he did not expect any complications—his trap was set; the bait, detected; and the rat was running through the maze, as planned.

“Do you want more tea, officer?” Silhouetted in the dark doorway of her bedroom, the busybody widow was all concern, expressing anxiety over the welfare of her temporary houseguest.

He smiled needlessly in the dark, his good nature unseen but plainly audible in his tone of voice. “No, thank you. It's almost time, and I need to be concentrating on my work.”

She cooed her delight. She tiptoed across the bedroom to stand behind his chair—*her* chair, she should say!—from which she kept a near-constant watch over the neighborhood. For most of the day, every day, she would station herself behind the slatted blinds of her bedroom window and observe. Over time, she had come to know every one of her neighbors, their names, their families, their joys and sorrows—and their secrets. She was all but invisible behind her blinds, but the world outside could hide nothing from her prying eyes. When the teenaged boy up the street took up with a lady friend many years his senior, she knew about it before the boy's

parents had any inkling. When the carpenter on the next block started a tryst with the courtesan who lived behind him, she was able to knowledgeably gossip about it long before the carpenter's wife learned the truth. Without a doubt, not a single event could take place anywhere within range of her lofty lookout post, no matter how insignificant, without her uncovering all the sordid details. So it was no surprise that when a strange young man began playing army games behind the abandoned house across the street in the middle of the night, she knew of it immediately. It was on his second practice run that she had divined his intent—and his target! He wasn't the only one who knew the behavior patterns of the residents. He was after the wealthiest of her neighbors, she was certain. To be sure, she did not care for the intended victim and certainly did not approve of how the woman chose to conduct her life, but none of that mattered now. Some things were more important than personal likes or dislikes. Excited, she wasted not an instant more before calling the police, reporting in detail the young man's movements, their timing, and her professional estimation of his intent. Now here it was, not twenty-four hours later, and they were ready for him. Her bosom swelled with pride for the service she was performing for her community. If only her late husband could see her now! He had always complained about her busybody ways, but tonight they would pay off handsomely—she had been promised the lion's share of the reward for the man's capture.

She touched the policeman gently on the shoulder. "That's nice. You have fun. I'll watch with you."

* * *

The quarry smiled.

She had seen the telltale, agreed-upon chalk mark scrawled on the sidewalk at the start of the block telling her that the police were in position. She told herself firmly that she had nothing to fear. *I hope!* she prayed, for she knew that the bandit would be armed.

As she proceeded up the block, she found that it was much more difficult to control her glance than she had expected. She knew specifically which bush he hid behind, exactly when he would appear, and precisely where he would confront her. Like a moth being drawn to the fire, the bush he hid behind pulled at her attention; but she dared not glance at his hiding place, lest she risk ruining the entire plan.

The police had gone over the bandit's *modus operandi* with her and the details of his strategy. "He's never hurt anyone, he only wants the money, so give it to him when he asks. That's all the evidence we'll need to move against him. Just give him the money. Leave it to us after that. Run home and lock your door."

Excited, she strode up the street, tossing her long hair back in anticipation, the beat of her high heels echoing in the dark.

* * *

The time came.

The bandit sprang from the bushes. Unsurprisingly, the quarry was right where he expected her to be.

In the darkness, he confronted her, a small, silver revolver glistening dully in his hand. "Only the money," he hissed from behind his mask. "I only want the money."

On cue, on command, according to the plan, she complied, almost tossing her heavy purse at his chest. Freed of her burden, she spun on one foot and ran; and true to his word, the bandit did not pursue. Clutching the purse to his chest, he smiled, turned, and faced the combined weaponry of the Las Vegas Crime Prevention Unit, earning the honor of becoming its first victim. Outnumbered, outgunned, and scowling, he dropped the purse with a loud thump, the weapon with a smaller clunk, and raised his hands high as the tide of blue uniforms swept over him.

* * *

Eddie hummed.

The simple tune, extracted from a complex concerto, rumbled gently in his throat, a pleasant undercurrent to the morning's labors. His hands were soiled, but with the clean stain of rich earth; it tightly filled the pores of his fingers appearing as tiny, undulating black whorls. The construction of his garden in the Transcontinental station cafeteria had been completed the day before, lacking only the seeds that were its purpose. Several varieties of them sat in carefully-labeled envelopes arranged neatly on the gleaming, chromium-trimmed table behind him, each seed waiting only on the farmer's enchanted touch that would bring them to life. Carefully, he poked a hole of deliberate depth into the soil, positioned the seed carefully inside, then gently tamped fertilized mulch into the dark cavity. A dash of water completed the cultivation before he moved on to the next planting. Unsurprisingly, his movements aligned with the beat of his humming, its rhythm adding an unconscious flourish to his every motion; the impression generated was that of a maestro conducting his orchestra. The last seed went into the ground as the last notes of the concerto rumbled within his chest, in the same instant.

He wiped his hands somewhat ineffectively on a battered towel as he stepped back to admire his handiwork. It was not all that impressive a sight to see: flat, damp earth pocked with petite piles of black mulch. Satisfied nonetheless, he gathered up his tools and returned them to their box, dropping the soiled towel on top. Idly, he reflected on his humming; the song that filled his mind had come to its impressive conclusion, and he felt hungry for more. That wasn't surprising; music was a rarity in Las Vegas, generally limited to the honky-tonk of the taproom pianos and the occasional amateur harmonica. There were no radio stations in town or even a record shop. Wistfully, he sighed. *There has to be something!* Perhaps he could ask around to see if anyone had any old records he could borrow—assuming he could find a phonograph.

He lifted the toolbox and was about to return it to its niche, but halted almost as soon as his motions began. Leaning in the doorway of the cafeteria, arms folded across his chest, was the policeman, his demeanor broadcasting a disconcerted mien.

"What's wrong?" asked Eddie without preamble.

The policeman unfolded his arms and stood straight. "It's our bandit."

"What? Your plan didn't work? You didn't nab him?"

"Quite the opposite—he's sitting comfortably in his cell."

Eddie's brow furrowed in bewilderment. "Shouldn't he be?"

"Well... yes and no."

He set down his toolbox on the corner of a table. "I don't follow you."

"Well, the man's got rights, doesn't he? Isn't he innocent until proven guilty? Shouldn't he have a trial or something?"

Two heartbeats passed. "Won't he?"

The policeman smiled without mirth. "City Hall is deserted, remember."

Light broke on Eddie's intellect. "Ah. No judges."

"Right. The last one we had left with the Mayor." As an afterthought, he added scornfully, "And good riddance, too, if you ask me!"

Eddie ignored the postscript. "You're right; the man deserves a fair trial, even though you caught him red handed."

The policeman nodded. "Exactly what I was thinking. These aren't the days of Mr. Wesley, you know."

"So where do we find a judge?"

"Actually..." The policeman paused, a mite disconcerted, as if he might be overstepping himself, but he plowed ahead nevertheless. "I was figuring that *you* might want to preside." He gained confidence as he spoke. "You're the one who set up the law enforcement here. It's only logical that you should be judge."

"Me? I'm no lawyer!"

The policeman laughed. "All the more reason why you should do it. And judging can't be that hard, or else lawyers wouldn't be able to do it! All you need is honesty and fairness, and you have that more than covered." He looked aside and continued in a sotto voice, "Not that this town has seen a whole lot of *that* in its judges!"

Eddie sighed. The policeman's logic stood to reason. "All right," he agreed resignedly. He thought it over for a moment, then added, "Can we do it first thing tomorrow morning?" He held out his stained hands, palms up. "'T'wer best done quickly," he quoted, "but I have things I need to finish up this afternoon."

"Nine tomorrow morning it is. 'So let it be written'...", the policeman quoted in turn as he turned to leave. "I'll spread the word."

* * *

The bandit grinned.

He sat on a crude wooden cot in a bare cell down in the cool cellar of the jailhouse, but his predicament did not trouble him. He knew perfectly well that they had gotten the drop on him, but such details did not dissuade his mirth. That he had blundered was the cold truth, or else they would not have captured him so readily. He had been caught many, many times in the past, but had always managed to elude prison through bribes, political influence, legal chicanery, or a clever combination of the three, and there was no reason to think they wouldn't save him yet again, hence the grin.

Another part of his elation stemmed from the fact that they would have to reveal in open court exactly how they had caught him; as in the past, it would prove to be an invaluable education. He would listen carefully, examine his failure in all its aspects, then take steps to make sure it would never, ever happen again. He would transform his adversary from a determined enemy into a harsh tutor; and with every untoward encounter, he would improve himself and become even more invincible. Idly, he wondered who his judge could possibly be—all of them had left town, or so he heard. Perhaps it was a new judge; he hoped so. It would make things all the more interesting, plus there would be the added educational bonus of hearing a new and different viewpoint.

He heard footsteps coming down the stairs. It was time; they were coming for him. With relish, he anticipated his upcoming educational encounter.

* * *

Eddie hesitated.

It was only a closet he faced, but the symbolism of the garments it held was overwhelming. Black robes, full length, hung from stout wooden hangers in the dark recesses. His hand had reached out to retrieve one of them, but his sense of self would not permit him to touch the fabric.

I'm no judge! he needlessly reminded himself, but found no courage in his unspoken defiance. Unbidden, dark warnings came to mind: *Judge not, lest thou shalt be judged!* The ancient wisdom handed down across the millennia stoked his disconcerted poise. He began to doubt the wisdom of involving himself in the entire affair in the first place, sorry that he had even bothered to even attempt to rebuild the rule of law; but he recognized his doubts for what they were—pure escapism—and as easily as they had come upon him, he just as readily shook them off. He was certain that throughout the entire affair his actions were necessary, right, and stood to reason, each and every step all along the way. That he found himself in this place, in front of this particular closet, being intimidated by a mere piece of cloth, was only the next phase of his convoluted journey toward making this town his home. Intellectually, he knew he should embrace the challenge, but still his emotions held him back.

Looking at the costumes arrayed in front of him, his jaw tightened; he realized that there was no reason why he should fear the traditional garb—or even need it, for that matter. His confidence returning, he firmly shut the closet door on the judicial robes and headed toward the courtroom. Flannel and denim would serve just as well.

* * *

The gavel cracked.

“All rise!” the hastily-recruited bailiff called out as the door to the judge’s chambers opened.

“No!” Eddie cried automatically, stopping in the doorway. In front of him the courtroom was populated with dozens of people; half were already standing, half still sitting, with a few caught midway in the act of rising, uncertain whether to complete the action in either direction.

“Sit down, please!” he called out. “It’s only me. You don’t have to get up.”

The standees sat as one as Eddie strode with a confidence he did not feel to take his seat behind the large, ornate desk upon the raised dais. He looked around the room uncertainly, wondering if he had somehow been transported through a magical mirror and was now looking back through it into the normal world he had left behind. He shook off the fantasy, steeled himself, and took a deep breath.

“All right, this court will come to order.”

“Objection!” It was the bandit. He was manacled to a burly policeman, wrist-to-wrist, co-joined Siamese twins seated at a table midway between Eddie and the audience.

“What?” Eddie blinked myopically. The unexpected interruption had taken him by surprise. “What’s your objection?”

The bandit fixed a squinting gaze upon Eddie and jabbed an accusing index finger in his direction. “You’re no judge! Where’s your robe? You have no power over me!”

“You’re right,” he admitted lightly. “I’m no judge, I have no robe, and I have no power over you. But I promise you I’ll do my best to make sure you get a fair hearing.”

“No! It’s the law! This trial cannot proceed without a real judge!”

“Sure it can,” Eddie explained patiently. “Because it’s not the judge who’s important here, it’s the jury. You’re accused of robbing that woman—” He pointed to the stunningly pretty young lady in the front row. “—at gunpoint, and it’ll be the jury who’ll decide your guilt or innocence, not me. I’m only here acting as sort of a referee. I’ll be doing no judging today.”

“But that’s not what the law says a judge does!”

“It’s what I do,” he said simply.

“But if there’s no judge, then you have to set me free!”

“Why’s that?”

“Because you’re no judge!”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Better yet...” Eddie turned to the audience. “How many of you accept me as judge here today?”

Every hand in the audience went up. At the table in front of Eddie, the burly policeman raised his own manacled wrist, dragging along with it the wrist of the bandit, lifting both their arms into the air. A satisfied, mischievous smile spread across his husky face.

The bandit threw the man an annoyed scowl before jerking both their arms back down.

Eddie scanned the crowd. “Okay, it looks unanimous. Let’s get going.” He quickly estimated the number of people in the room and divided by seven. “Starting with you...” He pointed to a teenager at one end of the front row. “...begin counting off. Every seventh person, please take a seat in the jury box.”

A panicked buzz of conversation instantly filled the air as the members of the audience reacted to the unexpected duty that was being asked of them.

“Objection!”

Patiently, Eddie faced the bandit. “What is it this time?”

“You can’t do that! I know the law—I’m allowed to interview each prospective juror!”

“Interview them? What for?”

“I get to reject the ones I don’t like!”

Eddie blinked twice. “You mean you want to stack the jury?”

The bandit hesitated; he hadn’t thought of it in quite those terms before. “But it’s my right!”

Recovering, Eddie flatly replied, “No it isn’t. Picking and choosing jurors like that wouldn’t be fair. We’ll just take every seventh person, no questions asked.” To the audience, he repeated, “All right, start counting. Every seventh person to the jury box, please.”

“Objection!”

Sternly, Eddie shook a finger at him. “Listen: I said I’m not going to let you stack the jury!”

“But it’s the law!”

“Whose law?”

Again, the bandit hesitated. This trial definitely wasn’t following along the normal lines. He didn’t know whose law it was; all he knew were the gopher holes of procedure. But he wasn’t going to let ignorance stop him. “The laws of America!” he guessed with forced conviction.

Intrigued but not impeded, Eddie asked, “Which law of America? Explain it to me. I’m no lawyer.”

Hesitation and exasperation simultaneously burst forth. “How the hell should I know?”

“Or I,” Eddie concurred. He sat in thought for a moment, then added, as if talking to himself, “You know, I’m not sure the laws of America would apply in any case. It’s been over a month since the X Project exploded, and

we've heard absolutely nothing from the rest of the nation since then. There doesn't seem to *be* any America any longer." He paused again briefly. "And besides, I'm not certain theft is a federal crime anyhow." With a start he realized the root of his uncertainty: he had never before read the Constitution, nor had it been taught in the schools he attended. He dismissed the random thought and returned to the matter at hand. "Regardless, if you or I don't know the law, how could we possibly follow it? How else would you suggest that we choose a jury?"

Seeing his chance, the bandit interjected, "That's why you have to let me go! You're no judge, you have no law, and you have no jury. You have no power over me!"

Eddie waved an arm across the courtroom. "These people have accepted me as their judge. They will be your jury."

"But you have no law!" he repeated.

Eddie hesitated. He could not deny that the bandit had a valid point. Given the total evaporation of government in Las Vegas—not to mention Nevada and the former United States!—where could a basis be found for any law? But there *had* to be some touchstone he could use that would provide a firm foundation for conducting a court of law. *But what might that principle be?* he asked himself. Unbidden, in his mind's eye Eddie recalled the bright sunlight of a summer morning when he was ten years old. On that day, in a clearing of the woods, he had told the young Dagny what he planned to do when he grew up: to reach for the best within himself, to do whatever is right. *Whatever is right!* For him it had always been a self-evident goal, one that he had pursued all of his life; he could never understand why men would ever want to do otherwise. That commitment made by the child Eddie reached across the decades to come to his aid today in this moment of need. He nodded to himself. He knew what to do, and more importantly, he *knew* he knew. Shaking himself out of his reverie, he asserted, "The law is that you must do whatever is right."

The bandit scoffed. "Yeah, right. And what does *right* mean?"

"A fair question. Here's a fair answer: it's the Golden Rule. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you—and isn't that enough law for any man? It's all about having the right to live your own life, but also respecting the rights and property of others. "

"Bah!" the bandit cried with a flourish of his free hand. "Mere words! Bromides! High-sounding, meaningless words!"

"They're not mean—," he began, but the bandit cut him off.

"Then what rights do I—or does anyone else!—have? Tell me that!"

Eddie did not hesitate. "All right, let me spell it out for you: you have the inalienable right to live your life your way, without interference, pro—"

"Then let me out of here!" he interrupted again. "I was living my own life my own way when you guys interfered!" He shook his manacled arm in defiant demonstration of the truth of his statement.

Eddie ignored the outburst and continued as if it had not happened. "You have the right... *provided*—do you hear me?—*provided* that you respect the rights and property of others. You did not respect this woman's right to live her life her own way, even though she was respecting yours."

"Respect?" he sneered. "Don't talk to me about respect! Your entire capitalist system lacks respect! If a man has no money, your system would just let him starve! Doesn't a man's privation give him the right to take what he needs?" He gestured unconsciously toward the victim he had robbed.

Eddie shook his head. "Not if she has a right to her own life and property, too. You have a responsibility to respect that right, or else you can't expect others to respect yours." After a second, he added, "And I

would think that men are compassionate enough that they wouldn't let another man starve."

The bandit ignored the aside, and replied with mocking sarcasm. "Exactly where did I pick up this 'responsibility' to her?"

Eddie ignored his contempt and answered sincerely. "Responsibility is an integral, inseparable part of your rights. Because for every right you enjoy, you have a corresponding responsibility to respect that right in others. So, for example, you have the right to live your life—but you have the corresponding responsibility to respect her right to live her own life. You have the right to your property—but you have the corresponding responsibility to respect the property of others. Rights and responsibility are two sides of the same coin."

"And what coin is that?"

"Liberty."

For several seconds after the echoes of his word died away, not a sound could be heard.

The bandit was first to react. "So you're saying that my rights come with strings attached?"

"Not strings so much as intertwined obligations. I'd call it personal freedom tempered by personal responsibility."

"And how far does this responsibility extend?" he inquired derisively. "What limit do you place upon my rights?"

Eddie considered the question for a moment. "To use an analogy, your right to swing your fist ends where her nose begins." At a sudden thought, he corrected himself. "No, wait; that's not quite correct. Even swinging your fist at someone shows a lack of respect. It stands to reason that threats of violence cannot be considered respectful, now can they?" He stared off into space for a moment, surprised at the truth of his own words.

The bandit hesitated as well, but for different reasons. Granted, he had come here today expecting to receive an education—but not one in philosophy! What did he care about philosophy? Still, he had to grudgingly admit that what Eddie was saying made sense on some fundamental level. Regardless, he could not let it stand; he had to extricate himself from this courtroom as a free man, and he could see that he was quickly running out of options. He had walked free every time he had been in court before; he had fully expected to do so again today—except that he found the solid legal granite he stood upon was quickly turning to philosophical sand. "But I have a right!" he repeated with hollow conviction, not knowing what else to say, as if the mere repetition would make it true, while understanding fully that it wouldn't.

"I agree," Eddie replied simply. "You have a right." He pointed to the victim. "And so does she. We all do. But like I said, we also have the responsibility to respect the rights of others, lest we throw away our own rights in the process. Abdicating that responsibility is what you're essentially accused of having done."

"And that's another thing!" he cried, attempting to pull the philosophical argument back into the realm of the legal. "No one's told me exactly what crime it is I'm being accused of committing!"

Momentarily at a loss, Eddie responded uncertainly. "I thought I did." Recovering, he pointed a finger at the victim. "Yes I did. You're accused of stealing money from that woman at gunpoint. I said that."

The bandit leaned forward across the table and his voice became suavely derisive. "Yes, But what *kind* of stealing are you talking about? Larceny, burglary, robbery, or what? First, second, or third, degree? Petit or grand? Misdemeanor or felony?"

Still wearing a perplexed expression, he replied, “Does it really matter?”

“Huh? Of course it does!”

“Why is that?”

Once again, the bandit was brought up short. “Uh...”

Eddie waited him out. When it became apparent no further words were forthcoming, he picked up the thread. “I’d venture to say that part of the problem with trials in the past was that the lawyers and judges relied too much on the words rather than on the deeds. Who really cares what it’s called? Why over-classify? You’re accused of taking that woman’s property under threat of force, and that’s all that matters. You did not respect her right to her life and property. Understand?”

Silence.

Seeing again that no answer was imminent, Eddie sat up straight in his chair, and to the audience, he politely requested, “Okay, now that that’s settled, let’s proceed. Every seventh person to the jury box, please.”

“But I have a right!” the bandit repeated yet again even less convincingly than before, almost whining. No one troubled to reply, and he did not—*could* not—pursue the matter further; he had no idea in which direction he might take it. Unschooled though he was, he was more than intelligent enough to recognize the wisdom in the words of Eddie, and he could plainly see that the audience saw it, too. Stripped of any philosophical, legal, or dramatic defense, he decided it best to bide his time for the moment, and wait for other opportunities to present themselves. He subsided moodily.

Uncertainly the count-off began and gathered confidence as it progressed. In short order, four men and three women took their new seats in the jury box. The bandit grumbled inaudibly at the table in front of him, not looking up.

“Okay, let’s have the victim tell her side of it. Miss?”

At his behest, the woman stepped up to the witness stand demurely and took a seat. All eyes were upon her, and not merely because she was a newly-minted celebrity and a part of the show, but more so because she happened to be a stunningly beautiful woman. Only Eddie seemed to remain untouched and aloof. He nodded to her gravely. “All right, tell us what happened.”

“Hey!” shouted the bandit. “Objection!”

“What now?” he asked patiently.

“She has to be sworn in!”

“Why is that?”

The bandit hesitated uncertainly. He was clearly not performing at his best this morning. “Uh... So that we know she’s not lying?” He didn’t sound too certain of his own assertion.

Eddie put a palm against his cheek, leaned on his elbow, and again looked perplexed. “But... But if she were going to lie, wouldn’t she just lie about swearing to tell the truth? Either she’s honest or she’s not. It’s up to the jury to take her at her word or not.”

“Then what’s to stop *me* from lying to *you*?”

“Nothing. Was there ever anything to stop you, except yourself?”

The bandit opened his mouth as if to say something, but no words came forth. His jaw closed and he wet his lips. The statement was true.

Eddie turned to the victim. “Proceed.”

In an incongruently cheerful voice, she told her story of the evening in question exactly as it had happened, how she was walking home with the evening’s receipts in her handbag, how the bandit had approached her and

demanded the money at gunpoint, how she had complied and ran. In a minute, she was through.

“Do you have any questions for her?” Eddie asked the bandit.

“You bet I do!” The bandit stood and began to swagger around the table to approach the witness stand, but only made it as far as the length of the short chain on the manacles. Sporting a sardonic smile, the burly officer gently but insistently pulled him back to their table and into his chair; the bandit scowled at him menacingly but impotently. Regaining his poise somewhat, the bandit turned to the woman, addressing her from his seat.

“How did you catch me?”

She smiled prettily. “I didn’t,” she replied politely. “The police did.”

“How did you know I was coming?” he pressed. “You guys were all ready for me!”

“The police did it,” she replied, not the least bit put out for having to repeat herself. “They warned me you might try to rob me one night soon. And they were right!”

“How did *they* know?”

Smiling coyly, she replied, “You should probably ask them that.”

“This is a waste of time,” he grumbled. Turning to Eddie, he demanded, “I want to talk to the cops. Put the cops on the stand!”

“Have you any further questions for this woman?”

“No! Get the cops up there!”

Eddie dismissed the woman, and time stopped as she took her seat, every eye upon her. Again, only Eddie seemed above the delightful distraction.

Next he called up the policeman. With professional detachment, the man related how he had watched the entire incident from the third story bedroom of the busybody widow, how he had seen the masked bandit approach his victim, heard the demand for money, saw her throw her purse at him and run away, and how his men had stepped in and immediately apprehended the man. Finished with his tale, the policeman calmly sat there, hands folded in his lap, not offering any additional details.

Without waiting to be invited, the bandit demanded, “How come you were already there?”

“Me?” asked the policeman, a little too innocently. “You’re asking me what I was doing in a woman’s bedroom late at night?” He looked up to Eddie. “Do I have to answer that?”

Blushing, he replied. “No, of course not.” To the bandit, he advised, “Let’s stay on topic. Any other questions? Related to the trial, that is?”

The bandit felt trapped, an unusual circumstance for him. He was accustomed to being the man in command of every conceivable situation, yet he felt his grip on events loosening more and more with each passing second. “I... I...,” he began, but could not finish. He nervously glanced right and left as if seeking escape. “I...” Something suddenly snapped within him and he brought both his fists down hard on the table in front of him, the resounding slam startling everyone. “How the hell did you know I was going to rob this woman?” he yelled. Someone at the back of the courtroom emitted a long whistle. Too late did the bandit realize his error—he had just admitted his guilt. Slack-jawed, he looked around him. The faces of the jurors were hard and closed. It was all over for him, he could tell.

Getting control of himself, he sat upright and folded his arms across his chest, his face blank, the manacles’ chain pulled taut. They’d never tell him what he wanted to know, that was certain. There would be no education for him here today, no victory.

“Any other questions?”

The bandit did not reply. Arms folded, he stared straight ahead, eyes focused on nothing. The impression was that of a child pouting.

“Then we’ll proceed.”

Several other witnesses were called to testify, some of them police officers on the scene, others neighbors who had been watching from the safety of their own homes, each describing their viewpoint of the robbery.

Throughout it all, the bandit sat silent. For the first time in his nefarious career, he was at a complete loss; his mind raced, but it spun in circles; he simply could not think of any way out. There was no question he would be found guilty, irrespective of his blunt admission. He could not rely on esoteric errors of legal procedure, and he was certain he would not be able to bribe his way out; his only remaining chance was in fighting the sentencing.

The last witness completed his damning testimony, and Eddie addressed the bandit directly.

“Do you wish to call any witnesses?”

Sullen silence echoed across the room.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no.’” To the bailiff, he ordered, “Please take the jurors to the deliberation room so they can come to a verdict.”

The bandit glimpsed another procedural avenue opening up to him, and without thinking, automatically took it. He sprang to life: “Objection!”

Again caught by surprise, Eddie could only reply, “What? What now?”

With a sinking feeling, the bandit realized that procedural objections fell upon deaf ears here; he may as well have remained silent. Nevertheless, the damage had been done, so he pressed on. “You’re required to give them their instructions!”

“What instructions?” asked Eddie blankly.

The bandit snorted. “Lots of them! A big rigmarole about trying the facts and not the law. I’ve heard judges say it a thousand times!” He was interrupted by jeering laughter from the back of the room; the bandit ignored it.

Eddie was plainly confused. “Are you saying that I should try to influence the jury?”

Now it was the bandit’s turn to be confused. “Huh?”

Patiently, Eddie explained. “They are the jury. They are the ones who must decide, and I’m not going to try to influence them in any way. As I said at the beginning, I’m a referee, not a participant. They listened to everything that was said, and now it’s up to them to decide your guilt or innocence.”

“Using your ‘law?’” he sneered.

“That’s up to them, too. I can’t force my law or my opinions onto anyone. Nor should they listen to me, if I tried. That’s what makes them the jury. They can judge both the law and the facts. If they believe it’s all right for you to walk up to someone and demand money at gunpoint, then they’ll acquit you. If not, they’ll find you guilty. What is it I could possibly add to that? Or want to?”

“I...” He halted. Nothing further came out. Again, he was completely at sea. Deflated, he returned to his sullen pose.

After a respectful pause, Eddie turned to the bailiff. “Please take the jurors to the deliberation room.” He gently clacked the gavel on the surface of his desk. “We’ll recess until they decide.”

As she left, one of the jurors called out over her shoulder, “You can bet it won’t be long!”

The bandit sat up with a start, as if he were about to object to something, but thought better of it and subsided.

Standing up and stretching, Eddie commented, "In that case, I'll think we'll wait right here."

* * *

The jurors returned.

It could not have been more than three minutes; a bad sign for the bandit, to be sure. Their faces blank, the seven filed back into the jury box as the audience and Eddie reclaimed their own seats.

Once everyone had settled down, he asked, "Have you reached a verdict?"

One of the jurors stood up, the woman who had warned of a quick verdict. "Yes, Your Honor, we have."

Eddie could not help but wince at being addressed as "Your Honor," but tried not to let it show. "Well? What say you?"

"Guilty!"

The gallery sat silent. No one was surprised by either the verdict or the restrained reaction, but electric anticipation hung heavy in the air. They all knew what was coming next.

In the silence, Eddie locked eyes with the bandit. His words echoed clearly across the silent room. "You're one smart fellow, do you know that?" The bandit did not reply. "From what we've heard about how you planned out and executed your crime, and from what I saw of your defense, it's plain to me that you're more than a cut above your average crook." Still there was no reaction, so Eddie continued. "I spent a lot of time considering what sort of sentence might be appropriate if you were convicted, and until five minutes ago I still wasn't sure exactly what we should do. The idea of tossing you in jail is personally repugnant to me, not to mention the question of who pays the cost of keeping you there. Tell me: do you want to go to jail?"

The bandit remained silent at first, but then stirred in his seat. "No" was all he said.

Eddie nodded. "Then I think we can work out something that might be a little better for all of us." He sat up straight and assumed a more formal pose; the sentencing was about to begin. Many in the gallery straightened in unconscious imitation, sensing the moment of truth was at hand.

"Having been found guilty by a jury of your peers of not respecting the rights of another, I recommend the following sentence: by your actions you have demonstrated that you cannot be trusted to roam freely in our society, so I believe it appropriate that you be exiled from Las Vegas for the period of one year."

The audience murmured its surprise; it was not what they had expected to hear. The bandit did not react, and Eddie waited for silence before he continued.

"I further recommend that you spend your year confined to the vicinity of the Boulder Dam powerplant. While you are there, you will be presented with the opportunity to learn how the powerplant operates, and you shall be given the chance to apply your knowledge as a worker. If you choose to take the job, you will be paid a fair wage during your exile. But if you cause trouble, then the remainder of your year will be spent in jail here in town where you'll perform whatever menial labor is necessary to cover the cost of your board." He paused for a brief moment indicating he had finished, then added tentatively, "Okay?"

Caught off guard, the bandit gaped. "Okay?" What do you mean, okay?"

“I mean, do you accept the sentence?” he explained succinctly, knowing full well he had no authority to impose it directly. As far as he was concerned, it was up to the bandit to accept it or not. He leaned slightly forward in his chair, attentively awaiting an answer. He fervently hoped the answer would be ‘yes;’ he wasn’t entirely sure what he would do should the sentence be rejected.

The bandit did not react at first, but soon a small smile crossed his face. He had recognized the same absence of an alternative. “And what if I refuse?”

Eddie shrugged. “As I said, you’re a smart fellow. I don’t think you will.”

The bandit sat for almost a full minute quietly considering his plight. Like Eddie, he was unsure of just what might happen, should he refuse. On the other hand, if he agreed, here was an opportunity to remove himself from the path of career criminal upon which he had long ago set himself. *Perhaps I should accept?* The bandit shrugged to himself. *And why not?* If it didn’t work out, he could always return to a life of banditry. He silently reviewed his options one last time, and as the last of the minute began to die, he finally spoke: “I accept exile.” He smiled to himself, thinking, *Once again I get off without a jail term! My record is intact!*

The audience burst into spontaneous applause. Rather than the somber moment which characterized most sentencing, the mood was one of unexpected jubilation. Many of the men had feared that a milquetoast Eddie might prove to be too lenient, while others feared the inexperienced judge would overreact with an unduly heavy-handed response; but having the bandit not only removed from the company of the law-abiding citizenry for a reasonable period and also set on a path to rehabilitation allayed all such doubts. Not only had vengeance been served this day, but justice as well.

Two members of the audience, obviously friends of the accused, rushed forward and shook the bandit’s hand enthusiastically, slapping him on the back and laughing. The attractive woman who was the victim rested her two adoring eyes squarely upon Eddie, obviously pleased with the result. The jurors were shaking hands with one another, but each of them kept catching Eddie’s eye as well, giving him a brief nod of appreciation. The policeman sat alone to one side, and when his eyes met Eddie’s, he flashed him an energetic, two-fisted “thumbs up.” Similar reactions came from every corner of the room. As with the defeat of the raiders, Eddie found himself once again cast in the role of the hero.

His work here done, Eddie rose to leave. To his surprise, as he did, all conversation came to a quick, abrupt halt. All eyes were upon him now; he felt self-consciously aware of their stares as he stood alone on the dais before them. He felt it incumbent upon himself to say something profound, but he retreated instead into the trite. To the bandit, he said simply, “Welcome aboard.” Looking to the audience, he added, “This court is adjourned.”

The crowd exploded into cheers as Eddie turned and left.

CHAPTER 7 – HERE COMES THE JUDGE

The gavel cracked.

“This court will please come to order!” called the bailiff, setting the gavel aside. Without being told, a number of the men and women in the audience stood automatically, but a sizeable majority pointedly retained their seats, veterans of the bandit’s trial.

Self-consciously, Eddie stepped up to claim his seat behind the judge’s bench, but halted halfway across the room. Sometime in the week since the bandit’s trial, someone had affixed a large, wooden signboard high on the wall behind his seat. In ornate, carved capitals, it read: “YOU HAVE THE INALIENABLE RIGHT TO LIVE YOUR LIFE YOUR WAY WITHOUT INTERFERENCE, PROVIDED YOU RESPECT THE RIGHTS AND PROPERTY OF OTHERS.” At the paragraph’s foot, one carved word stood out in even larger letters: “LIBERTY.” Twice he read through the words before casting a curious glance across the assembled audience. He caught the eye of the policeman, who innocently cast his own gaze elsewhere, answering the obvious, unasked question.

“All right, let’s get started,” prompted Eddie as he finally took his seat. “What’s the issue here?”

An elderly spinster rose in response. “Your Honor, there is a travesty taking place in our town that must be brought to a halt immediately!”

All concern, Eddie leaned forward attentively. “What? What’s that?”

The spinster spit out her venomous reply. “Prostitution!” Behind her, almost filling the first three rows, a contingent of women of various ages burst into energetic applause. From behind them came the sound of tittering laughter. The spinster basked in one and ignored the other.

Prostitution? Eddie stared blankly across the sea of faces. While he would never consider consorting with a prostitute or even befriending one, similarly he could not find it in himself to condemn the man who might—or the ladies of the night themselves. In one sense, the ladies performed a service for the community by providing an outlet to those men whose needs could not otherwise be met. There was no denying they might keep a simple fellow out of jail. “What would you have me do?” he asked cautiously.

“Why, put an end to it, of course!” Again, the elderly contingent dutifully applauded.

“But...,” he began hesitantly. “But how would I be able to do that?”

“Lock them all up!” she replied with a vehemence that belied her age, a response that brought more applause—and catcalls. “Run them out of town!” she added, giving both the demonstration and counter-demonstration new life.

“But why?” he persisted.

“Because they’re prostitutes, that’s why! It’s self-evident!” More applause echoed among the laughter.

“Please!” he implored the audience. No one challenged his request; they subsided as he addressed the spinster. “I agree it’s self-evident that there are prostitutes in town—this *is* Las Vegas, after all—but what is it they’ve done wrong? Are they robbing the men who come to see them?”

“They are robbing society!” she hissed.

“How so?”

“By their very existence, that’s how!”

Eddie exhaled wearily and leaned back in his chair. *This is going to be a tough one to—* The thought came to a screeching halt. *Then again,*

maybe not! He glanced quickly at the policeman, then back to the supplicant. "Ma'am, do you notice the carved statement on the wall behind me? Read it, please, if you will."

The woman's lips twitched; she remained silent.

"Much as you or I may agree or disagree with the way certain women have chosen to run their lives, there's no denying they do respect the rights and property of others. Un—"

"But—," she attempted to interrupt, but he did not let her finish.

"—less you know of an instance where they did not show such respect, how could I justify moving against them? And if I did so anyhow, I'd be demonstrating a lack of respect for them myself!"

"Well!" she sniffed haughtily. "*I* certainly have no respect for them!"

"Does that mean you would rob them or harm them?"

"No!" she retorted instantly. "Of course not!"

"Yet you would have *me* act as your agent and drive them out of town, lock them up, or worse." He stroked his chin and mused out loud. "You know, I'm not certain we mean the same thing by the word 'respect' here. What right is it the ladies are not respecting? Whose property?"

She did not hesitate. "They're not respecting their own bodies!"

Confused, Eddie replied, "But neither do the men who smoke and drink in the gambling halls. Would you want them locked up, too?"

Again there was no hesitation. "Yes!"

Loud applause came from her supporters in the audience, and mocking jeers came from the others; both groups cut themselves off instantly at the sight of Eddie's stern glance.

Returning his attention to the spinster, he nodded in understanding. "Ma'am, unless someone is not respecting the rights and property of others, there's nothing I can justify doing."

"Well!" she snorted angrily. "I was told you were an honorable man, but now we can all see the plain truth! You're no better than the scum of the Earth you're protecting!"

"But what can I properly do?"

"Oh, nothing! Nothing!" she replied testily as she picked up her handbag in obvious preparation to leave. "A body could as soon choke to death as say a word. Oh, you *men!*" Angrily she turned her back on him and stalked off toward the door; en masse her supporters in the audience stood in sympathy and followed noisily, their numerous tongues clucking in disapproval. Their spokesman halted briefly at the courtroom door to hurl a final, indignant warning: "You're not the only one in town who can play judge, you know!"

Calmly Eddie replied, "Feel free. Just be sure to respect the rights or property of others—or perhaps we shall meet here again."

Reddening, she scarcely contained her fury as she yanked the door open and stalked out, her numerous supporters in tow.

A pregnant silence hung in the air following their departure, but Eddie only shrugged. "This court is adjourned."

* * *

The gavel cracked.

"This court will please come to order!" called the bailiff. Only a handful of men and women stood; the vast majority deliberately remained seated. They were learning.

Self-consciously, Eddie took his own seat behind the judge's bench. "All right," he started. "What's the issue here?"

“That man killed my husband!” cried a distraught woman, pointing a shaky finger at a slim, good-looking man.

“Look, lady!” protested the accused. “It was a duel, fought fair and square, and he lost big! You can ask his second!” He gestured to a man seated in the front row. “Or mine!” He waved the hand at another.

The woman was undeterred. “Duel or no duel, you killed my husband, and that’s a fact!”

“But it was *him* who challenged *me!*”

“You didn’t have to accept!” she retorted.

He drew himself up. “What, and have everyone think I’m some sort of coward?”

“Only a coward would gun down another man!”

“Bah!” he cried with a dismissive wave of the hand. “You talk some sense into her, Mr. Eddie!”

Hesitantly Eddie entered the fray. “Well, if it’s a case of murder, that’s really for a jury to decide, not me.” He turned his attention to the woman. “Is what he says true? Did your husband challenge this man?”

“I hardly see how that matters!” she snapped.

“You are correct,” he agreed solemnly. “It doesn’t. Challenged or challenger, what really matters is whether or not both men willingly entered the duel. If your husband agreed, he must have known the risk he was taking.”

“What?!” she cried. “A man was murdered! *That* is all that matters!”

He shook his head slowly. “If your husband had declined and was killed anyhow, or if he was killed by a wild shot, or if the bullet smashed a window and no one paid for the damage, then I could see how someone would have a grievance. But that’s not the case here, is it?”

Astonished by the unexpected response, the woman did not reply.

Eddie turned to the dueler. “Where was the duel held?”

“In the desert south of town, out past the old silver mine.”

Eddie nodded; he knew the place. “I’m glad to hear you weren’t shooting off guns here in town. That’s just not safe.” He turned back to the woman. “Unless I’m missing something, it appears that everyone’s rights were respected, don’t you think?”

Angry tears began to stream down the woman’s face. “So you’d let my husband’s murderer get away?”

“Pardon me if what I’m about to say seems harsh; I don’t mean it that way. But it sounds to me like this is more a case of elaborate suicide than one of murder.” He reddened slightly.

“Then I *won’t* ask you! Let’s ask a jury!”

Eddie hesitated and glanced briefly at the policeman. “The costs of this court are paid by the law enforcement unit of the Las Vegas police.” He waved a hand to the carved plaque over his shoulder. “And here is the law we enforce. But I can see no violation of—”

“Then *I* will pay for it!” she screamed. “How much do you want?” She clutched frantically at her purse and rummaged around inside it while muttering, “Where’s my wallet? I’ve been in court before. I know how justice works...”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry if I confused you; that’s not what I meant. I don’t accept any payment for my time here. I’m a volunteer. But please let me finish what I was saying. No one violated our basic law, so there is no way I can legally intervene. In fact, I would be in trouble myself if I tried. If two men agree to a duel—or agree to anything else between them!—then it’s a contract voluntarily entered. How could I interfere with a private contract? By what right? And if I did, I’d be guilty of not respecting their rights.”

“But...,” she began, but no further words came.

Eddie rose. “There are no ‘buts.’ While I do not approve of duels personally, my approval or disapproval means nothing here. Unless there was force, fraud, or some other violation of the rights or property of another, I cannot be a party to these proceedings.” With that, he turned for the door.

“Wait! Come back here, you!” she yelled to his retreating form. “You can’t leave! You’re the judge!”

Two paces away from his vacated seat, he politely turned to face her. “My apologies again if my role here is still unclear to you.” He pointed a finger again at the carved sign above his vacated seat. “That’s all I do. You’re asking me to do its opposite. It’s like you’re asking me to deliberately eat poison instead of food. But I can’t. I won’t.”

The speechless woman gaped, recovered, and finally found her tongue, and it was an angry one. “How dare you! To Hell with you! I’ll go out and find another judge! I’m sure there’s a lot of men in this town who would not look kindly upon a man who makes widows!” With that, she stomped for the door.

“Please!” he warned her retreating back, a note of genuine concern in his voice. He opened his mouth as if to say more, but no words came forth. Slowly, deliberately, he closed it instead.

Her step faltered only slightly at his admonition, yet noticeably so, but she continued her exit without a backward glance. Even though she had not seen the hesitant, open mouth, in her mind she could nevertheless hear its unstated message: *Or perhaps we shall meet here again!* She slammed the door behind her. Almost unnoticed, a distinguished, olive-skinned gentleman followed her out.

In the silence that followed, Eddie looked around the room. The faces of the audience spanned the entire spectrum of human emotion: hate, anger, malice, shock, amazement, awe, joy, pride, delight, admiration, and a host of others; everything save indifference. Many emotions appeared on the same face simultaneously, shifting seamlessly from one into another; and adding to the emotional melee, the same array of emotions were being directed by some men at the closed door, and by others at Eddie.

“Just a moment, Mr. Eddie,” interrupted the bailiff. “There’s one more case.”

“What? Oh, right. Sorry.” He reclaimed his seat on the dais, asking, “All right, what’s the next issue here?”

Two men stood, each at opposite sides of the room. One came forward, but the second gathered his belongings and headed for the door.

Bewildered, the first man called, “Hey! Just where do you think you’re going?”

The second man halted at the door; he faced Eddie, but answered his questioner. “I can see there’s no way I’ll be able to get our contract annulled. Not here, anyway.” With that, he turned and left.

A heavy silence hung over the room, until it was finally broken by Eddie. “This court is adjourned,” he said simply.

* * *

The widow was dubious.

“Let me get this straight,” she contested. “You run your own court?”

The olive-skinned man sitting on the bench next to her nodded respectfully. “Yes, madam.”

“And you’d be willing to hear my case *gratis*?”

Again he nodded. The man seemed genuinely interested in her plight. “Yes, madam. If you come to me asking for justice, you shall have it.”

After a brief pause, he added, "And it seems likely to me that your husband's murderer will be convicted."

"And sentenced?"

"And sentenced."

"But what about..." She waved a hand in an ambiguous direction. "...the other court?"

"Our sentences are compatible with those handed down by Mr. Eddie."

"Compatible?" Still dubious, her eye narrowed. "How so?"

He smiled congenially. "We practice the time-honored, religious art of shunning."

"Shunning?"

"Quite so. Those we convict are shunned by the friends of our court. That means we will not deal with convicted men, not in any capacity. It's that simple."

"But... But what good does that do?"

He held his amiable smile. "Our court has friends in many positions here in town, both high and low. Not everywhere, to be sure, but in enough places that those we convict may find their opportunities for a pleasant life... diminished, shall we say?"

"Diminished? In what way?"

"In any number of ways. They may be passed over for a job or a promotion. They might find there are some shopkeepers who are unwilling to conduct business with them. Some societies or congregations may not look favorably upon them when considering them for membership—or continuing their membership. The possibilities are literally endless."

"And you don't run afoul of..." Her hand waved again, less energetically. "Other courts?"

"The men of Las Vegas have freedom of association. That implies its opposite: the freedom not to associate." His warm smile broadened. "We have no quarrel with Mr. Eddie, nor him with us. We are quite within his law, and are quite happy to remain there. Even his police know that. We are not his competitor; we are his supporter."

She nodded; but her dubiousness remained. "And it's not going to cost me?"

"There is no cost," he assured her affably. "However..." His smile faded into one of serious concern. "Someday—and that day may never come—you may be called upon to help us to... diminish... an opportunity for some other criminal we have convicted."

"Me? 'Diminish' someone else?"

"Yes. If you wish that we hear your case, we ask that you become another friend of our court."

"Yet you want me to do nothing..." This time her hand barely twitched. "...illegal?"

The cordial smile returned. "No, madam, of course not. It's just a favor we do for you today which you might have to return sometime in the future. Freely offered, and just as freely accepted." The smile did not falter as he added, "But you should know that we will never ask a second favor once we've been refused the first, nor grant a second favor—and neither will the friends of our court." He paused meaningfully. "Do you understand?"

She did. The woman rose jerkily to her feet and clumsily tucked her purse under her arm. "I'll think about it," she lied as she quickly took her leave.

"*Bene*," he called to her retreating figure.

* * *

The gavel tapped daintily.

"This court will please come to order," the spinster croaked throatily from her seat behind the judge's bench on the dais in the courtroom, her stern gaze sweeping across the dozens of biddies who filled the first several rows in the audience. An equal number of nondescript townfolk sat in the back rows, among them, the policeman. Sitting in the chair next to him was a large, coarse man smiling broadly through an unruly beard and several missing teeth. A sizeable number of the other onlookers were familiar faces in the courtroom, many of them men with an agenda to advance, hoping to be selected to serve on a jury.

Behind the spinster's head hung the carved wooden sign, but its message was covered snugly by a fitted pink sheet. Embroidered on the surface of the fabric were ornate, pastel letters proclaiming, "Ladies Court."

"What is our first case?" she demanded in a tone usually reserved for men who refused to tip their hats.

From her second row seat a lemon-faced nun rose, her flowing black habit cloaking her in a sinister regality. In a high-pitched, nasal whine she cried out, "Las Vegas versus prostitution!" The biddies surrounding her burst into animated applause.

The spinster-judge nodded. "I see," she said. Shifting her attention to the biddy-packed room, she commanded, "You there, in the front row! The first seven of you please proceed to the jury box."

The chosen few clutched their handbags close and eagerly scurried to claim their new seats. Most all of the men in the back scowled in disgust; a sizeable fraction took their leave, many of them in a huff.

"You may proceed," the spinster instructed the nun.

The nun maneuvered out from the midst of her peers and approached the bench. "Your Honor, there is a scourge loose upon our town," she began, "A foul scourge that..." and for the next twenty minutes she railed against the institution of prostitution, its purveyors, its clientele, and the society that permitted it to continue. The tone, delivery, and repetition exhibited in her words had the makings of an appalling, sixty-page speech. In dry detail she spoke of the unrelated evils the institution theoretically engendered, and how ending the vile practice would bring a swift end to all the world's ills. "...thus we are seeking judgment against the harlots and their ilk!" she finally concluded.

Looking around, the spinster inquired formally, "Do any of the accused wish to say anything in their defense?"

A general murmur rose from the audience, and the nun toyed with the beads that hung from her waist, nervously shifting her weight first onto one foot, then the other. "Your Honor," she finally admitted. "None of the accused are here."

"And why is that?" the spinster arrogantly demanded, as if their absence were some horrible personal affront.

"They all refused to come! They were told we were offering them a chance to repent for their sins, but they refused to take it!"

"That does not matter," decreed the spinster matter-of-factly. "Their presence here is not required. They can be sentenced in absentia."

"We'll see about that!" cried a male voice. All heads turned toward the source of the defiance; it came from the coarse man sitting next to the policeman.

Offended and flaunting it, the spinster challenged, "And just who do you think you are?"

"A bouncer at one of the brothels," he immediately replied, then drew himself up proudly. "And a founding member of the Bouncer's Union!" He

hooked a thumb at the policeman sitting alongside him. "My Union's one of his competitors, but only when it comes to the business of protecting our ladies. If anyone tries any funny-business, they'll have to deal with him and me both!—and all my union buddies, too! We union brothers stick together, no matter what. That's what makes us strong!"

"Sir!" The spinster assumed an astonished air. "Are you threatening me?"

He smiled broadly, revealing fully the extent of his inadequate dentistry. "No ma'am! I'm just saying that we union buddies always stick together to protect our ladies. Just something for you to keep in mind." He crossed his hairy arms over his chest, signifying he was finished speaking.

The spinster hesitated, but recovered quickly. "Well!" she retorted indignantly. "Don't interrupt again unless you have something of substance to add!" Waiting for neither reaction nor response, she turned her attention toward the jurors. "Do the ladies of the jury have any questions?"

Stone-faced, no one replied.

"In that case, I order the jury to retire and deliberate their verdict."

The jurors did not rise; rather they looked to one another inquisitively and began to nod at each another. One of them set her jaw and stood. "Your Honor, we have already reached a verdict!"

"What is your verdict?"

"Guilty!" she cried out. Again the biddies of the audience applauded, and this time the judge and jury joined them. Abruptly the approbation ended, as if the entire proceeding had been well rehearsed—which in truth, it had.

"And what sentence do you recommend?"

"Exile!" exclaimed the juror. "Exile forever!" Again the applause echoed.

"Pardon me!" came a call from the rear of the room, his voice rising to be heard over the din. An uncertain silence descended as all heads turned to see the policeman standing at his seat. Tipping his cap back on his head with the knuckle of a bent index finger and placing his hands on his hips, he inquired innocently, "I was wondering how you ladies were planning on carrying out that sentence."

Seconds ticked away in silence.

He gestured with one hand to the hairy man seated next to him and with the other to the distinguished, olive-skinned gentleman seated in the far corner of the room. "The other courts in town all make their sentences voluntary, you know."

The reminder was not necessary. They knew.

Lips pursed, the spinster regarded the blue-suited man several seconds longer. "And so are ours, of course," she finally admitted.

He touched his fingers to his cap in recognition and sat down, a friendly, satisfied smile on his face.

She shook an angry finger at him. "But see if the decent people of this town are ever caught associating with any of those fallen ladies or those who do!" Again her cheering section cheered, again stopping in unison as if on cue.

With another light tap of the gavel, the spinster added anticlimactically, "This court is adjourned."

* * *

Government returned.

But most of the men of Las Vegas did not quite recognize that it had, especially since it was a much smaller, much simpler government—

dramatically simpler, given the absence of the abused, ritualistic legalisms and institutionalized theft that had characterized its predecessor. Consequently, for the first time in history, individual citizens could finally, personally understand the precise role that government had in running their lives, specifically: none. Government was not there either to help them nor to hinder them; it was not a cornucopia to be mined for one's personal gain or a weapon to be wielded to beat down one's opponents. Instead its mission was to strictly restrict itself to defending the rights and property of men. Granted, there were still quibbles over what constituted a "right," and honest men could always come to disagree; but regardless, the seeds of a proper government had been planted, and as the weeks passed they quickly took root and blossomed.

Popular reaction to the coalescing of Eddie's laissez-faire government varied little, with the only differentiating mark being the swiftness with which each group climbed on board. Sitting squarely at the earliest end of that spectrum were the taprooms and brothels; it was no surprise that they were among the first to sing the praises of rights versus responsibilities, and they operated their premises accordingly. In the middle of the spectrum, the common man soon came to realize that he felt himself more secure, knowing that his home was truly his castle, that none could pass his door without his leave, and that there was an unlikely agent ready to help defend that right—his new government. At the far end of the spectrum were the meddling righteous who, outnumbered though they were, continued to voice a shrill insistence that things be done their way. But the vast majority of the citizens of Las Vegas paid the moralists no mind. Men refused to countenance so intolerant a message, or trade their newfound liberty for the unreasonable whims of an unreasoning minority. Grudgingly, the moralists eventually yielded to the inevitable and were compelled to capitulate—although not quietly.

Under the steady influence of a simple, single body of law, numerous private courts and police services flourished, some providing general assistance, much as the Las Vegas police department did, while others specialized in certain aspects of prevention or enforcement, catering to specific niches of need. But, like having multiple hospitals in the same neighborhood, the men of Las Vegas were richer for it.

Still, not all was sweetness and light in town. An occasional crime still went unsolved, despite the best efforts of the various law enforcement units. An old, penniless widow had been discovered lying unconscious on her porch suffering from malnourishment; now that the social workers had all vanished, no one had noticed her plight until it had become dire. Fist fights still broke out late at night in the shadowed alleyways behind the taprooms, their sodden sands reeking of stale whiskey, vomit, and worse.

There had also been a time—once, to be exact—where an accused man had packed the audience of the courtroom with his own supporters, and against all evidence had been found innocent. Indignation at the miscarriage of justice had quickly swept the town, bringing an angry mob flocking to Eddie's doorstep. Patiently he pointed out how the outcome stemmed not from any flaw in either law or legal procedure, but rather from their own indifference toward the proceedings. What they had in Las Vegas was *self-government*, he reminded them, and that implied that they, *themselves*, must personally become involved in its administration. If other men were able to seize control of the machinery of justice, it was the citizens' own apathy which had let it happen. Chastised, the men of Las Vegas took the episode to heart, and attendance at court functions rose immediately and dramatically, and the more significant the trial, the greater

was the number of honest citizens who attended, thus ending the possibility that a second, similar miscarriage of justice might ever occur.

Justice aside, there also remained the possibility that some malicious militia might spontaneously spring from among the citizenry and attempt to take over the town by force, but the geographical remoteness of Las Vegas engendered a strong camaraderie among the populace that encouraged a vigilant cooperation, a feeling fueled by the very-real perception that they were the last remnant of civilization remaining in America. Had they tried, those brutish men who cherished brawn over brain would find no toehold in Las Vegas. The town counted itself lucky to finally be rid of such men, and would damn well not accept their return now.

Despite its scattered failings and plethora of possible pitfalls, life in Las Vegas continued to improve almost exponentially, and as time passed, the citizens of town came to associate their improved lot in life not so much with their almost invisible, minarchist government, but rather with one particular man: Eddie—everyone except Eddie, that is.

CHAPTER 8 – MONEY

Eddie's brow furrowed.

He had been busily trimming back unruly vegetables in his cafeteria garden and was getting ready to call it a night when the banker intruded, briefcase in hand. Given the late hour, there was no reason to expect any visitors, nor did Eddie usually lock the doors against the possibility. Thanks to his crime prevention and law enforcement efforts, crime in Las Vegas had become almost non-existent, so there was little need for paranoid precautions such as locks. But the lack of evil intent did not preclude a more innocent invasion of privacy, as the banker's unexpected appearance demonstrated.

"I'm sorry, I know it's late," he began without preamble, "but I was heading home and saw your lights were still on, and I needed to speak with you as soon as possible."

Setting aside his clippers, with unfeigned concern Eddie had to ask, "Why? What is it?"

The banker scratched the back of his head as if embarrassed. "Well..." He paused, clearly unsure how to proceed. "I know this is going to sound strange, but... I'm running out of money."

Eddie was perplexed. He wasn't sure he understood what the banker meant. "What? You need a loan?"

"No, no!" The banker laughed nervously. "Nothing like that!" He grew instantly somber again. "No, the problem is that there's no more money."

Eddie considered the statement, but was none the wiser. "What do you mean, no more money?"

"Just that!" replied the banker, becoming more agitated. "There's no money!" He pulled back a little, then corrected himself. "Not *no* money. Not yet. But we're running dangerously low."

"Low? Low on money?"

"On cash! We're running out of cash at the bank. Dollar bills, fives, tens, twenties. We're running out."

"Ah." While he understood the answer, he still did not grasp the significance of the banker's plight, and his continued lack of understanding reflected itself in his hesitant questioning. "Running out, you say?"

"Yes! Running out! The bank's rules call for a minimum amount of currency to be on hand at all times, and today my bank fell below that line." He set his briefcase down and gestured at it with one hand. "I just closed the books on the month, and discovered we've fallen below the required minimum."

Eddie nodded. Now he was beginning to understand.

"Ordinarily when this sort of thing happens, I just wire the main office in New York City and a couple of days later an armored car brings in what we need. But today..." He trailed off with a shrug. "There's no New York City—or anyplace else, it would seem! I'm on my own out here and I don't know what to do! You've helped solve a lot of other big problems here in town, so I figured I'd come talk to you first."

"I see," he said.

The banker literally wrung his hands. "Do you realize what will happen to me if someone comes in to make a withdrawal and I don't have the cash? Panic! That's what!" His eyes went wide, looking like some madman in a Saturday matinee. "A flood of people will be pounding on my

door wanting all their deposits! I'll have to close down! It could wipe me out!"

Eddie nodded again. As the implications sank in, his eyes widened in unconscious imitation. "And it won't stop with you! It'll—"

"You're absolutely right!" interrupted the banker in a panicked voice. "People will lose faith in the entire system! Once my doors close, they'll flock to my competitor, then suck him dry, too! He'll follow me down the drain! I don't know what the situation is with respect to his own minimum requirements, but it's certain he only has so much cash on hand himself. We're the only two banks in town, both trapped on the same sinking ship, and at some point he's sure to face the same crisis. Why, he could be balancing his own books right now and wondering how to avert the same prospect of a run on his own bank!"

Scores of questions were boiling up in Eddie mind. He opened his mouth as if to say one thing, but stopped himself. He began again: "You're right. This is serious." He glanced around the cafeteria, then back to the banker. "Why don't we go someplace more comfortable where we can sit down and figure out what to do?"

"Please!"

He led the banker out of the cafeteria and across the brightly-lit, cavernous waiting room of the Transcontinental station, their lonely footsteps echoing hollowly, then down the long, slowly-sloping tunnel that led to the train platforms. Only a few scattered overhead bulbs illuminated the dim track area against the dark night, but gleaming waves of light streamed from the windows of the *Meteor's* observation car, a fiery orange ambiance that washed over the platform with cheerful warmth. They mounted the stairs at the squared end of the car and entered.

The banker had never been aboard the *Meteor* before, and he was taken aback by the unbelievable opulence of its observation car. From stem to stern it exuded luxury, starting with the polished brass doorknob set in a finely-lacquered mahogany door at its entrance, right on through to the shiny, curving brass railing of its rear balcony. They trod upon luxurious burgundy carpeting adorned with abstract patterns resembling leafy, golden vines. Along the walls, the wainscoting was dark mahogany with intricate inlays of silver birds nesting in golden vines; the upper wall was regularly punctuated with wide, tinted windows curtained and valenced in the same burgundy-and-gold motif. Between each pair of windows protruded a brass, two-armed lighting fixture in the style of an old-fashioned gas lamp in the same leaf-and-vine theme; each arm sported a raised, translucent-orange crystalline globe with a sparkling electric light burning within. On one wall of the near end of the car, a sizeable mirror ornately framed in carved mahogany vines was hung behind a polished mahogany bar with four tall barstools of the same dark wood uniformly positioned in front. Along the opposite wall sat a similarly-ornate, glass-fronted hutch filled with sparkling crystal glassware and gleaming ivory-colored dishes; it was flanked by a small, cubical refrigerator on the near side and a low server with an empty wine rack underneath on the other. The center of the car was dominated by a round mahogany table covered by an intricately crocheted tablecloth that almost reached its diameter; at its hub sat a tall lead crystal vase containing orchids native to the region—spotted coralroot—with the long, pointed petals of its pastel purple flowers tinged with spots of burgundy, and stems of the same deep reddish-brown as the walls. Four mahogany chairs sat at the compass points of the table; centered above it was a massive brass chandelier of many globes, in the same style as the wall lamps, hanging from a vaulted ceiling that ran the entire length of the car, an arched, golden surface that reflected soft, indirect lighting. Beyond the table was a sitting

area, with a maroon, velvet-covered couch stretching along one wall and two overstuffed velvet wing-back chairs positioned along the other; a small, round table sat between them, its surface shielded by a crocheted doily of a pattern similar to that of the table's. A long, low-slung coffee table was positioned between chairs and couch, but closer to the couch, its polished surface bare. Beyond them was an expansive carpeted area running halfway to the base of a curved brass railing that was adorned with brass vines and bellied outward into space at the very end of the car; the arched ceiling bent down from above to shade it, its rounded edge aligned precisely above the curve of the railing. Midway between the sitting area and the railing, where the carpet ended, were glass-paned, folding mahogany doors that were collapsed, for the moment, against either wall, leaving the interior of the car open to the warm Nevada night. Beyond the railing he could see ruler-straight tracks disappearing to a vanishing point far out of town in the dark desert. The banker's head turned left and right as he took in the lavish magnificence, his mouth agape. The predominant thought in his mind was, *I'm jealous!* Aloud, he remarked, "This is fabulous! You live here?"

"It's my living room," he admitted. "I cook and sleep in the sleeper car next door."

"Is that car anything like this one?" he asked, the awe plain in his voice.

"Oh, no! That one is standard Transcontinental rolling stock. This one is a VIP car. I picked it up before I left San Francisco a few months back. There was a lot of fighting there, and I was worried it might get damaged. So I had them couple it to the end of the *Meteor* and brought it with me."

"Good thing you did," marveled the banker. "It's a beauty!"

"Thank you," he replied as he gestured to one of the velvet chairs. He took the other himself. "Getting back to your problem, I appreciate your confidence in my abilities, but I'm not sure there's anything I can do about currency shortages."

The banker set his briefcase on the floor, taking the indicated seat. "Well, at least we can talk it out and see if maybe we can come up with a few ideas."

"Again, I'm not so sure. Where could you possibly get more money?"

"Maybe we could print more?" the banker suggested weakly. "At least that was one idea I had."

Eddie considered it only briefly. "I'm not sure there's a printer in town who could handle that sort of a job."

The banker sighed. "You're probably right. Now that you mention it, I know for a fact there's not. And it's not just finding the printer, you'd need that special linen paper, too—and even regular paper is difficult enough to come by these days. The town newspaper went out of business almost a year ago because they couldn't get enough paper."

Eddie had known that no newspaper circulated in town, but he had not known why. "How about coins? Can you mint more?"

The banker slowly shook his head. "There's nothing to mint. There used to be a number of silver mines not too far out of town, but they all closed down. Between the taxes and regulations, they were far too expensive to run. And even if we could mint more, who would want to carry around pounds and pounds of coins all the time?"

They fell silent, thinking, and the minutes dragged by. "Checks!" the banker cried suddenly. "People can write checks!"

"Against what? There's no money!"

"Against their balances! We can use book entries to keep track of everything, and people can use their personal checks as currency."

“But there’s no money behind the balances!”

The banker dismissed his objection with the wave of a hand. “That doesn’t matter; I’ve never had a one hundred percent reserve for my demand deposits here, even though the bank did when you added up the cash in all our branch offices. Bank rules allow for a certain degree of latitude, so a book entry accounting system would be business as usual as far as everyone is concerned. If I tell a man he has money in the bank, he’ll believe me.”

This time it was Eddie who dismissed the thought. “Writing checks may stave off the current crisis for a little while, but it won’t work for very long. You’ll still reach a point where people will want cash, and that’ll trigger your panic.”

The banker sighed. “You’re right, I suppose.” He pulled at his chin pensively. “If only there were a way to convince people to accept script rather than real money, or poker chips instead of solid coins.”

“It would be a sad day for this country if that were to ever happen,” Eddie lamented solemnly.

The banker laughed dryly, a discordant counterpoint to Eddie’s serious demeanor. “As if it isn’t already a sad day for the country!” He shook his head in dismay.

Silence descended on the two men again, and lengthened into several minutes.

“You know...,” Eddie began carefully, as if the thought hadn’t quite taken shape in his own mind yet. He sat up straight, stared piercingly at the banker, and began again with confidence. “You know, there *is* a way to have enough currency to go around.”

“How? We can’t print it. We can’t mint enough of it. We can’t bring in more. Where else would you get it?”

“We already have it!” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of coins. He shook them in his palm, the motion producing the pure, clear clinking of silver coin on silver coin. “We can use these!”

The banker scrunched up his face, not understanding. “But... But that’s the problem! We don’t have enough currency, coins included!”

“No! Not currency *and* coins! Just the coins!”

The look on the banker’s face plainly revealed that he was not following.

“Look here,” commanded Eddie, holding up a quarter. “How much is this worth?”

Still confused, the banker ventured uncertainly, “A quarter?” He felt silly naming it.

“All right...” He dug into his pocket for his wallet, opened it, and produced a dollar bill. “And how much is this worth?”

Plainly still at sea, the banker ventured. “A dollar?”

“Ah! But it doesn’t have to be, does it?”

“If a dollar’s not worth a dollar, then what *is* it worth?”

“I couldn’t say for sure off the top of my head, but for the sake of argument, let’s say it’s worth ten quarters.”

“But ten quarters are worth two-fifty!”

“No! Let me say it again: it doesn’t have to be!”

The banker fidgeted irritably in his plush chair. “A quarter’s not worth a quarter, and a dollar’s not worth a dollar? What nonsense!” There was a frustrated edge to his voice.

Eddie could see that he wasn’t piercing the banker’s long-ingrained monetary prejudices, so he tried a different tack. “All right, let’s start over again. What problem are we solving here?”

“We’re running out of currency,” the banker replied immediately and impatiently.

“And why is that a problem?”

“Because we’re running out of currency!” he replied testily. “People will panic!”

“No, no! That’s not what I mean. Let me rephrase the question: *Why* do you run out of currency?”

Subsiding somewhat, the banker thought for a moment, then sighed. “In theory, it could be for any of a number of reasons: old bills wear out, people hoard them, they get lost or destroyed, the economy grows and needs more money in circulation, things like that. But in this case, the culprit is obvious: inflation! More and more dollars have been chasing fewer and fewer goods for years. I’ve needed currency infusions every couple of months ever since Directive 289-10 went into effect. And it’s been getting worse.”

Eddie shook his head patiently. “I know all that. But you’re still thinking of the physical paper—but what about money itself?”

“The money itself?” he echoed, not understanding.

“The money itself,” he agreed. “This...” He held up the dollar bill. “...is not ‘money,’ is it?” When the banker did not respond, he stretched it out stiffly, pinching it at both ends between thumb and finger. “Here, read the fine print. It says, ‘This certifies that there is on deposit in the Treasury of the United States of America one dollar in silver payable to the bearer on demand.’ In other words, this paper is a debt, isn’t it? It’s not really money at all.”

“Money is debt?” The unusual thought penetrated slowly. “I guess in some queer manner of thinking, money could be considered debt.” He paused, then asserted with more confidence, “Yes, it is. Money is debt.”

“No, no! Not the money... The *paper* is the debt! It’s a promissory note, a warehouse receipt, or whatever you want to call it, but it’s not ‘money.’ The actual money is in the Treasury of the United States—this paper even says so! And isn’t that the root of our problem? That the debt this paper represents cannot be paid off? No one can go to Washington and convert this piece of paper into a silver dollar, now can they?”

“No, of course not. Not these days.”

“So it was the United States Treasury that issued the debt, not you. But as the banker, you’re the one left holding the bag, aren’t you?”

The banker impatiently fidgeted almost pointedly and replied huffily. “What are you saying here? That I should be the one responsible for paying off that debt?”

“No! Why should you? It’s not your debt! It’s the United States Treasury’s debt. But apparently there’s no United States Treasury any longer, is there?”

Red-faced with anger, the banker repeated sternly, “Are you saying we should repudiate that debt? Not accept currency? I won’t hear of it!”

“But it’s not your debt!”

“But we must honor it!”

“You can’t! Do you have the silver to exchange for it?”

“No, of course not!”

“Then what is it you must do?” Eddie waited expectantly for the answer, but none was forthcoming. He still had not pierced the banker’s stubborn knowledge. Taking a deep breath, he decided to try again from yet another point of view. “All right. Think of it this way: if all trade was handled by barter, a currency shortage wouldn’t be a problem, would it?”

Gruffly, the banker replied, “No, of course not. You wouldn’t need currency at all.”

“If all trade was handled by silver or gold coin, currency still wouldn’t be a problem, would it?” he pressed.

The banker remained silent for a moment, his fingers drumming lightly on his cheek. He was finally starting to see a glimmer of where Eddie was leading. “No. It wouldn’t,” he replied slowly, a little more reasonably.

“In other words, we don’t so much have a currency problem.” He let the words sink in. “Unbacked debt is the real problem here, isn’t it?”

Several seconds passed. “I see,” he said finally, his gaze slowly slipping off to one side as he became lost in thought. His fingers continued to drum his cheek. “I see!” he repeated a little more firmly, staring at the carpet.

”Then the solution to this crisis is obvious, isn’t it?”

Eddie could almost hear the gears turning in the banker’s head. Presently, the drumming fingers stopped. The man understood.

Looking back up to Eddie, he warned darkly, “People will howl!”

“Some will. But most won’t, not once they understand. And they won’t panic.”

Seconds passed as gears continued to turn. “No. Not panic.” The banker nodded. “Some of them will surely get angry—especially the ones without any coins!—but the percentage of coins is probably insignificant in comparison anyway.” He chuckled, adding, “Except the casinos. They stock lots of coins.” The banker sat in silence for another moment considering, then stood up abruptly, grabbed his briefcase, and strode swiftly across the carpeted floor to take a seat on the couch. He tossed the briefcase onto the empty coffee table and popped it open. “All right, I’m with you now. I see where you’re going. But the devil will definitely be in the details of exactly *how* we’re going to pull this one off.” He rifled around inside the briefcase for a moment. “I have all the numbers right here,” he asserted, pulling out a sheaf of ledger paper. He let it plop onto the table and fanned out the pages with one hand.

Eddie could see they were filled with numbers written in a neat script of varying hand.

The banker held up a bound booklet. “I also have with me the supposed net worth of the bank as of the last annual report, but it’s a tangled mess.” He dropped it onto the table on top of the papers. “Unfortunately, it carries the cost of administering Directive 289-10, the Equalization of Opportunities Bill, and a lot of insane local Directives as well. Given our current political climate...” He swept an arm across the documents. “...it’s all junk. But the raw data is still in there somewhere, and we can use that to help us implement your scheme.”

Eddie leaned back in his chair and eyed the splayed material warily, contemplatively rubbing a temple. He could see it was going to be a long night.

* * *

The clock chimed four in the morning.

Wearily, the banker pushed himself back from the round mahogany table. The tablecloth and orchids had been set aside, and the table was instead covered with scattered papers heaped in disorderly piles, and the papers themselves covered with long columns of calculations annotated with circles and arrows, sometimes accompanied by an occasional paragraph. “That’s it, then?”

Eddie had strength enough to nod, but none he felt he could spare for speech.

“Good! Based on the numbers we have here and on our extrapolations of my competitor’s share of the town’s business, I think we have a

reasonably good estimate of how much money there is in circulation, how much of it is coins, and how much is paper money. Assuming we exchange all the paper in town for coins, we'll have to devalue the paper ninety-seven point three-three percent to make things balance out. Call it three cents on the dollar. Assuming everyone cashes in their paper currency, that should keep the net worth of the town's money supply roughly the same while completely eliminating the paper currency."

Weary though he was, Eddie marveled in wonder at the audacious gambit they were plotting. Eschewing paper currency in favor of commodity-backed barter would be a revolutionary transformation. His amazement burst to the surface. "Everything is going to change! Prices... Wages... It'll affect the whole economy!"

The banker nodded. "But at the same time it'll stay the same, too. Only the numbers will change. All we do is just multiply current values by three percent across the board, eliminate the paper bills, and retain the face value of the coins. If something cost a dollar before, it'll cost three cents afterwards. Likewise, if you're getting paid a dollar an hour for your wage, it'll drop to three cents an hour. It's all proportional." He pondered the idea for a moment, then added, "You know, we couldn't even consider doing this sort of changeover unless we were isolated from the rest of the nation." He chuckled dryly. "Count your blessings!"

Ignoring the aside, Eddie eyed him wearily. "Will the bank have enough coins to buy back all your deposits?"

"Easily! I have lots of coins in storage—prices have been so high lately that there's been a lot less demand for them, so they tend to pile up. Once we make the changeover, I'll be in a good position to lend money and still hold a one hundred percent reserve on all my demand deposits—and I'll make a pretty penny on it, too, if you'll pardon the pun."

Eddie ignored the banker's attempt at humor; he had never been a fan of puns. "How long will the changeover take?"

The banker considered the question. "If our population estimates are correct, it would take days just for people to line up at the tellers' windows and exchange their outstanding paper for coins. But there's no reason why that should slow us down. We just flip the switch whenever we're ready and buy back the outstanding paper at people's convenience. In fact I expect that the paper will continue to circulate for some time before it finally falls by the wayside. So long as the exchange rate remains relatively stable, there's no hurry. And since it'll be the bank doing the exchanging, we'll make sure the rate remains steady."

"Doesn't that mean that there'll have to be two prices for everything?"

"Yes, that's true. One price for things bought or sold with coins, another price for paper. But the three-to-one-hundred ratio will stay fixed, so it won't be so difficult to calculate. People will get used to it pretty quickly. You'll see."

"That'll be a pretty big drop in prices. Won't some things end up costing less than a penny?"

The banker fixed his gaze on Eddie. "How much is a pack of chewing gum? Or a candy bar?"

"Fifty cents at least, these days. Usually more."

"It'll be one or two cents once we're through. So where's the problem? Name something that costs less than a quarter."

Seconds passed. "I can't," he admitted.

"The lowly penny will make a comeback. Money will be worth something again." With a chuckle, he added, "And no one will need to carry around pounds and pounds of coins."

"What happens to the money in people's bank accounts?"

“Three for a hundred, the same as any paper asset. If something is not coin or commodity-backed one-for-one, its days are numbered.” He smiled. “Re-numbered, I should say!”

Again, Eddie ignored the witticism. “And the bank will keep a stockpile of coins, then, just like you’ve stockpiled paper currency?”

“Indeed. The coins are the money and the money is the coin. Fractional reserve currencies will become a thing of the past—in fact, it’ll be impossible. There’ll be no more debt as money.”

Eddie nodded. Being a banker sure made certain things much easier to accomplish. That thought triggered another: “How about your competitor? Do we need to let him know what we have planned?”

“We don’t have to, but we should. Once we make our announcement, he’ll have to toe the line. Otherwise he’ll see a run on coins as people try to sneak in under the wire using the existing one-to-one ratio. If he’s worth anything as a banker—and I’m not too sure that he is, mind you!—he’ll realize the score. So we should tell him. It’ll make our job of convincing the citizens that much easier if we can present a unified front.” The banker hesitated uneasily. “But I’m not too sure he’ll agree to help.”

Overlooking the significance of that admonition, a weary Eddie took a long, tired breath and shifted the subject. “So when do we make the changeover?”

“Soon, that’s for sure! There’s no telling when we’ll run out of paper currency, and we want the transition to be as orderly as possible. It would make things that much more difficult for everyone if a panic were to set in first. And it could get ugly. People can get pretty touchy when it comes to money, believe me!”

Eddie nodded absently; he was still only half listening to the answers. Rather, he was thinking ahead and trying to determine what the impact would be upon Transcontinental. He knew they had a good deal of cash in the station’s basement vault to fund their daily operations, and a substantial portion of that was, out of necessity, in coin. In the days when trains regularly roamed the rails of the nation, Transcontinental station agents routinely made change when travelers purchased tickets. But he had no idea how much coin was on hand today—if any.

Shaking himself out of his reverie, he repeated his question. “Pardon me, I was woolgathering. When did you say the changeover would occur?”

“Well, I guess I didn’t say.” The banker thought for a moment before replying. “We’ll need to speak with my competitor first, and that can’t be done until at least tomorrow morning—later this morning, I should say!” He hesitated, still deep in thought. “Maybe we can change over tomorrow sometime?” he ventured. He thought a moment longer, then continued. “On second thought, to keep it simple we should do it while the banks are closed. That means the earliest we can make the changeover is tomorrow night.” Nodding, he declared, “Let’s do that, then. Tomorrow night it is. What do you think?”

“Can we do it that quickly?”

“We have to. And the sooner, the better. We don’t want a panic, do we?”

Eddie considered a moment, then replied, “All right. But how do we get the news to the people? There’s no newspaper or radio, and there’s not much time.”

“Good question! Handbills? Posters? A town crier?”

The look on Eddie’s face was one of shocked concern. “You can’t just hang up posters that say, ‘We’re devaluing your money!’ We’d have to be a little more tactful than that.”

The banker nodded. "You're right. We should probably tell them in person, convene a big town meeting, explain the situation, and let them ask questions. We can hold the meeting tomorrow after the banks close, the same time we make the changeover. At sunset, let's say."

"All right. But how do we get people to show up for the meeting?"

The banker laughed. "You underestimate your own importance, sir! Trust me. All it would take would be to have your name attached to it, and most men would come. You can call it a 'critically important town meeting' or something alluring like that. But you're right, it has to be done diplomatically—and above all, it has to be kept secret until the meeting. Not a word of this to anyone except you, me, and my competitor!"

"Of course not."

* * *

The tumblers fell.

The stationmaster hauled the huge, circular vault door open, its massive bulk swinging smoothly on thick, expertly-oiled hinges. He stepped inside the confined, cubical room and flicked a light switch, revealing tall racks of large stainless steel drawers along all three walls. Eddie followed him inside and pulled open one of the drawers; it was full of neat bundles of cash.

"And you know exactly how much is here?"

"Down to the penny, Mr. Eddie, to the penny!" In demonstration of his confidence, he reached behind him without looking and pulled open another drawer; it was full of small cylinders of rolled pennies. He smiled without a glance at the pennies and bumped the drawer closed with his elbow. "Back when we still ran trains, we used the money down here to keep our cash registers stocked. These days we only use it to cover the pay rolls."

"Do you know how much of it is in coins?"

The stationmaster hesitated. "In coins? Nope, can't say. Never bothered to keep track of the coins separately. All I know is the total dollar value."

"If you didn't keep track of the value of your coins, how would you know when you needed more of them?"

He pointed to the closed penny drawer. "When a drawer started running low, we sent someone to the bank to get more. When it got too full, we sent some back. I just kept track of the difference."

Eddie opened and closed a few more drawers at random, then faced the stationmaster. "I'm going to need an accurate count of the value of all our coins as soon as you can."

"The coins? How come?"

Eddie hesitated. "I hope you won't be offended if I wait until tonight to answer that question."

The stationmaster shrugged. "I was just asking."

"Let's get back upstairs to your office. There's something else that needs to be done right away." He flipped off the light and sealed the massive door. As he followed the stationmaster to the stairs, a tall rack of complex electronic equipment caught Eddie's eye. Its broad face was studded with jeweled indicator lights, calibrated knobs, rows of toggle switches and cryptically-labeled meters. The indicator lights were all dark; the meters registered nothing.

Curious, Eddie stopped to examine the equipment. "What's this?"

The stationmaster halted, one foot on the first step. "Oh, that? It's a transmitter from the town's old commercial radio station. They stopped

broadcasting about a year ago when the owner disappeared unexpected-like. Been sitting there ever since.”

“Does it work?”

“I guess so. At least it used to, before the owner vanished. And the tower is still there, out on the western side of the rail yard.”

Eddie nodded. He had seen the tall radio tower many times, but had not given it any thought. To him it was nothing more than another seldom-noticed feature of the landscape.

“Do you know how it works?”

The stationmaster shook his head. “No, not in the sense of what all those buttons and knobs do. But I do know a couple of things. Back when they were still on the air I used to get calls to come down here and adjust the power level or turn it back on after a lightning strike would blow the breakers. Things like that. Uncomplicated things.”

“Is there a microphone for it?” he asked eagerly, realizing that this might be just the vehicle for getting word out about the town meeting.

“No, no microphone or anything else here. They had a cable from their studio that would feed the signal directly.”

“Where’s the studio?”

Again, the stationmaster shook his head. “Burned down, Mr. Eddie, same time as when the owner disappeared. Lots of people think he did it himself then skipped town. Other folks suspect foul play. But who really knows? Who is John Galt?”

Deflated, Eddie’s shoulders fell. He stared at the dark indicators and lifeless meters a moment longer, before turning to go. They ascended the steps and headed for the stationmaster’s office behind the ticket booths. Once they arrived, Eddie informed him, “I’ll need the help of you and your men to prepare a stack of posters and hang them up around town. And it needs to be done right away.”

“Posters? About what?”

Eddie handed him a scrap of paper. “Here’s what they should say. Make the letters big and dark so you can recognize them from a distance.”

The stationmaster scanned the text twice, then looked up at Eddie from under his eyebrows. “A big town meeting? Tonight? What’s this all about, Mr. Eddie?”

Again, Eddie hesitated. “If you don’t mind, we can talk about that tonight, too.”

The stationmaster gestured with the scrap of paper. “Before or after this meeting?”

Uncomfortably, not trusting himself to fabricate an answer, Eddie turned and left.

* * *

The stationmaster wondered.

The mindless activity of drawing up and hanging scores of posters around the town left the stationmaster with plenty of leftover brain power to consider what might be a possible topic for the upcoming town meeting. He was an intelligent man, but prone to a lack of initiative, a fortuitous combination which had originally secured him his lofty position as stationmaster. His superiors from the old days preferred such men; it dramatically reduced the chances of him interfering in their political scheming while allowing him to participate meaningfully—if only as their pawn. But his eyes were none the less seeing for not being self-directed, his mind none the less experienced and wise for being impassive.

He sat in his office with nothing else to do, waiting vacantly for the end of his workday still hours hence, wondering what could possibly be on the agenda for the grand gathering that evening. There was no information available to him other than what appeared on the posters, and that was sparse indeed; no one had the slightest clue what Mr. Eddie planned to talk about, least of all the stationmaster. Many was the man who had stopped him in his assignment of hanging the posters to ask what it was all about. Truthfully he had answered how he was just as much in the dark as everyone else. *Perhaps that had been Mr. Eddie's intent?* he wondered. An honest ignorance was difficult to feign; an unknown secret was impossible to spill.

The meeting was not the only mystery the stationmaster had on his mind. What could possibly have triggered Mr. Eddie's interest in the coins in the vault? Did he suspect thievery? The stationmaster and Mr. Eddie were the only people in town who knew the vault's combination, and since he knew *he* hadn't stolen any company money, it stood to reason that no one had. Besides, if there had been a theft, it would be more logical to steal those neat bundles of cash, not the heavy coins. Given that they were so much less valuable, what, then, was his interest in the coins? For not the first time that day, he shook his head ruefully. He could not figure it out.

His intuition told him that somehow the two mysteries were related. It was far too much of a coincidence that both undertakings came out of nowhere together, then needed to be completed by the same deadline—at which time Mr. Eddie promised to reveal all. The tasks were too tightly tied in time to be unrelated. *What is it about pennies that made for a "critically important town meeting,"* he pondered. Why was it important to know how many pennies were in the vault? Why not how many bills? What could be so critically important about knowing how many pennies you had, but not how many dollar bills? *Unless the coins were more valuable than the bills?* he pondered. He laughed to himself. Under what outrageous condition could metal money possibly hold more value than paper money? What could make mere pennies more valuable than real money? He almost tossed the question aside as unworthy of thought, when with a start he realized exactly what that condition was: *There's something wrong with the bills!* Without break, his mind leapt forward again. *There's a counterfeiter out there! And the big meeting tonight is to make the announcement!* He nodded to himself. It all made sense. Mr. Eddie had been working with the police quite a lot lately, and now they were working together on this problem as well. Someone was counterfeiting, for sure.

Curious, he fished his wallet from his pocket, pulled out the not-so-modest wad of cash he routinely carried with him, and examined each bill carefully. If any of them were counterfeit, he could not tell. He halted abruptly at a thought: *If I can't tell... then neither can anyone else!* Needless glancing left and right conspiratorially, he nervously secreted the stack of bills back in his wallet. He glanced at his desk clock; it was early afternoon. The banks were still open.

He pocketed his wallet and headed for the door.

* * *

Eddie tried.

After ordering the posters be put up, he had gone to pay a visit to the banker's competitor. True to the banker's prediction, his competitor took a completely different point of view of the potential crisis.

“Who, me? Running low on currency?” He sported a friendly smile that reminded Eddie of a used car salesman. “Son, I started running low months ago.”

“Don’t your bank rules require you to report it?”

The smile vanished; he eyed him warily. “What’s it to you?”

“What happens if you run out of currency?”

He shrugged. “I write IOU’s until things balance out again. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“But aren’t you risking a run on your bank by doing that?”

“Naw. If I tell people they have money in the bank, they’ll believe me.”

A passing feeling of *déjà vu* ran through Eddie, but he ignored it. “Yes, but only for so long. Shouldn’t you do something to shore up your position?”

He tilted his head back and gravely looked down his nose at Eddie. “Son,” he began disdainfully, drawing out the word. “I don’t tell you how to run your railroad. Don’t you tell me how to run my bank.”

Eddie strained to make himself understood. “But aren’t you worried about a run on your bank?”

“Worried like my goodie-two-shoes competitor, you mean?”

“Like your competitor—yes.”

He sighed. “I imagine that’s the reason for your visit. He’s finally hit the minimums, too, hasn’t he?”

“Yes.”

The man chortled. “And New York City’s not going to be able to bail him out this time, will it?”

“No.”

“I bet he’s not planning to write any IOU’s either.”

“No. We’re going to do something very different than that.”

Patiently, Eddie began to explain the course of action that they planned to follow, but he never had a chance to finish half his exposition before he was rudely interrupted.

“What?! Eliminate paper currency? What are you, son, crazy? Don’t you see that this is our golden opportunity? Uncoupling the currency from gold and silver leaves us in the driver’s seat! We’ll just print up more dollars any time we need them!”

Eddie was astonished. “But that’s inflationary!”

“Why, sure,” he replied easily, but his eyes narrowed, watching him suspiciously, as if he were wondering what motive prompted Eddie to make so explicit a statement.

“It reduces the value of everyone’s money!”

“Not immediately, it doesn’t. Every new dollar I issue is worth the same as everyone else’s dollars. But once it gets into circulation, *then* it reduces oh-so-slightly the value of everyone else’s dollars. I get the full value; everyone else pays for it.”

“But that’s theft! An insidious, invisible theft...” Inexplicably, the image of the hollowed core of an old oak tree came to mind, its splintered hulk shattered by lightning. He shook off the thought. “...but theft nonetheless!”

The man leaned back as if he had lost all further interest in the discussion. He waved a hand at Eddie in good-natured dismissal. “Go ahead and try to eliminate dollar bills. I don’t care. It won’t matter, because people won’t go for it.”

“What? Why not?”

He leaned forward intently, his eyes bright. “Haven’t you studied economics, son? It’s a well-known law that bad money drives out the good!”

It's held true all through history, and why shouldn't it hold true today? If you're going to tell people their dollars are only worth three cents, I guarantee you they won't listen to you—especially when I'm telling them their dollars are worth a hundred cents. It's basic economics!”

Eddie recalled having heard something along the same lines in his studies long ago, but he couldn't help but feel there was some flaw in the man's reasoning; yet he couldn't put his finger on it. Economics could be a tricky science at times, where a conclusion would seem to be absolutely correct when in actuality it was terribly wrong. His intuition told him that this was such a time. “So you won't join us?”

“Son, haven't you been listening? It's *you* who will be forced to join *me!* It's as undeniable as Adam Smith's invisible hand. And who are you to argue with Adam Smith?”

* * *

The teller asked, too.

The stationmaster shook his head. “No, ma'am,” he admitted. “Mr. Eddie didn't tell me anything about what he wants to talk about tonight, not a word.”

“Well, I figured you might know, seeing how you work for him.”

“Nope. I did ask, but he told me he'd tell me tonight, same time as you, and that's the God's honest truth!”

“Well, I'll be there to hear it, believe me! He's really gotten my curiosity up.” One at a time, she plopped three canvas bank bags of coins between them on the countertop and managed to push the heavy load only slightly toward him, not even clearing the teller's iron grate. “Here you are, sir, the change you requested.” Parenthetically, she added, “And most all of what we had handy. I'd have to go into our vault if you needed any more.”

“This will do just fine, thanks.”

“And please bring the bags back when you can—there aren't that many of them left.”

“I will,” he promised. Somewhat clumsily he gathered up the loot in his arms and left.

No one else had been waiting behind him in line, leaving the teller idle for the moment. She had brightened when the stationmaster had first entered the bank; she was certain he would be able to tell her all the gossip about the upcoming meeting, but his lack of hard facts was beyond disappointing. He had told her nothing; all he had wanted was silver dollars, three bags full.

The thought gave her pause. *Now that's odd... What could he want with so many?* With a start, she quickly made a mental connection. *If Mr. Eddie's stationmaster is suddenly collecting silver dollars...* She left the thought incomplete, lacking both the ability and knowledge to complete it. But she did not need either knowledge or ability; imagination proved to be more than enough.

She turned to the teller at the window next to hers. “Say, the strangest thing just happened.”

“What's that?” she asked eagerly.

“Well! Let me tell you all about it...”

* * *

“The Panic” began.

It started modestly, but gathered steam quickly. At first, it followed the pattern set by the stationmaster. After he had left the bank, the two

tellers immediately exchanged not only the cash in their purses for silver dollars but also the entire balance in their modest accounts. By mutual agreement, one teller covered the duties of the other while the first carried her heavy load home. But before the first teller returned to spell her colleague, the word was already out. When she entered the bank, over a dozen people were queued up waiting to convert their savings.

Worse yet, the questionable message of financial uncertainty morphed with each telling, becoming more grandiose by the moment, like the child's game of whispering a common phrase in someone's ear; by the time the message reached the end of the lane, it was horribly garbled. Within the hour, the dictum had transformed from "Transcontinental's stationmaster exchanged some bills for coins" to "Eddie withdrew all his money!" to "The banks have no money!" By the time the second teller had lugged her own haul home and returned to her post, the bank was mobbed. Before long the lines extended out into the street, then around the corners, left and right. Fistfights broke out as people jockeyed for position in the makeshift lines, and still the crowds grew.

When it came to banking, the term "panic" was one not lightly earned, and the word added another chevron to its infamous rank that afternoon. Less than an hour after the stationmaster had walked out of the bank, both of the town's banks were forced to close their doors. There was no more currency. Yet still the crowds grew—as did their anger. With the banks closed, they had only one destination left in mind, one outlet for their fury: Transcontinental Railroad's Las Vegas station.

* * *

The sun set.

The broad boulevard in front of the Transcontinental station was jammed with people. The size of the crowd was difficult to estimate under the fading sky and uneven lighting supplied by the widely-spaced streetlights, but a conservative estimate placed it in the thousands.

Eddie and the banker watched from inside the darkened station behind locked doors. For once, the security precaution seemed prudent. The only other barrier separating the massive gathering from the men hiding inside was a lone hitching rail, its horizontal blockade providing woefully inadequate protection. Eddie knew he couldn't wait too much longer before facing their wrath. Angry though they were, for the moment the crowd retained enough civility not to break down his doors and demand an immediate accounting. They stood not-so-patiently on their side of the rail, touchy and raw, waiting in an edgy sort of mood for Eddie and the banker to appear.

As the two men listened, they could hear the cries from the crowd growing in volume as each person raised their own voice in order to be heard above that of their neighbors, creating a positive feedback that promised to reach a deafening crescendo in a very short while. They could put off facing the crowd no longer. Eddie turned to the banker. "Are you ready?"

The banker nodded gravely. "We practiced our speeches enough. If we're not ready now, we'll never be."

Displaying a confidence he did not feel, Eddie unlocked the door, pushed it open, and stepped outside, the banker close behind. Those nearest the door jumped back in surprise, falling silent. Eerily, the silence rapidly stretched across the crowd in an expanding bubble, as if some powerful wizard had cast a spreading spell stealing their power of speech. Within seconds, the stillness reached the farthest corners of the mob, leaving only

the quietest rustle of cloth on cloth as people turned to face Eddie as he stood at the top of the station steps shielded solely by the hitching rail. But the silence only held for a few seconds before being replaced by a broad-based murmuring. Eddie could make out some of the words spoken by those closest to him.

“Look! There he is!”

“That banker fellow, too!”

“He’s got a lot of gall coming here, after what he’s done!”

“He doesn’t look very contrite!”

“And to think we trusted him!”

Eddie surveyed the sea of faces apprehensively. He stood on a square landing at the top of the three steps that led from the sidewalk up to a pair of wide glass doors that were closely flanked by tall, imposing pillars, consigning him and the banker to a narrow stage a scant two feet higher than the crowd. From his modest vantage, the faces seemed endless as they stretched out of sight. The night before, he and the banker had estimated the town held roughly five or six thousand people, and it appeared to him that almost all of the thousands had zeroed in on the station. Eddie swallowed hard and raised a hand for silence. Again, the magic bubble reached across the crowd, stilling their voices.

He lowered his arm. “Thank you all for coming here tonight...,” he began nervously, his voice shaking. Irrespective of the quality of its delivery, his speaking was enough to disturb the spell; it shattered. In a heap, a cacophony of angry words were thrown in his face from every direction.

“What did you do with my money!”

“Throw him in jail!”

“How will we eat?”

“Thief!”

This time it took his holding up both his hands in a patting motion to slowly reinstate the spell, and even then, much less effectively. The assembled multitude continued to emit a low growl, but it was uneven, shifting, and widely spread, making it more difficult for him to be heard. He took a deep breath; it would have to do.

“Thank you for coming,” he called again as loud as he could, and this time his countrymen grudgingly lent him their ears. But the low growl remained. “I ask that you please hear me out first, then I’ll answer your questions as best I can. All right?” He paused, not for effect, but rather because despite all his practice that afternoon, his mind went momentarily blank. He was no public speaker, and even if he were more practiced in the art, he had never before faced such a sea of contempt in his entire life, and its impact on his peace of mind was much more immense than he could ever have imagined. But his pause had an accidental, positive effect on the crowd; as the silence stretched out, many nodded grudgingly in quiet agreement to his unintended question, and others fell silent, giving the man his due. The growling subsided, replaced with a murmuring forbearance.

Buoyed, he recalled his opening line and leapt into the aural opening. In a loud, clear voice, he called out, “I asked you to come here tonight because our town is facing a financial crisis. We have a plan to overcome the crisis, but I’ll need your help.”

Growls swiftly rose and fell as the mob reacted to his pronouncements. His statement held both menace and promise; it left the crowd curious to hear more.

“What is the crisis?” he asked rhetorically. “The crisis is that the banks are running out of cash on hand. Since we’re—” But he wasn’t given the chance to complete his sentence. With his frank admission—he

meant to say “running low”—the noise level instantly shot up, as if someone had opened the door on a raucous party. Women wailed and angry men shouted. In their midst, others were worriedly discussing his bald revelation among themselves: it was as bad as they had feared. There was no money. They had been wiped out. They were broke; destitute. Their worst fears had been confirmed.

A full fifteen seconds passed before Eddie could even attempt to speak once more, the level of confusion was so pronounced. “Since we’re isolated...,” he began again; the crowd subsided slowly. “Since we’re isolated...,” he repeated, then waited, giving the silence a chance to spread before continuing. He did not wait for it to perfect itself.

“Since we’re isolated from the rest of the country, we can’t bring in more money from out of town, and we don’t have the ability to print more. But we do have a solution.” He paused to let his words sink in before continuing. The hubbub did not rise appreciably; they were listening now.

“We do have a solution,” he repeated firmly, “And no one will lose any money. Do you hear me?” A clamor began to rise again, but Eddie shouted over it. “No one will lose any money!” he bellowed, but the din swallowed his words. As their meaning finally took hold, a mixed bag of phrases reached his ears.

“Oh, thank God!”

“Yeah, sure!”

“Who’s he fooling?”

“How does he plan to do that!”

“Quiet! Give the man a chance!”

“Haw, haw, haw!”

“With the banks closed?”

When the clamor subsided somewhat, he loudly repeated one more time, “No one will lose any money!” The voices became subdued. He had their attention again, and their tacit approval; it was news they had wanted to hear, even if most did not yet believe him. He proceeded cautiously.

“Our plan calls for us to return to a system of sound money...” He paused to let his words sink in, and for the first time since he had begun speaking, the crowd did not react unreasonably. Somewhat lifted by their reaction, he continued with some measure of confidence. “Sound money! We will return to the sound money of silver and gold coins. That means that starting tonight, the value of the coins in your pocket will tetrigenuple!”

To a man, the silent crowd stared at him blankly. Behind him, the banker hissed, “I *told* you no one would understand!”

Eddie waved him off and tried again. “Starting tonight, the coins in your pocket will multiply in value thirty-three times over!”

The crowd buzzed again, only this time there was no menace in the sound—disbelief, incredulity, and surprise, yes; but no menace. The words had their desired effect. Eddie and the banker momentarily met each other’s glance; the message that passed between them was: *it worked!* In crafting the wording of their speech that afternoon, they had reasoned that it would be easier to sell the populace on multiplying the value of their coins rather than presenting their plan as a mammoth drop in the value of their paper script. But it amounted to the same thing mathematically, regardless of how it might be presented. Human nature was a peculiar thing, and not always pervious to logic.

The excited buzz faded, and Eddie continued. “By multiplying the value of your coins thirty-three times over, the total value of money in circulation will remain the same, but to do that successfully, only coins can circulate. Let me say that again: starting tomorrow morning, only coins will

circulate! That will let us eliminate paper money entirely. The money shortage will vanish, because we won't need paper cash any longer."

The sheer absurdity of his statement set the crowd into a riotous frenzy. Many were angry, thinking that they were being played for a fool. Others laughed, taking his words as a joke. A very few nodded their heads in understanding, but the vast majority still had no idea exactly what it was that was being proposed. If it had taken the throng a long time to quiet down before, it was dwarfed by their reaction to his outrageous scheme. Eddie held both hands up pleading for silence, but it was long in coming. Minutes passed before the crowd raggedly ran down, and even then, not completely so. Four times Eddie began to speak before he finally reclaimed their attention.

"That's the plan. Tomorrow morning when the bank opens, your paper money will be purchased at a rate of three cents for each paper dollar. To make things balance out throughout the economy, the cost of all goods and services must also be multiplied by three percent. That means that something which costs a dollar today will cost three cents tomorrow morning. If you earned one hundred dollars a day today, you'll be earning three dollars a day tomorrow."

"Says who!" a loud voice called out. Eddie recognized the butcher from the south side of town.

The banker stepped forward, placing a restraining hand lightly on Eddie's arm. "Let me answer this," he whispered, then in a loud voice, he shouted, "Says *you*, that's who!" Silence met his words. "Nobody is going to force anyone to do this. But I'm telling you tonight that *I'm* going to do it! I run my bank my way, and starting right now I'm not doing business in paper money any longer. If you want to do business with my bank, you'll do it in coin. I don't care what you do with other people." He paused, taking in the eye of the crowd. "Who among you doesn't think it's the end of the line for paper money in Las Vegas?"

"I don't!" shouted another voice. "You're not the only bank in town!" It was the banker's competitor. He pushed his way through the throng, demanding, "Step aside! Let me through! Get the hell out of my way!" He vaulted over the hitching rail and bounded up the three stairs onto the impromptu stage. He turned to face the multitude. "Let them keep their outrageous scheme!" he bellowed. "We don't want it! My bank will open tomorrow morning and your dollars are more than welcome—at a hundred cents on the dollar, too!" He waved a hand in dismissal at the two men standing at his side. "Let these commoners count their pennies. You and I will count our dollars!" The crowd burst into applause, but a sizeable minority voiced a counter-demonstration of disapproval.

Eddie held up his hands in supplication. By now the throng had learned the rules; they knew his gesture meant that he wanted to speak, and they raggedly obliged him. Once he had acquired sufficient silence, he gestured toward the newcomer and warned, "You should all know something: this man does not have enough cash to continue operating a bank, and that he hasn't had enough cash on hand for months! He has been risking your deposits. And now he's telling you he wants even more of your deposits! Yet his bank also had to close its doors today. He is out of cash. He told me so himself! I want him to tell us what's going to happen to his customers now that he's run out of cash!" He turned to face his nemesis. "Well? What will you do? How will you solve this crisis? Where will you find more cash?"

"Become my customer," he roared to the crowd, arms open wide, the used-car salesman smile on his face, "and find out!"

Scattered cheers and catcalls could be heard. It wasn't clear who was being lauded or damned.

Eddie turned to face the assembled citizenry once more. "He hasn't any cash! If you deposit your money with him, it's likely to vanish! Solid coins are the only way to protect your savings. Paper currency—"

He was interrupted by a burly man not far from the stage. "Hey! I got a question for your banker friend!" he hollered. "I took all my savings out of your bank today, thousands of dollars. What happens if I deposit it back?"

"You'll get three cents in coin for each paper dollar, same as everyone else."

Interrupting in turn, his competitor retorted, "You can deposit it in my bank, dollar for dollar!"

A woman cried out angrily, "I couldn't get my money out before you closed! What happened to it?" It wasn't clear which banker she was addressing.

"You'll get it all when I open tomorrow," the competitor cried back.

"You'll get three cents in coin for every dollar you have on deposit with me," the banker cried back.

"That's theft!" she screamed.

"But, lady! What would you have me do?" pleaded the banker. "There's not enough cash in all Las Vegas to give everyone their deposits back. That's what made this a crisis!" He pointed to the butcher. "Shall I refuse to give him any cash at all, just so you can get yours?" He pointed to the burly man. "Should I confiscate his deposit, just to give you your withdrawal? Rob Peter to pay Paul? What, then, happens to poor Peter?" He pointed at his competitor. "Come tomorrow morning, that's exactly what *he's* going to do! He's going to take your deposits and use them for someone else's withdrawal! Would you have me write IOU's—like he'll have to do!—then let you find out they're worthless once my bank fails from a lack of capital? Is that what you want? Madam, my honesty will not permit me to become a thief! The only way we can survive as a town, the only way we can keep our economy alive, is to burn all the old currency and shift to solid, safe, silver coins!"

A smattering of applause and cheers came from around the crowd. Slowly, more of the townsfolk were being won over. But there was still a long way to go.

Eddie took center stage once again. "Let me remind you that whether you took out your money today or not, it's all worth the same thing: three solid pennies per paper dollar. We're all in this together, and if we stay together, we can ride this out. I think the best way for you to understand how it will turn out is to let it run its course. As the banker says, you don't have to do this. But if you don't, I'm warning you that your paper money will soon be worthless. And if you do, your money will still be worth the same it was worth this morning, except that you won't be an easy victim to the first looter that comes blathering down the pike." Unconsciously he spread his arms, apparently gesturing to the banker's competitor who still stood at his side.

"What?!" he shrieked, the car-salesman friendliness vanishing. "Are you calling me a thief?" Without waiting for an answer, he cocked a tight fist and swung. The blow landed squarely on Eddie's jaw, and he fell to the steps unconscious. For Eddie, the night was over.

* * *

Eddie came to.

His head throbbed painfully as he lay on his bed in the sleeper car. It was dark, but there was a tight, bright circle of white light emanating from the miniature lens of a focused reading lamp mounted in the ceiling. In its umbra, out of the corner of his eye he could make out the shapely torso of a woman sitting in a chair next to him, a book open in her lap. Her shadowed face lifted up toward him as he stirred. He opened his mouth to speak, but halted the motion as soon as it began, wincing sharply from the pain in his jaw.

"The doctor said he doesn't think it's broken," she reassured him in a bright tone.

"That's good to know," he slurred through unmoving teeth. He turned his head to see who it was who spoke, but she remained only partially visible. He could distinguish the last few inches of her long, light auburn hair splayed across her ample bosom, but her face was outside the circle of illumination emitted by the reading light. As he turned to better see her face, he halted the motion almost as soon as it started; the back of his head complained with a sharp pain. He raised a hand to gingerly rub a large lump.

"But he said you might have a mild concussion from banging your head when you fell." She set her book down in her lap and flicked a switch mounted on the wall. A dim, blue night light filled the compartment, its soft cerulean radiance gently banishing the shadows. "It's a good sign that you're awake. If you hadn't woken up soon by yourself, he said I was supposed to try to wake you."

Despite the murky, alien light, he immediately recognized his nurse—it was the woman who had been the victim of the bandit. He became aware of the great, absorbed eyes that rested so lightly upon his. He turned away, muttering, "Have you any aspirin?"

"Doctor says 'no,'" she replied cheerily. "It's not good for you after you've had a concussion. That ice pack is all he'd allow."

Ice pack? She was right; his head was resting on a cold, bumpy sock filled with ice. He hadn't noticed its presence until she had mentioned it. His confusion was itself confusing, leaving him to wonder, *I don't think I banged my head that hard!—Did I?*

"I hope you don't mind, but I found the ice in the refrigerator on board your train—it's a *beautiful* train by the way!—and the sock was in there." She pointed a blue finger at a closed drawer mounted flush inside the sleeper compartment's wall. "I put a towel under the ice so that it doesn't get your pillow so wet."

"Thank you," he murmured without moving his jaw.

"I brought you some lavender, too. My grandmother always used to use lavender oil to cure headaches. And I just love lavender, don't you? The doctor said it was okay, so I put some on the sock, if you don't mind."

As with the ice, he hadn't noticed the delicate scent until she mentioned it. Perhaps he *had* banged his head harder than he thought.

"If it makes you feel any better, that mean man who punched you is cooling his heels in jail at the moment. You'll be proud to know that once he knocked you down, a dozen men stormed up the steps to defend you, and held him down until our friend the policeman arrived. Looks like you'll get another chance to play judge, Your Honor, once you're back on your feet again."

He closed his eyes. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"Oh, not long. Not even an hour. There's still an awful lot of people outside arguing about your plan—can't you hear them?" She cocked an ear, but Eddie heard nothing. "Your banker friend is still out there talking it up,

and he's convinced a lot of people. Me, I think it's a great idea. Kids'll have penny candy again! Isn't that sweet?"

He moved to sit up.

"Oh, no!" She laid a palm gently but firmly upon his chest. "Doctor's orders! You need to stay in bed, Your Honor! Anything you need, you just let me know."

"Thanks, but I'm all right. You can go home now."

"Let's not talk. You rest." She reached out and switched off the blue nightlight, strengthening the stark illumination that washed over the book on her lap while dramatically darkening the rest of the sleeper compartment. She lifted her book, and after one last glance and a half-seen, self-assured smile, pointedly resumed her reading. She was obviously done talking.

Eddie was in no mood to argue. He closed his eyes, and with the whisper of lavender drifting around him, he slept.

* * *

The economy shifted.

The morning following the crucial town meeting dawned with only a tad of confusion, but that was far outweighed by quite a bit of considered resolve. Shopkeepers were in the vanguard of Eddie's new economic order, which they embraced wholeheartedly. They knew the value of a paper dollar versus the value of the silver coins that no longer backed those dollars, and that knowledge was reflected in the prices of their wares. Existing prices remained, but only for those who chose to purchase goods with paper money; those who used coins alone were treated to the suggested one-thirty-third of a dollar price. No customers could complain, since they could use their preferred choice of money either at the existing price or at the new deep discount. It was as if two separate economies existed side by side; in short order silver and paper became like quarts and liters or miles and kilometers. People automatically understood the difference, and unconsciously acted accordingly.

Initially there were some few stubborn holdouts among the shopkeepers who continued to treat paper and metal money equally, but once word spread of their folly, customers would deliberately patronize their establishments and purchase goods in such amounts so as to maximize the amount of coins they would receive in change. Long before midmorning, the recalcitrant shopkeepers had no choice but to fall into line. It was either that or give away good money for bad—and at a steep premium, at that.

Another strong impetus driving the adoption of the silver standard was circumstantial: of the two banks that operated in Las Vegas, only one of them opened their doors that morning; the owner of the other bank remained in jail awaiting trial for assaulting Eddie. Citizens who wished to redeem their dollars for one hundred cents in coins were left with no place to go. But even had the paper banker opened his doors that morning, the outcome would have been the same for him as it was with the recalcitrant shopkeepers: choose to pursue an expensive folly or fall in line.

They fell in line.

* * *

Eddie woke.

Despite the fact that his eyes were still closed, he knew breakfast had arrived. He squinted against the bright, late-morning sunshine angling steeply through the window of his sleeper car, and with trouble he focused

on the shapely feminine form standing in the doorway. But vision was not needed to know she had brought along a piping hot omelet; the aroma was extraordinary. He rubbed his eyes and his vision cleared sufficiently to discern that she held a tray with two tall iced tumblers full of grapefruit juice and two plates graced not only with an aromatic heaping of egg, but also a fluffy muffin smothered in steaming sausage gravy.

“Good morning, Your Honor,” she beamed. “Feel like some breakfast?”

He lifted himself up on one elbow. “You’ve been here all night?”

“Well,” she replied smiling, “I’m used to staying up late because of work. And someone had to keep waking you every couple of hours to make sure you didn’t die or something.” She rolled her eyes playfully. “I slept in the compartment next door and used your alarm clock. I thought you wouldn’t mind.”

He nodded. He remembered being repeatedly woken, if not the waker.

She balanced the tray expertly on one hand while using the other to fold down the collapsible table from its recess in the wall, then set the tray upon it. “Mind if I join you?” she asked as she sat down uninvited in the chair she had occupied the night before.

“Please,” he finally mustered.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I made only soft food for you. I was worried your jaw might still be sore. How do you feel?”

Experimentally he sat up in bed and jiggled his jaw, but noticed no untoward effects. “Me? I feel fine.”

“Good! Let’s eat.” She cautiously relocated the tray with their breakfasts onto his lap, then transferred her own plate, silverware, and glass from it back to the table.

After the second bite, Eddie paused; the omelet was excellent. She was obviously a skilled cook. He dug in with relish. It did not take long for the nourishment to reinvigorate his thought processes, bringing the details of the night before back into sharp focus. He sat up straight, dangerously unbalancing the tray on his lap. “What time is it?”

“Almost eleven.”

“What’s happening with the money?”

She set her fork down with feigned irritation. “Well, I haven’t heard any gunshots, so I assume things must be going smoothly.” She smiled, then added, “Don’t worry. I’ve already talked with several people, and they all say it’s going well. I’d suggest you get out there and talk with people yourself. The doctor said it’s okay for you to be out and about, if you take it easy. But no horseback riding or anything rough for a couple of days, he said.”

“But it’s working?”

“It’s working. As you knew it would.” She smiled proudly, as if his achievement somehow reflected well upon her. “Now eat your breakfast before it gets cold.”

They ate in silence, and when they had finished, she gathered up the dishes. “I’ll take care of these and be on my way to work. But I’ll stop in on you tonight after I get off, and see how you’re doing. I get out of work late, you may recall, so don’t hold dinner for me.”

“Thanks, but I don’t think it’ll be necessary for you to bother.”

“Oh, it’s no bother! I work just up the street from here, so it’ll be no problem to stop by. Besides...” She shook a playful finger at him. “I told the doctor I’d keep my eye on you!”

Two seconds passed. “I see,” he said.

“And remember! Take it easy today, Your Honor. No big speeches!” With a small wave, she was gone.

Once she had left, with needless surreptitiousness Eddie snuck a glance under his blanket; except for an absence of shoes he was still dressed. He tossed back the covers and sat on the edge of the bed, sizing himself up physically. His head did not swim, nor did he feel the slightest bit weak. He rubbed the back of his skull gently; the lump remained, but not quite so tender or as large as the night before. He put on his shoes, left the sleeper car, and headed for the station's front door. Outside it was a typical morning in Las Vegas: hot, dry, and clear, but with a brisk wind blowing from the west. There was the usual amount of foot and horse traffic on the street; it did not appear that anything had overtly changed.

"Good morning, Mr. Eddie," a strange woman offered, a broad smile on her face. He nodded once in return.

"Morning, Eddie," an unknown man called from atop his horse with the tip of his hat. "Glad to see you're up and about. Feeling all right?"

"I'm fine, thanks," he responded. *What a difference a day makes!* he marveled. Their pleasant reactions laid to rest any initial doubts he may have had about their acceptance of his economic reforms. But he had to dig under the façade to make sure.

He entered the butcher shop to the sound of the tinkling bell affixed to the door, but before he could begin to close it, an unseen, angry voice called out, "No! I won't change a dollar! Go away!" A head popped up from behind the counter. "Oh, it's you! Come on in! Quick, close the door—the wind's making it dusty outside today. How are you feeling?"

"No permanent damage," he conceded. "I was more interested in how *you* were doing!"

"You mean the money thing? Of course you do!" He put his hands on his hips. "Let me tell you something: there are a lot of men wandering the streets looking for people to change a dollar for them." He barked a short laugh. "Flim flams, looking for a quick buck. Well, they won't get it here! And let me tell you another thing: they won't get it anywhere! Everyone who's come into my store already knows the score. Some of them pay with bills, some with coins, but no one makes a fuss. Excepting them scam artists, that is."

Eddie examined the contents of the refrigerated meat case through its angled front glass trimmed in gleaming chromium. Numerous cuts of meat were arrayed inside, each sporting skewers announcing two prices, one thirty-three-times higher than the other. He nodded in understanding. Looking up at the butcher, he instructed, "Since I'm here, I'll take that fat steak there."

"Sure thing!" He extracted the indicated slab of meat, weighed it, and wrapped it in brown paper. "That's one fine cut you picked there," he complimented. "Got something special going on tonight? Celebrating or something?"

"Not particularly."

"You should."

"Why? What's to celebrate?"

The butcher looked Eddie squarely in the eye, a mocking, sarcastic expression on his face. "Be that way," he retorted enigmatically. He set the wrapped victual on the countertop. "Will that be cash or coin?"

"Cash."

The butcher sighed. "You and everyone else! Seems everyone wants to get rid of their paper money pronto. But so what? Me, I'll just take it to the bank and turn it into silver. No sense holding onto bad money."

"I agree." He headed for the door and nodded on his way out. "Be seeing you."

"And you."

Eddie stopped in several other establishments on his walk back to the Transcontinental station, sometimes to make purchases, but mostly just to talk; he found all their stories to be similar to the butcher's. The revaluation of the currency had apparently gone over smoothly, but there was still one important place to check.

"It's working!" the banker announced when Eddie entered the bank. "There have been a few innocents wandering in here looking for too much change for a dollar, but other than that, it's gone off without a hitch. I've talked to many of my customers, and almost all of them are behind it one hundred percent. In fact, most people coming in today are here only to exchange their bills for coins." He frowned fleetingly. "I'm thinking we may have erred in setting the price at three cents on the dollar. Given the level of demand, I believe we could have gotten away with two. And soon, we will."

"You're the expert," he replied deferentially. "Just don't push it too hard or too fast."

"No, of course not." He let out a deep breath. "So that's it, then. We did it!"

"Yes we did," he agreed. "But there's still one question left hanging."

"What's that?"

"The Panic'. How did word get out? I didn't tell anyone."

"Neither did I."

The silence between them stretched itself out. Neither man noticed the two tellers exchanging worried glances from behind their respective windows.

"Then how *did* word get out?" Eddie repeated.

The banker thought for a moment, then replied, "My competitor?"

"I think not! He was pretty convinced that we were going to fail. Besides, a panic wouldn't be in his interest. It would hurt him as much as it would you. Even more so, given his low cash reserves. He knew that. He wouldn't risk it."

"Then who?"

Silence.

Eddie sighed. "Well, let's not worry about it right now. We're over that hump, so it's not that important for the moment. But I imagine we'll find out eventually." He gestured with a bundle wrapped in brown paper. "If you'll excuse me, I need to get this home and into the refrigerator. We'll talk again soon."

Despite the needs of his provisions, he did not head directly home; he still had to pursue his last and largest concern. He walked the several blocks to the city jail.

"Good morning!" the policeman called cheerfully when he recognized his visitor, the relief plain in his voice. "No serious injuries, I take it?"

"Just a bit of a bump on the head, but I expect I'll live," he replied with a weak attempt at humor. "Where's our friend?"

"Downstairs in his cell, where he belongs."

"I want to see him."

The policeman eyed him curiously. "All right." He stood, retrieved the keys from their nail, and led the way downstairs. They found the pugilistic banker sitting on his cot idly staring at the floor, elbows on his legs, and hands folded between his knees, the perfect picture of a pitiful prisoner.

He rose at their approach. "So, the condemned man has a visitor, has he?" When neither man took the gambit, he continued contemptuously, "Or is it time for my impartial trial, Your Honor?"

Eddie's expression did not change. "There will be no trial."

The banker's eyebrows shot up in mock surprise. "What, you're just going to have me shot?"

Eddie turned to the policeman. "Let him out."

"What?!"

"Let him out. I don't want to press any charges."

Warily, the policeman swayed slightly where he was standing. "You sure?"

"Yes. Let him go."

"If you say so..." Slowly, almost theatrically, the policeman stepped forward, unlocked the cell, and swung the barred door wide.

The former prisoner did not move to leave the cell. "What's the deal, son?"

"No deal," he replied in a deadpan voice. "You're free to go. But before you re-open your bank, I'd suggest you stop by and talk to some of the merchants."

"It's working?" His voice dripped disdain.

"It's working," he replied, not deigning to notice the pointedly negative attitude. "I heard that there were a few shops that were making change dollar-for-dollar when they first opened up this morning, but not now. It's over. You won't be able to inflate your way to wealth." To the policeman, he asserted, "He's no threat any longer."

"If you say so!"

The banker's aloofness began to crack. "But... But what about Adam Smith? The invisible hand?"

Eddie shrugged. "It would appear that one of Mr. Smith's basic premises doesn't hold true."

"What? You must be joking! It's a law of economics!"

Again, Eddie shrugged. "I'm no economist, but it appears to me that given their own choice, people prefer to receive the best money available and give away the worst, not the other way around as you would have it. My guess is that in the absence of someone imposing a set value on their money, men will decide for themselves how much a given currency is actually worth, and they act accordingly. It's still the invisible hand, only it's setting the value of the currency rather than what that currency can buy."

Uncertainly, the former prisoner looked from one man to the other, and without another word angrily shouldered past them and bounded up the steps.

The policeman watched him leave, then turned to Eddie. "I hope you know what you're doing!"

He sighed. "Me, too."

* * *

The stationmaster fretted.

He found it out of place that he should fret. He had just made the most profitable investment of his entire life, and ironically he had done it for all the wrong reasons. He felt he should be proud of his cunning, how he had predicted the future of Las Vegas from such slim information, gambled, and won. Instead, he felt somehow haunted. He knew that eventually the story of how he had swapped paper dollars for silver dollars would come out, but that was not what worried him. That he was personally responsible for The Panic was beyond a doubt, and all it would take would be for someone to connect the dots before he would be called on the carpet for his foolishness. He fretted over the reaction of the mob once they found out. He had witnessed their wrath firsthand the night before, and he knew he did not

want to face it himself. He wished it were years later so that it would all be over and far behind him.

In the old days when the trains still plied the rails of the nation, he often fretted as he did now. Back then, the men of the Unificating Board held a great, unchecked power over the continued employment—and subsequently the lives—of every man, woman, and child, both the high and mighty and the lowliest laborer, and at any possible moment his comfortable position as stationmaster could become history. But once Mr. Eddie had come on the scene, those fretful days had come to an end. It was pleasant to work with an honest man for a change.

An honest man! The thought brought another bout of fear welling up within his knotted stomach. That he had somehow betrayed Mr. Eddie was obvious—not that he was any saint himself; the role of stationmaster had always held its opportunities for questionable perks and petty graft, and he had not been immune to their allure. In past years he had earned what amounted to a second salary by providing tickets to trains that were already full, or diverting railroad property to other, more personal uses. When motorized vehicles still roamed the highways he had collected a nice honorarium from tapping the forgotten tank cars full of diesel fuel. Siphoning off a few dozen gallons a week from a twenty-thousand-gallon tank car could continue for years before the level dropped to empty; not that anyone would notice or care. But with the disappearance of mechanized transportation he was forced to halt even that undetectable larceny. One or two working trucks in a stilled, fuel-less city would trigger too many questions.

The stationmaster tried valiantly to rationalize his actions at the bank. Tank cars aside, had he really done anything wrong? Since Mr. Eddie hadn't taken him into his confidence, there was really no confidence to betray. And the conclusion he had painfully teased out of less-than-meager information was plainly incorrect in any case, even though it may have been correct on another level. He had not intended to cause The Panic; his motives were pure. In retrospect, perhaps he should have swapped his currency for some of the coins stored safely in the terminal's vault; the intrinsic secrecy of the transaction would have shielded him from the public scrutiny he now feared. But what was there to fear? He had only attempted to protect himself from the possible effects of counterfeit money. Whether the coins originated from the bank's vault or the terminal's vault was of no matter; he had merely sought to cover his own assets, and had succeeded. The others be damned.

The stationmaster shrugged. There was no sense losing any sleep over the morality of his plight. Morality aside, he knew he was innocent. Besides, it was up to them to catch him; he'd save his worries for the day they did, if and when.

Confidently setting moral concerns behind him once and for all, for the fourth time that day he gleefully counted out each and every one of the silver dollars he had had the forethought to acquire.

* * *

It was late.

Ignoring the hour and the advice of the doctor, Eddie was busily cleaning up around the cafeteria. Despite his best efforts, dirt somehow managed to escape from the garden's beds to lightly dust the floor of the cafeteria. Once there, it ended up getting tracked all over the station. Although he usually delegated cleanup chores to a Transcontinental employee, the cafeteria was off-limits to them. He could never consider

ordering any of them to take a role in maintaining his garden. Somehow, it didn't seem proper tasking Transcontinental Railroad to look after his personal endeavors.

He heard the front door to the station open and close. "Hello!" a woman's echoing voice sang out musically. "Hello! I'm back!"

"In here," he called.

She entered the cafeteria, saw the broom in his hand and immediately donned a stern look of concern, hands on her broad hips. "Didn't I tell you the doctor said to take it easy?"

"Sweeping *is* easy," he countered.

"You shouldn't be taking the chance!"

"All right," he conceded, holding the broom off to one side. "I was only keeping myself busy until you got back. Otherwise I might have fallen asleep."

"And I would have just woken you up, like last night." She shook a playful finger at him. "And there's no hiding, because now I know where you sleep!"

"I see," he said, reddening.

Her mockingly stern visage softened. "I'm sorry it took me this long to get here, but I had to work late."

"Have you eaten?"

"Not dinner, no. I was going to grab something when I got home."

"I picked up a nice steak when I was out today. We can cook that, if you like." He paused, embarrassed. "I wanted to do something to thank you for helping me out last night."

Her eyes shone. "How sweet! I'd love to stay for dinner!" Her face darkened again. "But you're not allowed to cook! You still have to take it easy. Doctor's orders. Tell you what, though: I'll let you watch."

"All right," he surrendered. "You're a much better cook than I am anyhow. That breakfast this morning was superb!"

"Why thank you, Your Honor. I'll have you know I was trained as a gourmet chef in New York City and did my apprenticeship in the People's State of France." She grabbed the broom from his hand possessively and headed for the cafeteria door. "I'm sure I could teach you a trick or two, if you'd like."

"All right," he replied, following in her wake.

For the next half-hour, they busied themselves with preparations for their late meal. She relaxed her nursing orders enough to let him prepare a salad while she broiled the steak in the compact electric oven he had installed in the sleeper car. Before long they sat down at the round mahogany table in the observation car to enjoy the fruit of their labors, and the results were scrumptious.

"All we're missing is a nice red wine," she lamented. "And I mean wine made from real grapes, not one of those horrible fruit wines everybody serves these days."

The lack of variety did not make much difference to Eddie; as a rule, he did not drink.

Small talk punctuated their meal; and no surprise, the main topic on Eddie's mind was the local economy. "I must have spoken with dozens of people today about the changeover," he explained. "And every one of them was pretty happy with it. It went over much smoother than I would have expected."

"I heard almost all good things about it at work, too." She giggled. "But some people still need to change their thinking when it comes to tipping, though."

"What? What do you mean?"

“Well, a dollar bill isn’t worth what it used to be, right? But some men keep tipping with them as if they were still worth the trouble of picking up off the street. It’d take at least a hundred dollar bill just to get my attention these days.”

“I imagine it will be some time before people get a better feel for it,” he admitted.

She sighed. “I, for one, can’t wait.”

He sat in thought for a moment. “You get tipped? You know, I don’t know what it is you do for a living. The subject never came up when we were out to catch the bandit. All I know is that you work late.”

“Oh,” she replied demurely. “I’m a courtesan at the honky-tonk a block west of here.”

Ten full seconds passed in absolute silence. “I see,” he finally said.

“I also dance on Fridays and Saturdays,” she picked up, not countenancing his hesitation. “Or anytime really, if someone tips me enough, and I’m in the mood. But I usually am. You ought to catch my act sometime. I really enjoy dancing—always have, even when I was a little girl.” She smiled at the thought, but suddenly bristled in a mock anger; it appeared as if she didn’t have the capacity for actual anger. “That’s just what I was talking about. Some people still think a five-dollar tip is enough to get me dancing, but let me tell you: five dollars won’t get you nearly as far as it used to!”

Eddie face colored. “I see,” he repeated.

She shrugged, again not reacting to his discomfiture. “Oh, well. You warned us there would have to be a period of adjustment. I’m sure it’ll all settle out soon enough—just like it did after you started your court.” An amused smile crossed her face. “Speaking of which, I got another letter from the Ladies’ Auxiliary today. It seems I’ve been exiled again—the second time this month!” She giggled. “I guess once wasn’t enough for them.” She reached out to momentarily touch his hand. “I’m *so* glad you made it voluntary to accept a court’s sentence. Otherwise I might find myself sleeping with strangers in Boulder City.”

“I see.” The color deepened.

She rose with an air of finality. “And speaking of sleep, I should be on my way. I didn’t get a good night’s sleep last night, and it’s been a long day today. No! Don’t get up!” She leaned over and gave Eddie a quick peck on the cheek. Her long auburn hair tumbled off her shoulder and brushed lightly across his face, instantly imbuing his awareness with her subtle fragrance. “Let me put these dishes in the sink, then I’ll find my own way out. Thank you for the dinner, Your Honor, and I’m glad to see you’re doing so well. I’ll stop by tomorrow and finish cleaning up.”

“That won’t be necessary.” He reddened even more.

“Oh, it’s my pleasure,” she reminded him, once more not taking overt notice to his unease. With a final small wave, she left.

Eddie sat for a long time before finally retiring to his compartment, the delicate scent of lavender following him all the way.

* * *

Las Vegas changed.

Along with the arrival of the new economy came several unexpected ramifications, and the first revealed itself almost immediately: whenever a paper dollar purchase totaled to some fraction of a dollar, of course coins would no longer be given in change; instead, the price would be rounded up to the next nearest whole dollar amount, and change be damned. Fortunately this did not prove problematic; hardly any commodities were

worth less than a paper dollar, and for those few that were, they became bundled in packages of two, three, or whatever was appropriate. In terms of respect, the dollar bill quickly became the penny of paper money.

Another unexpected fallout that developed over the course of the first week, one that quickly rendered rounding moot, was a new, undeniable pressure of an invisible hand on the prices of certain commodities. Since the days of Directive 289-10, the cost of virtually all goods had been fixed by public policy, not by market forces; but with their unleashing from both law and tradition, prices quickly rearranged themselves to settle each to their own proper level. Not only did this settling occur for commodities, it also affected the old paper dollar—now a commodity itself—which dropped in value to two cents within as many days, then to a penny within the week. It remained at that level for another week, then dropped to an ignominious two dollars to the penny. In an odd turnabout, paper dollars began to be used for making change of a copper penny, and, having broken the crucial level of one-to-one parity, its value deteriorated steadily over the course of the month until it finally settled at an even five dollars to the penny, a mere two mills each. There it sat, the almighty dollar, a shadow of its former glory, and a monument to the folly of fiat currency.

The upward revaluation of silver coins triggered yet another unexpected result: more than a few entrepreneurs discovered it was again profitable to operate some of the nearby silver mines; the silver in the ground was now worth quite a bit more than the effort required to extract and refine it, triggering a boom in the mining market. Within weeks, newly-minted silver dollars began to circulate. At first the coins were featureless disks, but—to Eddie's acute embarrassment—one of the silver miners began minting a silver dollar with a fair likeness of Eddie's face embossed upon one side, and a Diesel engine on the other, with the motto, *In Eddie We Trust* above his profile, and *Las Vegas* beneath. In jest, the miner christened the coin a "willie," and unsurprisingly the colloquial slang stuck, and soon replaced the old word completely. In common usage, *dollar* was reserved for paper; *willies* were always silver, regardless of whose countenance happened to grace a particular coin.

Along with prosperity, hobbies and other simple pleasures made a comeback, and Eddie decided he'd try his hand at an unusual one—for a very personal reason. Recalling the abandoned radio transmitter in the basement of the Transcontinental station, he decided he would try to bring it back to life. But he fretted over how to keep the equipment in repair. To the best of his knowledge, aside from the stationmaster's minimal empirical experience with the transmitter and the Dam technician's general knowledge of electricity, none of the town's residents possessed any detailed technical expertise with regards to either radio or television. He was acutely aware that all it would take would be one major failure of his equipment and he would be off the air for good. So his plan was to severely limit the amount of time that he kept the transmitter active in hopes of extending its life.

While equipment malfunctions were merely a potential problem, locating a phonograph was an actual one. Despite the variety of shops in town, there were few that sold electric appliances—virtually all second-hand, there being no factories to manufacture new ones—and none of the stores had any phonographs for sale. Undeterred, a driven Eddie pursued an alternative solution: he began a house-by-house search of the many vacant homes in Las Vegas to seek one out.

When he entered the first house, his heart sank; the place had been ransacked. In room after room, clothes, trash, and unrecognizable debris lay in tumbled heaps on the floor. The scene was much the same in the next

several vacant homes he visited, but soon he began to find evidence of the existence of what he sought: one house possessed a meager collection of popular recordings which no one had thought worth removing from their dusty shelf. Eddie left them undisturbed as well, but it raised his hopes that he might find his phonograph, and perhaps more. Sure enough, the next home yielded a battered, but serviceable model, and his spirits rose further. It took some time, but before long his quest proved more than successful: not only did he locate several working phonographs of varying quality, he also found something just as precious: several large caches of recorded music. And not merely music; a good number of the recordings were classical symphonies and concertos, precisely the type of music he was seeking. He felt no guilt in rummaging through the abandoned homes; it was better that the music be heard rather than have it lying around ownerless collecting dust, especially given the goal he had in mind.

With the help of the Dam technician, he assembled a crude radio studio in the empty mail car of the *Meteor*, running a shielded copper wire from there to the transmitter in the station's basement. To assure pinpoint precision in the scheduling of his radio show, he purchased a vintage railroad pocket watch from a curio shop, then commissioned the town jeweler to clean and calibrate the timepiece; the man guaranteed its accuracy to within seconds each year, an exactitude that appealed to the railroadman in Eddie.

With everything finally in place, he put his station on the air for the pleasure of Las Vegas and the silent world beyond. For one solid hour he played songs that he knew to be among Dagny's favorites, beginning his broadcast at precisely nine o'clock each night except for those occasional evenings where business or social engagements would pre-empt his time.

The broadcasts represented a bittersweet joy in his life. As he prepared to spin his discs, he would imagine Dagny eagerly tuning in to hear them. In his mind's eye he would picture her smiling face as she listened to the songs he would choose for her pleasure, and the look of little-girl serenity on her face as they lulled her to sleep.

In his heart, he hoped that she heard them; but in his mind he knew she must be dead. With the catastrophic end of civilization in America, it seemed ludicrous to think that she alone could have survived whatever disaster had befallen New York City when apparently no one else had.

But still he serenaded her most every night, broadcasting from his makeshift studio in the mail car of the last *Meteor* she had ordered dispatched out onto the road. It was his musical gift to her, a memorial to her memory, from ocean to ocean forever.

CHAPTER 9 – CRAWL BACK UNDER MY STONE

The crook cowered.

The unfortunate man had little choice but to hide himself. The day had been pure hell for him, a damnation that had started early and continued to accelerate with each passing hour. Hence, he hid; he *had* to hide!

As with most damnations, his had sprouted from a combination of great pride and righteous determination. Standing in front of the Las Vegas jury that had just convicted him of theft, he flatly rejected the sentence of three months' exile they had decreed as his punishment. "I do not recognize this court's right to try me!" he had cried defiantly. If they needed his sanction to make the proceedings legal, he was not going to give it. "Go ahead and plaster my face around town on your 'exiled' posters; I will not help you pretend that you are administering justice!" he asserted brazenly. "I will have no part of it!" His brave words earned him the admiration of his criminal peers; and when he stalked out of the courtroom unmolested, they slapped him on the back and pumped his hand energetically. By now, everyone in town had heard how you need not accept the sentence of the jury, but in the months since the new brand of trials had begun, none had chosen to stand against their verdict—until today. The crook was riding high on top of his thieves' world as a man in sole control of his fate. Standing in the mid-morning sun in front of the courthouse, he snapped his fingers at the building in criminal contempt, to a backdrop of his contemporaries' raucous applause. *He* sure showed *them*!

But the initial glow of triumph did not last long. The first crack in his newfound renown arrived only a few hours later, innocently enough, on the wings of humor during lunch at the honky-tonk near the Transcontinental station. As he sat with his co-workers and related the proud tale of the morning's trial over a fat mug of foamy, yellow ale, on a whim one of his companions took on a mischievous grin and reached out to snatch the mug from in front of the unsuspecting crook.

"Hey!" the crook cried. "That was *my* beer!"

His friend laughed into the pilfered beer as he sipped it, spraying white foam across the tabletop. "You're right! *It was* your beer!" With that, he downed the drink in a single, gulping swig.

"Why, you—," the crook began, but his companions only laughed.

"Go tell it to the jury!" the friend jabbed as he wiped off his chin. "If they'll even bother to listen to you!"

The others at the table laughed in unison at the joke being played on the unfortunate crook; they knew for a fact the man could never call on the jury to defend his rights ever again. So the victimized crook found himself reluctantly joining in the laughter; and for the first time that day, he found he had little other choice.

"Just having a little fun," asserted his friend. "Hey, let me buy you another." He signaled to the lovely barmaid, and she brought the crook a fresh mug. But no sooner than the beverage hit the table when another man snatched it up before the thirsty crook could even begin to reach for it.

"Hey!" he cried again.

"Tell it to the jury!" the man echoed. Sipping noisily, in a single, fluid motion he rose and spun away from the table to escape with his booty.

The results were similar with the third, fourth, and fifth beers the hapless crook attempted to order. The joke had rapidly worn thin, and the crook was forced to retreat in anger from the table to take a seat at the bar. Moodily he claimed an empty stool and ordered yet another beer. The

beverage arrived swiftly, and he slid a large silver coin across the surface of the bar in payment; the proprietor smiled, pocketed the gleaming disc, and walked away.

“Hey!” the crook called to the retreating man. “Where’s my change, buddy? That was a willie, you know!”

“What change?” the proprietor inquired innocently, brazenly holding his gaze.

The tableau held for several seconds before the crook realized he was being had yet again, and worse yet, that he was again left without recourse. Stymied, he angrily dashed the contents of the mug into the proprietor’s face and stormed away, heading for the door. But in his anger he did not notice the foot that unexpectedly shot out in front of his, and with a squawk he tumbled over it to fall hard onto the wooden floor. The patrons laughed, and several heckled the unfortunate crook as he clambered to his feet and continued his interrupted retreat, red-faced with impotent anger. He slammed the swinging doors wide and fled the scene, once again being left with no other choice.

The end of the afternoon found him progressing further down the road to damnation: when his employer paid him his day’s wage, it was only half the amount that was due him.

“Where’s the rest of my money?” he demanded.

“You spent the whole morning in court. You’re lucky you’re getting that much!”

“But the trial lasted less than an hour, and I was on the job before ten!” he protested. “I deserve more than a half day’s pay!”

“Go cry to the jury,” suggested the cheating employer. “If they’ll listen, that is!” He knew they wouldn’t; not now. The news of the mischievous escapade at lunch had spread quickly.

The short-changed crook had no choice but to head for home; and when he arrived, he discovered his troubles had ratcheted to a new level, for while he was away someone had kicked in his door and ransacked the house; a quick glance revealed that most everything of value was missing. Granted, he did not live in the best of neighborhoods, and his friends were all of the same moral caliber as he, but there used to be some modicum of honor among thieves. Yet in light of his refusal to accept the sentence of the jury, that negligible amount of honor had vanished in a flash.

Open-mouthed he stared at the devastation a moment longer before blind anger washed over him. “Damn them all to Hell!” he frothed, hurling his hat to the messy floor in exasperated rage, his curse spanning not only his so-called friends, but also the members of the morning’s jury. Ignoring the mess, he stepped hatless out onto the street, leaving the breached door open behind him. There was no point in closing it now. *What next?* he snapped angrily at the unknown judges of his unwitnessed mood.

BLAM! The dust puffed at his feet where the bullet had hit. “Run, you lousy bastard!” a disembodied voice yelled. *BLAM!* the revolver reported again, this time shattering the door jamb alongside his head, scattering splinters painfully across his cheek.

The panicked crook immediately took the advice to heart. Crouching low, he scurried around the corner of his home anxiously awaiting a third bullet, which fortunately never came. Discharging firearms within the city limits of Las Vegas was itself a crime, regardless of the intended target, but such niceties apparently meant nothing to his unseen attacker.

“You stay away from my girl!” demanded the anonymous assailant of the fleeing crook. “Or else! Because it’s open season on the likes of you, you damned Exile, you! Get out of town! *Now!* And *stay out!*”

The poor crook's mind was in a whirl as he fled; he had no idea which girl his invisible nemesis might have meant—or if any girl existed at all! But girl or no girl, the heart of his message was crystal clear.

Sunset found him cowering in the back room of an abandoned store on the seediest side of town. In mere hours, his status had devolved from that of a free citizen to apprehended suspect to convicted criminal to hunted animal, leaving him with all the rights of an animal, specifically: none. He was an outlaw—literally a man outside the law—and as such, no longer entitled to call upon the court for protection. Nor was there any viable alternative; even the former crime bosses in town obeyed the new rules. There was more profit in it.

“Damn!” he cursed under his breath, cautiously quiet lest he inadvertently give his presence away. *What do I do now?* he demanded of himself, yet full well knowing the answer.

With a sigh he came to the only decision possible: later on, in the very wee hours of the morning—which was the *only* time the streets of Las Vegas ever emptied out!—he would slink back to the police station, turn himself in, repent, and accept the sentence of the court. One final time, he found himself with no other choice. Yes, he'd have to move to Boulder City or take a job as a farmhand at one of the outlying ranches, but the three months of his exile would pass quickly—or so he hoped. And even if it didn't, his existence would surely improve over what had promptly become one of the worst days of his life.

CHAPTER 10 – A WORLD OF OUR OWN

The teller fidgeted.

“Well, there were quite a number of people who came in the bank that day,” she explained nervously.

Her discomfort did not go unnoticed by the banker. He reached across his desk and handed her a sheet of ledger paper. “Take a look at this log of deposits and withdrawals,” he suggested. “What would you make of it?”

She knew exactly what to make of it, and was trying her best to conceal that knowledge. She scanned it nonchalantly. “It’s just a list of deposits and withdrawals,” she observed a little too innocently.

“Yes, but isn’t there something interesting about it? Take a look at what happens around one thirty.”

She pretended to read the suggested entries, the paper starting to shake slightly in her jittery hand. She made no comment.

He pointed to the quivering paper. “Don’t you see how there were random deposits and withdrawals up until that time, then almost nothing but withdrawals afterwards?”

She continued to look at the paper unnecessarily. She already knew what it said. “How about that,” she noted noncommittally. Her voice quavered.

“Do you recognize the bank account number of the first withdrawal?”

Of course she did. It was hers. But she said nothing.

“It seemed an odd time to withdraw all your cash—just before everyone else did. Don’t you think?”

She did not answer. There was nothing to be said.

“And then your co-worker did the same.”

The hapless teller stared unblinkingly at the paper, and the banker continued. “You had better tell me what you know...”

She sighed heavily, nervously. “It was the Transcontinental stationmaster,” she began, her voice cracking. “He came in here and changed all his money into silver dollars.”

“How many?”

“Over a thousand of them. I forget exactly how many. They filled three of our canvas coin bags.”

He pointed to the sheet she still held in her shaking hand. “But he didn’t withdraw any money.”

“No, I guess not.”

“But you did. Why?”

She took a ragged deep breath. “I don’t rightly know!” The words started tumbling out. “Mr. Eddie had called for the big meeting to be held that night and no one knew what it was all about then in walks his stationmaster and exchanges all his money for silver dollars and I thought he must know what he was doing...” She hesitated, looked down, and spoke softly to her knees. “...and so I did it, too.”

“Did you ask him why he did it?”

She shook her head. Tears began to leak down her cheeks.

“Did you tell anyone else what he had done?”

She nodded, still looking down. The tears shook from her chin to splash onto the paper. “My sister,” she whispered.

The banker sighed, leaning back in his chair. *That’s what did it!*

She looked up with large, wet eyes. “You’re not going to have them fire me, are you?” She was terrified. She could only imagine what the all-powerful Unificating Board might do to her, but in her troubled state of

mind, she had forgotten that the Board no longer existed. The power it once held over the employment of every American was a thing of the recent past, but the fear was current, deep seated, and not easily excised.

He coldly held her gaze several seconds before replying. "No, I'm not going to have them fire you—I'm going to do it myself. You know how much the bank depends on your trustworthiness. You tried to take a personal benefit based upon knowledge of one of our customer's banking habits. That's a breach of trust. For the sake of our customers, I have to let you go."

Her hands flew to her face and she burst into sobs.

"I could take legal proceedings against you to reclaim the silver you girls took, but I won't." He stood up, indicating the interview was ended. "You can consider it your severance pay. It's far more than either of you deserve." This time it was the banker's voice that shook. "Please gather up your personal belongings and go."

Crying, she fled his office.

Again, the banker sighed. He loved his work, but sometimes he absolutely hated his job. *And there's still one more teller to go!*

* * *

The stationmaster interrupted.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Eddie?"

Eddie was on the telephone. He abstractly held up an index finger indicating the stationmaster should wait; his concentration was on his conversation. "No more pepper? What do you mean there's no more pepper?... Really? I wasn't aware that it was all imported... What should I use instead?... You're right, that would work. It's close enough... All right, thanks for the advice... Good-bye." He hung up the telephone and glanced up. "Sorry."

The stationmaster's eyes flicked toward the telephone inquisitively. "There's no pepper left?"

"That's what she says," he replied, reddening slightly. "Unless someone somewhere in town is growing it, it looks like there'll be no more pepper until we can manage to import some." He shook his head and mused abstractly. "Who would have thought it! I wonder what we'll run out of next?"

The stationmaster had little interest in the spice. Not only was it bad for his stomach, he detested its taste. "You wanted to see me?" he repeated.

"Yes. Please have a seat." He took a deep breath. "Listen: I was talking with the banker a little while ago and he had some interesting news."

"Is that so?" *Uh oh! Here it comes!* His heartbeat increased its pace noticeably.

"Yes." Eddie was clearly uncomfortable. He was reluctant to meet the stationmaster's eyes. "He said you exchanged a lot of paper money for silver dollars the afternoon of the big town meeting."

The stationmaster did not reply.

"Can I ask why you did it?"

He let out a deep breath. He had erred in that he had no lie ready; there was nothing else to do but play it straight. "I'll be honest with you, Mr. Eddie. I thought my cash might have been counterfeit."

"What? Counterfeit? Who could possibly counterfeit money? There's not a printer in town who could handle that sort of a job." A mental hiccough of *dèjà vu* shook him; he recognized the words as his own.

The stationmaster spread his pudgy hands wide. "Well, there was this town meeting coming up, and I figured you had some big announcement to

make, and then you said you wanted me to count up all the coins. I put two and two together and figured you were going to warn people there was a counterfeiter in town.”

Eddie wore a perplexed expression. “I don’t see how those facts fit together.”

The stationmaster shrugged. “They seemed to fit at the time, Mr. Eddie. So I figured I’d just be on the safe side and get rid of all my cash.” He smiled uncomfortably. “Turned out to be a good move, even if it was for the wrong reasons.”

“If you thought they were counterfeit, shouldn’t you have contacted the police?”

He hesitated. “Never thought to.”

“Didn’t you think you might be doing something wrong?”

“How’s that, Mr. Eddie?”

“If they were counterfeit, wouldn’t you be giving the bank bad bills?”

“I figured they’d know what to do with them.”

“Do *what* with them? They couldn’t give them to their customers, could they?”

He considered the question for a moment. “No, I guess not.”

Eddie sat silent for a moment, then asked, “Do you know it’s a crime to pass bad money?”

“I wasn’t sure it was bad money.”

“But you suspected it was.”

“But it wasn’t!” he cried, starting to become agitated.

He let that pass. “Do you know it was your actions that started The Panic?”

The stationmaster looked away. “Maybe.”

“Maybe? It was! Right after you exchanged your bills, the tellers did the same, then all their friends and family, then the whole town! You triggered it!”

“I can’t control what no tellers do!” he replied vehemently. “They should have kept quiet—it’s their job to keep quiet!”

“But it was still you who tipped them off. They knew I had called the town meeting for that night, and that you worked for Transcontinental Railroad. They assumed you knew what the meeting was about. They were only following your lead.”

“That’s as may be, but like I said, I can’t control no tellers! And besides, the money wasn’t even counterfeit! You said so yourself!”

“You used railroad information for your own personal gain—and started a panic! Let me ask you again: don’t you think you did something wrong?” When the stationmaster did not reply immediately, Eddie sighed. “Well, you can take your time and think it over, because it’ll all be hashed out at your trial.”

“My trial?” he yelped, his voice cracking.

“I’m sorry. The banker is pressing charges against you. He went over his records and was able to pinpoint the exact transaction that started The Panic. It was yours.”

The stationmaster grew angry. “I didn’t rob nobody! I just had them make some change.”

“Your dollars were only worth three cents each. You collected one hundred cents each.”

“It’s not my job to correct his employees’ mistakes!”

Eddie blinked twice. He could not believe what he was hearing. “But... But they made a mistake in giving you the silver. Shouldn’t you return it? It was a mistake!”

“People make mistakes all the time.”

“That mistake cost the banker a great deal of money—money that you now have! Shouldn’t you return it?”

“I don’t see how it’s my duty.”

“As a Transcontinental employee, it’s your duty to keep our business dealings confidential and not take personal advantage of them.”

“If that’s a Transcontinental rule,” he replied defiantly, “I ain’t never heard it before now. Besides, you never told me nothing about anything! What’s there to take advantage of?”

Eddie hesitated; the man had two valid points. Still, it was obvious the stationmaster’s moral code diverged from his own. “Regardless, if you’re not going to return the money, you should turn yourself in to the police. They’re expecting you, but I told them I wanted to talk with you first about giving it back.”

He leapt to his feet. “I was just watchin’ out for myself! I didn’t do nothing wrong!”

“That’s for a jury to decide now.”

He stood there red-faced for another moment, then bolted from the room.

Eddie sighed audibly. He felt miserable.

* * *

The trial began.

As with the other recent hearings, the legal proceedings were a far cry from the meaningless, over-stylized formality, pomp and circumstance of the fallen regime. However, while the new court’s choreography was similar to that of recent trials, the audience was not—the room was packed to overflowing. People were curious to learn the details of how The Panic had come about—and what would be done about it.

Waiting upon the appointed hour, Eddie sat silently alongside the banker at the prosecutor’s table located near the front of the courtroom midway between the judge’s bench and the railing separating the audience from the legal machinery. When the time to convene arrived, without ceremony he stood and took the seat behind the judge’s bench, the carved law hanging above his head. Self-consciously, he lightly banged the gavel twice in quick succession. “All right, let’s get started.” The room quieted quickly. “We’re here today to talk about The Panic. The banker feels that my stationmaster acted out of line by asking for...” He consulted a paper. “...one thousand three hundred sixty nine silver dollars in exchange for the same number of paper dollars. He feels that the stationmaster’s actions were not respectful of his rights and property, and so he wants his money back.” He looked to the banker. “Is that it?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

Eddie winced. He could not imagine how he would ever become accustomed to being addressed in that manner. He looked at the stationmaster. “Do you understand what it is he’s asking for?”

“Well, I hear what he says, Mr. Eddie, but I don’t see as how it’s my fault.”

“That’s fine. You’ll each get your chance to explain.” He glanced around the packed room and estimated the crowd at well over three hundred, perhaps as many as five hundred. Given its standing-room-only character, it was difficult to estimate its size. “All right, let’s have a jury. Please start from here...” He indicated the woman sitting at one end of the front row. “...and count off. Every... uh... fiftieth person, let’s say, please come up to the jury box.”

There was an excited buzz as the audience members began enumerating. Word of Eddie's odd brand of justice had quickly spread throughout the town, and scores had come that day with a single goal, that of being selected to serve on the jury. A great many were disappointed; seven were not. The chosen few took their appointed seats, but one remained standing: a priest. He clasped his hands in front of his chest, and his gaze went to the window. "Please," he addressed it. "Grant Your servants wisdom. But Thy will be done. Amen." A thin scattering of amens chorused around the room.

With the jury seated, the banker took the witness stand and began his tale. In the patient, cut-and-dried, matter-of-fact manner of the businessman, as if reciting a balance sheet, he explained how he and Eddie had met the night before The Panic, hatched their strategy, and planned out its execution. He then laid out his retroactive research into the causes of The Panic, including the story told by his deposits log, the tearful revelations of the tellers, and of their subsequent firing, concluding with his assertion that the stationmaster should return his ill-gotten gains. There was much concurrence throughout the audience; many heads nodded in agreement, but many others did not.

Next came the stationmaster's turn on the stand. Using so much less detail that it sounded stark in light of the testimony that had preceded it, he related how he had been instructed to count the coins in Transcontinental's vault, and had come to the dubious conclusion that the town meeting being held that night might have something to do with the coins. Not knowing exactly what that might be, he chose to exchange his paper dollars for silver ones, just to be on the safe side. With that final, bald assertion, he stopped and sat there waiting.

Eddie took on his referee's role. "That pretty much matches up with my recollections." He faced to the banker. "Do you have any questions for him?"

The banker shook his head slowly and deliberately.

"You may step down," he directed the stationmaster, and scanned the sea of faces. "Does anyone in the audience have anything to add?" He paused, waiting.

"Give 'em hell, Eddie!" someone called out. The audience tittered in response.

Eddie ignore the aside and faced the jurors. "Does anyone from the jury have any questions?"

One juror raised a tentative hand. "Yes, I do." She hesitated, then asked, almost embarrassed, "Pardon me, but I don't understand. What was it the stationmaster did wrong?" The audience murmured its approval for her words—and some, their contempt.

"That's part of what we're here to find out," replied Eddie, not giving countenance to either group. "Speaking strictly from my point of view, he did not betray the responsibility entrusted to him as a Transcontinental stationmaster. But the question is not about his duty to the railroad, but rather to the bank."

The banker surged to his feet angrily and stood behind his table. "Well, I can't say my tellers were blameless! They violated the confidentiality of our customers. That's why I had to fire them."

Awkwardly, the juror hesitated. "I understand all that, but I don't see how the stationmaster did anything wrong in exchanging his money."

The banker was quick to reply. "Because those dollars were worth only three cents at the time. Less, today."

"But how was he to know that? The big meeting was held hours later!"

“He should not have acted on confidential railroad information. That’s what triggered The Panic!”

“Well, if you didn’t want your tellers to make change, shouldn’t you have instructed them not to?”

“And tell them what we had planned? No, of course not! Two of us knowing were already two too many.”

The juror shook her head. “You didn’t have to reveal the whole plan. Why didn’t you just tell them not to make change?”

Now it was the banker’s turn to hesitate. “I did not think of it,” he finally replied gruffly.

The juror sat back, satisfied.

Another juror leaned forward—the priest—to confront her. “Now wait a minute here,” he interjected. “How can you suggest he mislead his tellers? ‘Thou shalt not bear false witness,’ remember! It’s the telling of these half-truths that started The Panic in the first place.” He gestured toward the banker. “Are you saying that he should have told the tellers more lies?”

Eddie interrupted. “Pardon me, but I think you should save that conversation for the deliberation room. Let’s try to stick with asking questions of the defense and prosecution for now.”

The priest turned to Eddie, an injured, officious look on his face. “I *was* asking questions. I think it *is* important that we find out their answers here and now. Because if acting on half-truths is a crime as well as a sin, then there are a lot of guilty people in this room!”

Eddie’s confusion showed plainly on his face. “What? Like who?”

“Him!” He pointed an accusing finger at the banker who still stood at his table. “This man did not take reasonable steps to prevent The Panic! He’s just as guilty as your stationmaster!”

The banker was stunned. “I? Now wait one minute! *I’m* not the one who’s on trial here!”

“But you had a hand in causing The Panic!”

The banker turned to Eddie, a growing anger reflecting in his voice. “What is this, some sort of court arena where anyone can be skewered?”

Eddie shrugged. “The juror does have a point, though. You did have a hand in it. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, I would—if the purpose of this trial were to determine the causes of The Panic. But it’s not! I’m here to get my money back! And if what he said were true, then...” He paused, amazed at his own realization. He pointed a finger at Eddie. “...then *you’re* guilty, too!”

“Me?”

The banker was openly angry now. “If I’m guilty because I did not say enough to my tellers, then *you’re* guilty for not saying enough to your stationmaster!”

“But I said too much as it was!”

The priest jumped back in. “Or not enough, Mr. Eddie. It depends on how you look at it.”

“This is ridiculous!” declared the banker. “We are *not* here to talk about The Panic.” He jabbed a finger in the direction of the stationmaster, but tossed his angry words at the priest. “The issue here is that this man used privileged information to rob my bank!”

“He did *not* rob your bank!” the priest retorted. “It was a routine transaction. And you let it happen.” He folded his arms over his chest with smug satisfaction and leaned back in his chair.

The woman juror was nodding her agreement and replied, “That’s what I meant. The stationmaster didn’t do anything wrong—it was the banker!”

“Balderdash!” shouted the banker. Angrily he turned to face Eddie. “I demand a new jury! One that can stick to the facts of the case, not run off in unwarranted directions!”

The turmoil in Eddie mind was plainly reflected in his expression. “But that’s their job, isn’t it? To judge the law as well as the facts? You can’t keep changing the jury until you find one that agrees with you. How would that be respectful of the rights of the stationmaster?”

“And how did he respect mine?” he replied, red-faced.

Eddie sighed. He was not cut out to be a judge, and it was moments like this one that drove the fact solidly home. Fortunately, the decision would not be his; he was only the referee. “And that’s why we have a jury.” Turning to face them, he asked, “Do any of you have any more questions?” No one replied. He turned to the stationmaster. “Anything more you want to add?”

“No, Your Honor.”

Suppressing the near-automatic wince, Eddie turned to the banker. “And you?”

His face still glowed red with his fury, but he did not reply. After several seconds, he demurred. “No, Your Honor.”

This time Eddie did wince. He turned to the bailiff and politely asked, “Will you please escort the jury to the deliberation room?” He banged the gavel once—too hard, he thought—and declared, “This court is in recess.”

Bedlam burst out as several hundred people excitedly began to talk all at once. Unnoticed, His Honor Eddie quickly abandoned the room to escape their eyes.

* * *

The jury returned.

“Have you reached a verdict?” Eddie asked formally.

Several hundred people held their collective breath.

The jury’s foreman—the priest—rose and stood proudly, his head held high, appearing as if he were a prophet handing down the wisdom of the ages, his ecclesiastical costume adding to the sacred image. “Yes we have, Your Honor. That, and more.”

He winced. “All right, let’s have it.”

“We find everyone guilty!” he announced in a clear, righteous voice. “Every single one of you!”

The silence screamed, and Eddie hesitated, clearly confused. “What do you mean, ‘everyone?’”

“We find you, the stationmaster, the banker, and the two tellers all guilty of causing The Panic. Any one of you could have stopped it, but not one of you did. You’re all guilty!”

The decorum of the courtroom vaporized into pandemonium. Some were cheering, others jeering, but most were excitedly engaged in spirited discussion with one another trying to divine the meaning of the priest’s words and their possible repercussions. Several times Eddie banged his gavel in vain attempts to restore order; but this time the gavel’s sharp sound seemed woefully inadequate, like snapping one’s fingers at an onrushing hurricane. Order struggled to reassert itself, and eventually did.

Still standing, the priest continued. “And we have decided on several sentences we want to hand down as well. First...” He pointed at the banker. “You do not deserve to get your money back. Had you done the right thing early on and instructed your tellers properly, none of this would have happened.” He twirled a finger in the air, indicating The Panic that had transpired. “You did not stop to think what the result of your actions would

be on the rest of the town. You did not respect us. Next...” He brought the spiraling finger down and pointed at the stationmaster. “It’s more than clear that you respected the rights of your employer and the property of the banker. Although your actions directly triggered The Panic, we must reluctantly agree: you betrayed no trust, nor is it a crime to ask someone to make change. You, sir, may keep your money.” His eyes scanned the audience, and quickly found the object of his search—the two tellers, huddled together, wide-eyed with panic. The accusing digit picked them out of the crowd. “And you—you both deserved to be fired! But the jury cannot interfere in a private affair, nor is it you two who are on trial here today—” He tossed a quick glance at the banker. “—as your former boss has twice reminded us. But if you were, we would pronounce you guilty and affirm that as your sentence.”

The priest was on a roll, and did not give any indication that he would soon slow down. “And you!” He whirled around to point at Eddie, startling him. “You’re guilty as well! You’re the man who started this whole chain in motion!” He paused theatrically, as if he were reaching the climax of a fiery sermon. The audience’s patience was barely held in check as they anxiously waited for him to come to a conclusion. “However, by all accounts you also saved this town from total economic collapse. The fact that virtually no one lost any money in The Panic is thanks to your doing. You saved us once again, Mr. Eddie. In fact, you’ve done so much for this town, the last thing we’d want you to do is to stop. I know this jury has no power over you either, but we still find you guilty of triggering The Panic and will recommend a sentence.” Maddeningly, he paused again; but mercifully, it was brief. “Your sentence is to keep on doing just what you’ve been doing, and may God bless your work!” He leaned toward Eddie, winked, and continued in a casual, conversational tone. “Just be a little more careful next time.” He sat down to tumultuous applause that rocked the courtroom down to the sands that lay beneath it.

The ruckus continued for several minutes before Eddie’s gavel finally pierced the wall of noise and regained control of the proceedings. But once the audience subsided, they subsided completely, as if someone had flipped a switch turning off a loud radio.

In the silence, Eddie turned to face the stationmaster. “Do you accept the sentence?”

The stationmaster snorted sarcastically. “Are you kidding? Of course I do!”

Eddie turned to the banker and asked, “How about you? Do you accept the sentence?”

The banker said nothing at first, but he wore an angry look and blood suffused his face; he glowed beet-red. Quite a lot of money was at stake—at current exchange rates, those willies were worth well over a half million old dollars, quite a tidy sum. He wasn’t going to simply walk away from that! “And what if I don’t?” he challenged defiantly, the anger plain in his voice.

Eddie nodded. He had heard the question several times before, starting with the bandit’s trial. At that time, he had not thought the question all the way through, nor had it been necessary; the bandit had accepted the sentence willingly. But in the months since that trial, several other defendants had made the same challenge; by this time Eddie was ready with a confident answer. Deliberately avoiding mirroring the banker’s defiant tone, he replied unemotionally, “You really don’t have to accept it. Since the rest of the country seems to have abandoned us, we’re pretty much on our own out here. I can’t say categorically what sort of actual legal authority we have to impose any sentences at all, but I can say this: if you

don't accept the sentence, you've effectively chosen not to participate in what we feel is justice in this town. So I'd say that if you don't accept our brand of justice, then you can't really expect to be able to call upon it in the future, should you find yourself somehow wronged. It's really up to you whether or not you choose to participate—and judging from what's happened to others who have refused, I'd advise that you choose carefully.”

The banker was plainly not pleased with the answer. “So you're saying that if I refuse to accept the sentence, if my bank gets robbed tomorrow you won't prosecute the thief?”

He did not pause to think twice. “It stands to reason, doesn't it? Think of it this way: wouldn't it be hypocritical of you to spurn our system of justice when it applies to you, but embrace it when it comes to others? You need to decide which side you're on—ours or someone else's. Whether or not you accept your sentence would be a reflection of that decision.”

The banker's mouth opened, then slowly closed; he could not refute the logic. The seconds passed. “How did I ever get myself into this?” he murmured to himself testily.

Eddie heard the aside and answered aloud. “You put yourself into it when you initiated the use of courts.” Silent seconds passed, and Eddie pressed, “So do you accept your sentence?”

“Bah!” he shot back testily, looking away and folding his arms defiantly. “What's the point? I may as well just fight it in my appeal.”

“Your... what?”

He whirled to face Eddie. “My appeal! I'll have their decision overturned at my appeal.”

“But...,” he began slowly, a bewildered look on his face.

“I *do* get an appeal, don't I?” demanded the banker, almost petulantly.

“But...,” he began again, with only a minor amount of the uncertainty fading from his voice. “The jury has pronounced its verdict based on the facts presented here today, right? So if you were to appeal...” He paused a moment, in doubt about how to continue. More to himself than any listener, he pondered aloud, “Now that I think about it, I'm not sure how an appeal would work. I'm not even sure what form it might take—that of a new trial?” He hesitated again. “But wouldn't that be the same thing as asking for a new jury?” Shaking himself loose from his reverie, he faced the banker. “We've already established that you can't do that. It wouldn't be right.”

“But I have the right to an appeal!”

“A right? What right?” He gestured to the wooden sign hanging behind his head. “Are you suggesting you can improve the law somehow? How would you change it? What should it say instead?”

The banker could already grasp the ultimate conclusion of Eddie's arguments, and his continued refusal to face that truth only served to stoke his anger. It boiled to the surface. “How the hell should I know?!”

“But that's all I do here—protect the rights and property of men!”

“Then I'll go to another court!” he huffed.

Eddie shook his head. “That's the same thing as asking for a new jury. And we already said that wouldn't be right. How would doing that be fair to the stationmaster?”

“How has this trial been fair to me?” snapped the banker.

“How has it been unfair?” countered Eddie.

The banker glowered defiantly for a moment, but his anger gradually ebbed and he awkwardly looked away. If anything, the proceedings had been fair almost to a fault, and everyone knew it.

A little more certain of himself, Eddie sat up straighter. “No, there can be no appeal. What’s to appeal? There’s nothing *to* appeal! On the other hand, if there were new evidence that would plainly influence the verdict, then we could simply reconvene the same trial—ideally with the same jury—present the new evidence, then let them decide if either the verdict or the sentence needed to be changed.” More became clear to him as he spoke. “Or if someone didn’t respect your rights in the trial somehow—say, a witness lied or somehow violated your rights in other ways—maybe that would merit another trial—of course it would be a completely different trial, one about whether or not that man violated your rights—and if he were found guilty, then I could see you might want to reconvene your original trial. But I hardly think you could really call any of those situations an appeal. It would either be a continuation of the original trial, or a new trial about new crimes.”

The banker was reduced to desperation. “And why can’t I just get a new trial as my appeal? Not a continuation. A new hearing instead.”

Again Eddie shook his head. “I already said that asking for that is the same thing as asking for a new jury. And—”

“But—”

Eddie held up a finger in interruption. “Think of it this way: suppose you did have a new trial and let’s say you won. Wouldn’t we then need a third trial to break the tie? So wouldn’t asking for a new trial really be the same thing as saying, ‘Best out of three?’ And if you lost again, what would stop it from becoming best out of five? Or seven? Or seven times seven times? It could go on forever! And that wouldn’t be fair to anyone. It just wouldn’t be right.”

The banker’s arms crossed his chest again. He was losing the logical argument, and he knew it. “So there’s no such thing as an appeal, is that what you’re saying?”

“I cannot imagine what its purpose would be.”

“So the sentence... it’s either take it or leave it, then?”

“I cannot imagine a third choice. Can you?”

The banker opened his mouth as if to speak, but he slowly closed it. He couldn’t visualize any third path either.

After a moment, Eddie interrupted the silence. “So. Do you accept the sentence of the jury?”

Desperately the banker grasped at a final straw. “Wait a minute! The first time it was you who came up with the sentence. This time it was the jury. Whose justice is this anyhow?”

“I don’t see why anyone can’t suggest what the sentence might be. Many times it’s been me; this time it was the jury; next time it may be someone in the audience—maybe even the defendant! But does it really matter? I think the jury’s sentence a good one. It stands to reason, and it fits the crime—or lack thereof, I should say, given the verdict. Or do you have an alternative sentence you wish to offer?”

Seconds passed. The banker did not reply.

Eddie faced the audience. “Anyone have a suggestion for a different sentence?”

Seconds passed in pregnant silence.

He turned back to the banker. “There it is, then. Do you accept the sentence of the jury?”

No answer.

He repeated a little more forcefully, enunciating each word separately. “Do you accept the sentence of the jury?”

The silence dragged out several seconds longer. Finally, the banker mumbled a reply. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Eddie nodded and looked out across the audience. "And so do I." He banged the gavel once. "This court is adjourned."

The audience released its collective breath and exploded in cheers and applause.

* * *

Las Vegas changed again.

It was as if the sun had finally popped out from behind the last black cloud to brighten a storm-beaten land, and the transformation that overspread the town's economy occurred just as abruptly. With the establishment of sound money, prices for most commodities quickly stabilized, then fell. Without the drag of taxation, fiat currency, or the inflation they encouraged, wages rose. Given the low prices and high wages, the economy began to stretch in unusual directions: people began taking more time away from their work to pursue hobbies, charitable service, or just sit on their porch and enjoy life. Homes were better kept, yards neatly trimmed, and the streets proudly swept clean. Crime dropped dramatically, not only because of the judicial mechanisms Eddie had put in place, but also due to the plethora of opportunities for honest, well-paid work. With the reduced economic pressure also came a reduced psychological pressure; people seemed to tolerate each other's foibles more readily, and were also much more willing to help one another. For Las Vegas the day of the looter had finally ended.

But challenges still remained. Despite the surfeit of good tidings, their paradise was punctuated with random shortages induced by their isolation. Everyday commodities, long taken for granted, continued to disappear from the store shelves, and one of the first commodities to vanish was coffee, much to the agitated annoyance of the populace. Refined sugar was soon replaced with several coarser varieties. Chocolate, maple syrup, cinnamon, and other formerly-mundane wares also dwindled quickly. Fortunately, the staples of existence remained plentiful; men adjusted, and life moved on.

The occasional stranger would wander into town, most of them local ranchers who had abandoned their lonely farms in favor of the more civilized life and greater economic opportunities that the town offered. A few refugees from the fighting to the west still emigrated from time to time, but their sparse numbers trickled off to zero before very long. It was as if the world had forgotten that Las Vegas existed.

At least for the moment.

CHAPTER 11 – TRAIN IN THE DISTANCE

The horse collapsed.

“God *DAMN it!*” swore the wagonmaster as he threw down the reins, furious in his anger. Heads popped out behind him from under the shade of the wagon’s patched canvas bonnet; dread spread across their delicate faces when they saw the cause of the curse. There were few enough horses left alive pulling them across the desert. Now there was one fewer.

In a justifiably-foul temper, painfully the wagonmaster climbed down from the inadequately-padded driver’s seat. He stood alongside the downed steed and for a moment glared pitilessly at its pathetic, pleading eyes. He had seen that look too many times before not to know what it meant; this one was never going to get back up. Not that he was surprised; it should have been a mule or an ox pulling that heavy wagon through the dry heat, but horses were all they had. *No sense in putting it off!* he griped to himself. He reached down and unhitched the unfortunate creature from the wagon’s neck yoke and traces, removed the leather reins and balled them up in his hands. Ignoring the fallen horse, he stood for a moment scanning the featureless, desert horizon, and his rage exploded. “*DAMN it!*” he cursed again in a fit of pique and threw the tangled leather ball down onto the bleached surface of the old concrete highway. Leaving it there, he marched determinedly to the rear of the wagon and gruffly ordered, “Alright, everybody out! Come on, come on! Quit your dawdling! From here on you’ll have to walk!”

Feeble, high-pitched protests could be heard from the shaded interior, but their dissent had all the impact of kittens meowing in a box, if not merely the tone. Lethargically, an even dozen women and children clambered out of the wagon and onto the hot surface of the concrete highway. From their midst, an almost pubescent teen with long, stringy hair stepped forward and faced the wagonmaster insolently, gesturing toward the front of the wagon. “There’s still another horse!” she fumed, just as angry as he was. “Why are you making us walk?”

“Because one goddamn horse can’t pull a wagon loaded with impudent scum like you!” he roared. “Maybe you want we should throw away the rest of the water instead? Or do you just want to see if you can kill the other horse, too? Gah!” He turned away in disgust. “Kids!” he muttered under his breath as he reluctantly returned to reclaim his uncomfortable perch. Even before he was seated, he grasped and shook the remaining set of reins none too gently. “Giddyup!” he cried. The overworked horse strained for a second against the off-balanced harness before the wagon slowly began to roll forward once more, with long, piercing squeaks shrieking from its under-lubricated wheels. The two wagons behind him followed in slow suit, each of them making the slight detour around the dying obstacle lying in the road.

“Heeyah!” shouted the wagonmaster, not as any command for the sole remaining animal in front of him, but rather to release some of his own pent-up feeling of hopelessness.

They were not going to make it; of that he was now certain. Their efforts had all been for nothing. A little over a year ago he had somehow survived the fiery death of Los Angeles and the subsequent, merciless attacks of the Party of the People that drove him and his sons first into the Imperial Valley, then back out of it. They had managed to avoid the mass exodus of refugees, and eventually found an isolated farm on the southwestern edge of California where they could finally settle down. Once

there, they had successfully fought off raiders, buzzards, and the heat, only to ultimately be driven from their home once again, only this time by the religious zealots of Back For God. Somewhere several hundred miles behind him, his three strong sons were making their final stand alongside a woefully inadequate number of defenders, full well knowing their fate, selflessly cashing in the last ounce of their strength for the sole purpose of buying time for him and his charges to escape. Now he found himself leading a shabby, shrinking wagon train consisting of himself and thirty-eight women and children. They had started with many more, and he was convinced they'd end with many less—zero, to be exact. Even the portents bespoke of ill times ahead: a few days earlier they had to maneuver around a human skeleton lying in the middle of the highway, shards of shattered bone protruding at awkward angles from the corpse's shrunken, mummified skin. It was impossible to say what sort of horrible calamity had befallen the poor soul; it appeared that the body had been pummeled with some gigantic hammer, or fallen from a great height. He shook his head ruefully at the ill-omened memory, and what it foretold. Surely his sons were all dead by now; it had been weeks since they had parted company: a tearful farewell for the women, and a tight-jawed nod of the head for the men. You did what you had to do to survive, to press on, no matter how tough the going. The only alternative was to lie down and die, like some overstressed hor—

“DAMN it!” he cursed again; he had forgotten about the fallen horse! Pulling on the reins none too gently, he halted the wagon, and behind him the rest of the wagon train followed in painful suit. He steeled himself for the task that had to be done.

“What now?” came a plaintive whine from one usually-pleasant grandmother, her insubordination plainly demonstrating how irritable and edgy everyone had become.

He climbed down from the wagon without a word and retraced a path to the downed animal still lying in the road not far behind the two wagons that followed his own, each of them also pulled by a single horse. Only one of their wagons carried passengers: those who were too old, weak, or ill to walk on their own; the other two held the last of their food and water. Other than a cache of precious sacks of seeds, the refugees carried no luggage other than the clothes on their backs. The weight penalty was far too great to carry anything more; and losing one more horse would now also mean losing a wagon—and more importantly the food and water—or the people!—it carried.

The children jumped at the loud, sharp report from the wagonmaster's revolver. As he returned, they stared at him with wide, alarmed eyes, their frightened faces swiveling to track his progress as he passed. He did not look back at them or the dispatched animal, but rather without a word climbed back into his painfully-flat wooden seat. He shook the reins once and the tired gelding leaned into the weary task once more.

It was hopeless folly to have ever tried to make for Lake Meade, of that he was sure, but there had been no other choice. What the acolytes of Back For God did with their heathen prisoners—especially the women!—was well known to all. It was a kinder fate for them to attempt a journey of hundreds of miles and die as mummified skeletons under the scorching desert sun than to face such barbaric cruelty; and with each passing day, it was becoming more and more certain that the kinder fate would soon come to pass.

* * *

The *Meteor* hurtled.

Like some superbly-trained athlete in a marathon race, the Diesel effortlessly barreled along the flat, ruler-straight track across the sparsely-settled desert south of Las Vegas. Eddie sat relaxed in the engineer's seat, one hand resting lightly on the throttle, his eyes studiously fixed on the track ahead. He did not expect any problems on the scheduled trip down to Boulder City. He had been piloting this run for half a year now without incident, but prudence dictated that he always keep a watchful eye. It was not too distant a journey to the deserted town—less than an hour each way—nor was the train a long one: it consisted of only the Diesel, a baggage car, and one day coach carrying a mere six passengers: four of them were members of the relief crew for the four men who were currently watching over the powerplant of the massive Boulder Dam; the other two passengers were wives.

Early in the morning of every third and fourth day Eddie and the *Meteor* would make the trip to Boulder City, that being the closest approach any track made to the Dam, then return to Las Vegas an hour later. Commuting on the *Meteor* not only saved the workers many hours of horseback riding in the hot desert sun, it also saved them the trouble of bringing additional horses to cart the several days' worth of food and other supplies that would be needed during their vigil, not to mention doing away with the bother and expense of feeding and caring for a small herd of horses. The run also served to bring in a reasonable amount of revenue to the coffers of Transcontinental Railroad. But none of these reasons were what drove Eddie to provide train service, even though he personally profited from the operation of both the railroad and the Dam. For him it was reason enough to keep the railroad running so that it could serve the men of ability, as it was always meant to do; and as with his radio broadcasts, keeping the *Meteor* alive also kept an important part of Eddie's past alive as well.

In addition to the men of ability, the *Meteor* also served their children: after returning from the morning trip to the Dam, Eddie would run an afternoon "Kids' Special" into the desert north of town, just for the fun of it. Unsurprisingly, the jaunts were a huge hit among the children and their parents alike. He refused to accept any payment from the children who rode these excursions; he felt he was amply rewarded by their laughter as they hung their heads out the windows of the day coach, and by the grateful, almost worshipping gaze of their parents. Not that it was any altruism on his part; Eddie had an ulterior motive for the joyrides: he wanted to instill in the hearts of the children the same love of the railroad that he held in his own heart. Someday, he knew, one of them would have to take his place in the Diesel. As proved to be the case with the bandit exiled to work at the Dam, among those children were several future Transcontinental Railroad employees.

The hurtling train swallowed the desert miles, soon encountering a darkened semaphore signal. Its lack of illumination was deliberate; given that the *Meteor* was the only train running anywhere within hundreds of miles—more likely thousands!—Eddie had not troubled to power up the signaling system. Despite its darkness, for him the semaphore was an important waypoint. From there, ahead in the distance he could begin to make out the squat, abandoned structures of Boulder City; the *Meteor* was almost there.

He had heard news that plans were in the offing to re-colonize the town; it was becoming more trouble for the Dam workers to commute than it would be to simply move in. Nor would bringing the lonely ghost town back to life be difficult. Being so close to the Dam, the town already had electricity aplenty; and telephone service had recently been restored to both

the Dam and the abandoned town. Once the town's water supply was secured—an effort already well underway—re-colonization would be the next logical step.

The planned colonization was not all that unexpected; other areas surrounding Las Vegas were also being slowly re-populated as well. Private exploration parties had been ranging far and wide across the desert seeking out new opportunities for wealth, and they were finding them. Many farms and ranches, previously abandoned, were being brought back to life. Disregarded herds which had been left to roam freely were again corralled within vast fenced plains. Neglected orchards of fruit trees were reclaimed, pruned, and tended. The economic arms of Las Vegas stretched out to embrace them all. Within fifty miles of town civilization had been restored, and peace and tranquility reigned; but beyond that lay nothing but uninhabited, empty space—or so they imagined. No one had yet explored the wilderness out very far; nor had that wilderness intruded upon them.

Eddie sounded one long, mournful wail on the Diesel's triple-coned air horn to announce his approach to Boulder City, and began slowing the *Meteor*. Minutes later, he switched on its yard bell, and soon brought the train to a gentle halt at a makeshift station just short of the final track switch before the end of the line, studiously cautious not to foul its points. Waiting with their luggage were the four men and three of their wives that were to be his return passengers. Eddie recognized the reformed bandit standing proudly among them, no longer an exile, but now a productive citizen and the Dam's newly-promoted shift supervisor. Parked nearby was a compact battery-powered cart and its low, boxy trailer that the men used to haul their personal effects and supplies the remaining distance to and from the Dam.

The electric carts were a relatively new item on the Las Vegas scene. One clever lad had taken to scavenging electric motors of varying sizes from whatever source he could find, wiring them up to old batteries removed from stilled automobiles, and installing them on carriages, wagons, or any sort of wheeled contraption he could cobble together. The result was an array of unique carts that could travel for up to an hour on a single charge. Given that electricity was cheap and plentiful, the carts became an instant hit. Unsurprisingly, the lad had difficulty keeping up with demand, and before long a competitor established himself in the business as well. Each tried to out-do the other in terms of features, range, and style, but the winners of their competition were the citizens of Las Vegas who found themselves conveyed back to the age of motorized transportation.

While the arriving men transferred their supplies from the *Meteor's* baggage car to the cart, Eddie uncoupled the Diesel from the rest of the train and maneuvered around the triangle of sidings to position it in front of the coach for its return journey. By the time he was finished re-coupling the Diesel, the men had completed their task as well. Before long, at the appointed moment, he climbed the four steps to the top of the platform at the rear of the day coach and called "All aboard!" in a signature voice, then walked down the aisle and dutifully collected and punched their tickets. He emerged from the other end of the coach and was about to descend to the ground and head for the cab of the Diesel when movement in the near distance caught his eye. Coming up from the southwest making an apparent beeline in the direction of the train, was a long, large cloud of dust.

* * *

The wagonmaster dozed.

That he could somehow manage to sleep at all in so uncomfortable a spot as the wagon's driver's seat was a clear indication of his deteriorating

physical condition. Nor was he alone in his travails. He had presided over yet another burial that morning—the fifth in as many days—performing last rites for an elderly lady who had not managed to survive the night. Equally distressing, they had lost another horse two days before, reducing their train to a mere two wagons: one to carry the sick, and the other, the last of their water; and just yesterday the food had run out as well. He cursed himself for not having the forethought to butcher the fallen horses; he simply had not thought of it. He shook his head; the blunder may prove to be his final mistake. He pressed ahead unthinkingly, just marking time now, going through the motions of what he knew for certain to be their final days, doing what duty demanded of him until he would finally be relieved of both duty and life together, in the same instant.

He stirred in his restless sleep and squinted one eye open. Ahead in the distance he could see the squat structures of yet another town. Although he remained convinced they were on the correct road, he had little idea exactly where they were. Not that there weren't landmarks; every few days they would come upon some side road or an abandoned town duly identified by a faded sign at its outskirts; but lacking a map, the names yielded no information regarding their progress. So it was no surprise that coming across yet another town instilled no sense of excitement in him; it was just another unremarkable milestone in an unending journey. To be sure, the towns were universally useful for replenishing their water supply: there was more than enough potable water trapped in every house's water pipes to meet their needs, waiting only to be drained into their buckets. The limiting factor was not the water in the pipes, but rather how much weight the remaining two horses could pull. Should luck smile upon them, they might even find a few morsels of food in the abandoned town; but such luck had been elusive.

In weariness, he closed his eyes again; but only for a split second. His posture snapped into a straight sitting position unlike any he had held in almost a week. His fading eyes narrowed as he peered into the distance; he tilted his head, listening. At first he feared he was hallucinating, but the reaction of the walkers around him confirmed the reality of the clear, sweet note of a train whistle blaring dimly in the near distance.

"Whoa! Whoa!" he cried, pulling fiercely on the reins, causing the tired horse to rear up on its hind legs despite its own great fatigue. Before the wagon could come to a stop, he was already down from his seat furiously working to unhitch the horse, but his stiff, weakened hands fumbled at the task. "Here! Here!" he cried over his shoulder. "Quick! Come help me!" Several pairs of hands joined in the effort, and in seconds the horse was free of its bindings.

"You!" he cried, pointing to the rebellious teen. "Get out there and *STOP THAT TRAIN!*" Without a word, she leapt onto the bare back of the freed animal and was off.

* * *

The *Meteor* was ready.

The bandit-turned-supervisor had assumed command of their defense. He had sent the wives to take armed concealment in one of the abandoned buildings strategically located behind the shelter of the train, out of sight of the approaching cloud, and deployed the eight men for battle in numerous carefully-considered locations: behind the Diesel, under the wheels of the day coach, inside the cab, peering around either edge of the slightly-open door of the baggage car, and more, with each man armed and ready for

action. Left, right, back, and forward the bandit glanced, assessing their defenses, then smiled. He was in his element; they were ready.

Eddie crouched behind the large steel coupler protruding from the snub nose of the Diesel, a worn pistol in hand. Typically he did not travel about armed, as was generally the custom in Las Vegas these days, but he kept an old, yet serviceable weapon in the Diesel's toolkit in case an emergency such as this should arise. With no small amount of trepidation, he waited.

As the dust cloud approached, details of its source began to resolve themselves. It was one person riding a horse. He was small. He... that is, *she* was wearing a dress that billowed behind her from the wind of her motion, her long, stringy hair streaming back almost horizontally, bouncing in tandem with the undulation of the horse beneath her. She slowed as she approached the train, then halted a score of feet away and dismounted from the badly-frothing horse. She couldn't have been much more than twelve or thirteen. Cautiously she took several steps toward the noisily-idling, apparently-abandoned train and halted. Behind her, the horse collapsed onto its side with a resounding thud.

"Hello?" she called dubiously, not looking back to the downed steed. Several seconds passed in silence.

"Could you raise your hands, please?" Eddie finally returned politely, still crouching behind the coupler.

"Huh? Oh, sure!" she complied, a wide grin on her grimy face.

Eddie emerged slowly from behind the *Meteor*, worn pistol in hand pointed carelessly at the ground. "Can I help you?" he asked uncertainly.

The girl theatrically faked a swoon, dramatically placing the back of a raised hand against her forehead. "Golly! Can you ever!"

* * *

The refugees arrived.

It had taken almost an hour before the sole remaining horse and its wagon, flanked by weary walkers, finally reached the makeshift station in Boulder City, but it only required a few short minutes to transfer the sickly passengers from the covered wagon to the *Meteor*. The healthier refugees filled the seats of the day coach nearly to capacity, while the seriously ill were relegated to lying on the floor of the baggage car. The returning Dam workers and their wives did what they could to make the refugees comfortable as the *Meteor* barreled swiftly north.

The platform of the Las Vegas station of Transcontinental Railroad was jammed beyond capacity in numbers not seen in years. Many of them were children with their parents who were always there to meet the *Meteor*, eagerly awaiting the departure of the afternoon's Kids' Special. Adding to the throng were the curious; one of the workers had called ahead from the Dam with the news of the approaching refugees. The two groups mingled and buzzed with excitement. It had been years since so large a contingent of newcomers had arrived in town, and no one wanted to miss the occasion.

The waiting horde held its collective breath when they first heard the distant blast of the train's whistle, and jockeyed for the best positions on the platform once the yard bell's dead, off-key clanking heralded the *Meteor*'s incipient arrival. They watched gleefully as the bright headlight approached; then, with a loud hiss and an abrupt release of compressed air, the *Meteor* came to a solid halt and the animated mob swarmed in to crowd around the day coach. One by one the refugees stepped off the train with an expression as if they were stepping into a dream, while the unfortunates in the baggage car were borne out on makeshift stretchers; all were led out of

the mid-day sun into the relative coolth of the station's waiting room. The natives had many questions, and all the while badgered the weary newcomers incessantly, yet good-naturedly. The waiting room echoed cheerfully with their chatter, but when Eddie emerged from the tunnel that led from the platforms, the room quickly fell silent. The wagonmaster stood and faced him deferentially, battered hat in hand.

Eddie spoke first. "Welcome to Las Vegas," he said simply, and the crowd burst into applause and cheers. The tumult reverberated impressively within the open confines of the vaulted ceiling of the Transcontinental station.

The wagonmaster managed a smile, the first one to grace his face in weeks. "Thank you," he replied hoarsely, taking in the entire assembly with the wave of his hat. "Thank you all!" Again, the crowd cheered.

Eddie faced the crowd. "Listen: some of his people need to see a doctor. All of them are tired and hungry. Would—"

"My wagon's out front!" one man interrupted. "Somebody help me get a couple of them sick folks on board. I'll take them over to the hospital."

"I have an electric cart!" someone else called out. "Let me help, too!"

"A couple of the children can stay with me tonight!" one woman called. "We have room."

"I do, too!" cried another.

In a torrent, one after the other, the good people of Las Vegas fell over each other as they opened up their hearts and homes to the refugees. Noisily the two groups mingled and merged, then headed for the door in small clusters with supportive arms slung around each others' shoulders.

Eddie walked over to the wagonmaster. "I'd be obliged if you'd stay with me for a while."

The wagonmaster eyed him warily. "I hope you're not going to ask for train fares," he asked, only half joking. "We have no money."

Eddie was momentarily taken aback. The idea had never so much as crossed his mind. Recovering, he tossed the question aside with the wave of a hand. "No, of course not. But I would like a chance to talk with you a little more and hear your story. As it was, I only caught a few snippets before we left Boulder City."

The wagonmaster did not immediately reply; his mind was concerned with other things. He was a proud man, not accustomed to accepting charity; but in his position he was left with little choice—again. Reluctantly, he grumbled, "Is there someplace I can maybe get something to eat first? Then rest up a little? Would you mind?"

"Not at all. There's no hurry. I'm about to take the *Meteor* back out on the road anyhow. But before I do, let me get you a sandwich and find you a bed."

He led the man to an unused compartment in the sleeper car and showed him where the shower and other amenities were located. He left him there momentarily, then returned presently with a tray holding a thick sandwich and a tall, chilled glass of fresh milk. The hungry man took pains not to wolf down the food, yet still finished the snack in barely a minute. He did not think to use the starched white napkin that Eddie had provided.

"Thanks," he muttered. "I needed that."

"You're certainly welcome." Eddie glanced at his wristwatch and suggested, "It's a little after noon. Tell you what: how about I come wake you for dinner around six. Or would that be too soon? I'm dying to hear your story."

"I guess," he replied wearily. "But I'm not too sure you'll enjoy hearing it."

CHAPTER 12 – OUT IN THE COUNTRY

The Diesel roared.

The throttle felt alive under Eddie's hand. It rumbled with a reflection of the vital forces that lay tamed behind it: a motive power which catapulted the hundreds of tons of metal and wood across the open desert on twin thin strips of shining steel glinting brightly in the mid-day sun.

They were approaching his favorite section of the Kids' Special run: a ten-mile straightaway rebuilt shortly before the world's collapse with fresh wooden crossties and rail made of now-irreplaceable Miracle Metal, making this stretch of track the best one anywhere in the vicinity of Las Vegas, capable of handling incredible loads and extraordinary track speeds. That knowledge encouraged a certain amount of reasoned recklessness on his part; for there was a caprice in which Eddie would always indulge himself, some boisterous fun that had quickly developed into a routine—if such a mundane word could be used to describe what had become the highest of the high points of the twice-weekly run.

The kids loved it, too. Eddie would always begin it with a series of blaring warning blasts on the triple-coned air horn, a sound followed by the rising roar of the massive motors that would drive the Diesel faster and faster down the greenish-blue straightaway until the *Meteor* was barreling along at a cool one hundred thirty-three miles an hour—that being the highest velocity its speedometer would register. He knew they could have gone faster still, but he was reluctant to accelerate further without the gauge's metered guidance. He knew from personal experience that high speed was hypnotizing; it was far too easy to misjudge the extent of their swiftness, and thereby invite disaster. But their current velocity proved to be more than adequate; for child and parent alike, it was the fastest that any of them had ever traveled and probably ever would. The novelty of it never wore off, neither for them nor for Eddie, because for him, it was along this particular stretch of rail that the *Meteor* felt the most alive, screaming with mechanical life as it faithfully followed the whimsical will of its master. The incredible motion melted the crossties beneath the *Meteor* into a single dark mass, as if they were not individual wooden logs, but rather a massively-long, seven-foot-wide board reinforced and ornamented by two gleaming strips of greenish-blue metal. Adding a bittersweet taint to his joy was the knowledge that the immense velocity would swallow up the ten miles in no time at all; the delight could only last a few short minutes before he would have to check his speed in anticipation of the rapidly-approaching bend. Dutifully, if reluctantly, he began to return the *Meteor* to a more prosaic velocity, once again toasting the moment with another series of blasts on the train's whistle, again according to the routine. Regardless of its ephemeral nature, the capricious sprint would always leave Eddie a happy man; happy for what had just transpired, and also in anticipation: he knew they still had to return this way.

He turned around at the gentle touch of a hand on his shoulder as the scent of lavender drifted up to him, mixing with the oiled, mechanical redolence of the Diesel's cab. He had not heard the sound of her approach over the various noises that the Diesel made: the low drone of the motors, the sharper clicking of the many parts that rang in varied cries of metal, and the high, thin chimes of trembling glass panes.

“That was *fun!*” she gushed, a childlike grin splitting her face, and her voice straining to be heard above the melee of the Diesel’s song. Her eyes were bright with excitement.

Eddie nodded almost solemnly, returning his attention to the track ahead. “Yes,” he replied calmly, his own voice unnaturally loud. “It always is.”

“You should be back there to listen to the kids screaming! They love it, too!”

He nodded again, eyes on the track. “That’s a part of my purpose in having these trips. I want the children to learn to love the railroad, too. Like I do.”

“And me,” she smiled, squeezing his shoulder lightly. She let her hand remain there. “But I don’t know how you’ll ever get to hear the kids if you spend all your time up here!”

He turned to glance at her briefly, as if she had stated the obvious, then looked away. “There’s no one else who knows how to operate a Diesel,” he reminded her, naming it.

“And what did you do with Boulder Dam’s powerplant, Your Honor? Only one person knew how to operate that—until you stepped in, that is.”

“That’s not the same thing!” he protested, his eyes firmly on the track ahead.

“Of course, of course,” she kidded, squeezing his shoulder gently one more time. This time she lowered her hand. “Maybe you could teach me?”

Slowly, Eddie turned to face her, hesitating before asking, “Teach you what?”

She gestured at the control panel. “How to drive a train,” she said simply.

“Operate a train’, you mean.”

“See?” she asked brightly. “I’m learning already!”

“There’s a lot more than that you’d need to learn than just the terminology.”

“Oh, pooh. How difficult was it for you to teach me how to become a conductor?”

“Operating a Diesel is a completely different subject! It’s not something you can learn overnight.”

“Of course!” she agreed quickly. “I know it won’t be easy. But I’m willing... and I’m sure you can teach me—” She gestured again at the control panel. “—to do whatever is right.” She smiled eagerly. “Would you give me a chance, Mr. Eddie?”

His eyes widened at her proposition, leaving him momentarily speechless; not only did he recognize her words as his own, he could think of only one other woman in his experience who would have the audacity to aspire to run a train—or a railroad.

She did not give him the chance to recover, nor to reply. “We don’t have to do it right now, though” she insisted. “I should be getting back with the kids.” She pecked his cheek in farewell as she always did, but this time she held her lips against his cheek a half second longer than usual.

The impact the brief delay had upon poor Eddie was immense. He could not help but notice how her lips lingered, if only because of the almost electric shock that shot through his skin. In that short instant, his sense of touch sharpened and reeled under the plump softness of her lips; he could almost feel her every pore and the tenderness that lay behind each one of them; his will was wiped out, leaving him helpless and speechless.

Not giving countenance to the turmoil she had intentionally instilled within him, she added one final blow: “And wait until you see my new

bathing suit!” With that, she turned to leave, calling over her shoulder, “See you at Camp!”

Eddie watched her depart, speechless still. Had he put his frozen thoughts to words, part of his mind would remark upon the ironic juxtaposition—before, it was he who was helping a beautiful woman to run a railroad, not the other way around. But the remainder of his frozen thoughts could only coalesce instinctively around one very-personal notion, almost as if she had planned it that way.

* * *

Children screamed.

One after the other, they clambered up the wide, rough-hewn shallow steps along the rocky cliff face, clutched the hanging rope tightly, and launched themselves into the air out over the suitably-wide creek that flowed through the deep gulch beneath the graceful arch of a steel truss railroad bridge, each of them dutifully swinging back and forth two or three times before finally releasing their grip and splashing into the deep, still water below, screaming all the way. From the shore their mothers watched with half an eye as they gossiped among themselves. The delicious aroma of grilled meats drifted through the air, the smoke of the fires swirling among the greenish-blue girders of the bridge. Hanging under the center of its artistic steel span was a wide, polished wooden sign with large, neatly-carved capital letters: *Camp Dagny*.

Not too high above the creek, perched on the track at one end of the graceful arch idled the *Meteor*; and leaning on folded arms out of a cab window on the Diesel’s shadowed side was Eddie surveying the scene below, his face reflecting a quiet pride. Constructing the Camp had surely been among his best ideas ever. The location was ideal for a picnic grove: the gulch was deep enough that its western wall shielded the afternoon sun, protecting the picnickers from the worst of its scorching desert rays. The creek at its bottom flowed deep and cool as it meandered along its sluggish path to Lake Meade. At water’s edge, a flat, gravelly shelf situated between cliff and creek formed a natural mesa for holding the wooden picnic tables and metal fire pits. That the Camp sat beneath one of Transcontinental’s most attractive truss arch bridges rounded out the perfection of the place.

The bridge itself was a scaled-down twin of the original Miracle Metal bridge which spanned the chasm immediately north of the former Ellis oil fields along Transcontinental’s Rio branch. That bridge had been designed by Hank himself using a revolutionary approach that would have been impossible if it were constructed out of mere steel. But by combining a truss with an arch and employing the unique capabilities of Miracle Metal, the bridge was strong enough to carry four trains at once and last hundreds of years, not to mention costing less than their cheapest culvert. It was a true showpiece, one of dozens scattered across the country, and the best possible sentry to stand guard over Camp Dagny.

Colonizing the Camp took much less time and effort than Eddie would have imagined; he and his handful of Transcontinental employees had assembled the entire infrastructure in much less than a week, the most complicated aspect being the construction of a modest bathroom with a simple privy. Once Camp opened, ridership on the Kids’ Special skyrocketed; but then, that was its purpose. It was a rare day that the train wasn’t full to capacity. Eddie felt bad whenever he needed to turn someone away; at this rate, he would soon have to bring back into service the bullet-riddled day coach that had sat idle since his arrival in Las Vegas so many years ago. Unfortunately, in this new age the tempered glass panes that its

windows required were impossible to find. If the coach were to take to the road once more, he would have to first board up the shattered glass and caulk the bullet holes that pocked its metal flanks. And given the burgeoning ridership, there was no denying it would have to be soon.

He watched absently as the children flung themselves one by one into the waiting water, but his attention was constantly being pulled aside by the sight of a beautiful woman in a skimpy, bright red bathing suit. At the moment, she was waiting in line for her turn at the rope; and even though he was dozens of feet above her, he could almost convince himself that he could smell her fragrance drifting on the air. She turned her head up to him as he watched, as if she had unexpectedly become aware of his attention, and for several seconds they held each other's gaze. Suddenly uncharacteristically self-conscious, she brushed a loose strand of hair back from her face, flashed an embarrassed smile, and turned to take her chance at the swing.

Unable to look away, Eddie watched captivated as she stretched her arms high over her head to grasp the rope, the reaching accentuating the curved beauty of her lithe figure. Without hesitation she swung out over the water, legs straight and toes pointed, her long auburn hair trailing alluringly in the breeze of her passage. Once, twice, three times she oscillated, bending her shapely, rigid legs back and forth at the hip to increase the degree of her arc. On the upward stroke of the fourth swing she released her grip, spinning slightly to face him, arms still held high over her head, her long legs arrow straight, her toes pointed at the water, appearing like some ballerina caught in mid pirouette, mid-air. She held the artful pose for the half-second it took gravity to reassert itself, squawked awkwardly, then with arms and legs flailing plummeted toward the water below as her hair swirled around to entangle her face. With a loud splash she was gone, leaving only expanding concentric rings to mark the spot where she had entered the pool. A moment later, a dark mass of soggy hair emerged from their center, seeming much like some surfacing sea monster streaming with stringy seaweed. Momentarily treading water, she used her fingers as a comb to reveal her face, then swam gracefully toward shore. Wriggling out of the water and onto the mesa, she paused to adjust the shoulder straps on her swimsuit one by one, the motion lifting each of her breasts in turn to settle them into a more comfortable position within. Without pausing, she slid her hands down her sides to reach behind her to snap the suit's elastic on each side of the bottom of her derriere for a more comfortable fit. She tossed her head back and bent over backwards, breasts pointed skyward, her wet hair falling behind her before she gathered it up in her hands and leaned to one side to wring some of the water from it. Hands still holding her hair high, elbows alongside her face, she walked gingerly across the gravel to retrieve an oversized, fluffy towel and wrapped herself in its bulk.

Had the fate of the entire world depended upon his immediate action, Eddie could not have torn his attention from her. Nor was he alone; almost every eye had been upon her. Several teenaged boys stood slack-jawed as they waited in line for their turn at the rope that swung unoccupied and limp over the water. Most of the mothers pointedly ignored her performance; a few smiled, while some others scowled their displeasure. The few fathers in attendance were understandably captivated as well, but the younger children simply paid no attention to the grown-ups, as children were always wont to do.

"Oh, golly!" cried a young teen as she shouldered past several stupefied young men to clutch at the ignored rope. "Get the hell out of my way!" With that, the trance was broken; together, the upstaged teens turned

their angry attention to the girl on the rope, not in another bout of helpless admiration, but rather in impatient annoyance for being upstaged in line.

“Hey! Wait your turn!” screamed one lad.

“Get the hell out of *MY* way!” cried another.

“Cheater! Cheater!” protested a third.

Ignoring their tirades, she laughed as she launched herself into space.

Eddie found himself incapable of smiling at the human comedy unfolding in the scene below, having been as much a victim of the woman’s charms as the upstaged young men. Shaking himself free from their spell, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the precision railroad watch he always carried when operating a scheduled run; his eyebrows went up in surprise—they were late, an unthinkable sin for a railroadman. Reaching over his head, he grasped the hemp rope that activated the Diesel’s horn and pulled one long blast, a signal to the picnickers to begin their preparations to leave. Even over the noise of the idling Diesel he could hear the collective cry of dismay from the children—and from their parents. Their reactions were uniformly the same; no one wanted to leave. The thought brought a great deal of satisfaction to Eddie; it was precisely the feeling he had intended Camp Dagny to instill in its guests.

CHAPTER 13 – THE WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN

The telephone rang.

Eddie was in the station's cafeteria picking vegetables for their evening meal when the call came in. Fortunately, he had recently had an extension telephone installed in the cafeteria so that he need not walk all the way back to the stationmaster's office to take a call. He was able to pick it up halfway through the second ring rather than on the tenth.

"Hello, Mr. Eddie?" the tinny voice came. "I'm the head nurse at the hospital, and we have a situation here that I need to speak with you about."

"Regarding our newcomers?" he asked anxiously.

Recognizing his tone of voice, thoughtfully she anticipated, "Yes, but not about their medical condition. Considering what they've been through, they're in remarkably good shape, or at least not as bad as they might have been. The doctors think that most of them will be just fine after a few meals and a little rest. There are only four really questionable patients, and one of them is a pregnant woman. Weeks of being shaken around in the back of a covered wagon didn't do her baby any good—or her. She may still lose it—and we may even lose her!"

"Oh! I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thank you, but that's not exactly what I'm calling about."

"What? What is it, then?"

She hesitated, then began awkwardly, "Well, I'm calling to find out if you knew who is going to be paying for their medical care?"

As with the wagonmaster's question of train fares, it was an issue that Eddie hadn't even remotely considered. "I see," he said.

"As I said, most of them are only going to need some bed rest and a minor amount of attention, but others, such as our pregnant friend, is going to require a substantial degree of care, and that's going to run into a lot of willies."

"I see," he repeated, his face coloring with an unseen blush.

"We'll do what we can for them all, but it's something that will need to be addressed soon."

"All right. Let me get back to you."

"Thank you, Mr. Eddie."

He hung up and stood there for several seconds with his hand still on the instrument, thinking. It was only fair that the hospital be paid for services rendered, but who is it that should be paying it? His first notion was that the refugees should pay for it themselves, but as the wagonmaster had already pointed out, they had no money. Perhaps someone could lend them the money until they were able to pay it back, but that implied that someone had to be the source of the loan. Certainly it would not be right to leave the hospital holding that bag; but if not them, who? He sighed. It looked like it was going to be another one of those fundamental quandaries that kept sneaking up on Las Vegas every now and again. Civilization could be so complicated!

The question itself was not a new one. The town had its own share of the poor, mostly elderly widows and widowers, but in these days of heightened prosperity, their needs were pretty much taken care of by their family, friends, and neighbors. The police even had a special "adopt a neighbor" rate where for a modest, additional fee one could add a destitute friend to the list of those who were entitled to assured police protection. But this new situation would surely prove to be more expensive and difficult to

solve than a random widow's meals or an occasional burial, if only because of its suddenly-larger constituency.

He mulled over who he might be able to call for advice. There were several people who had helped him solve other town problems in the past, such as the banker, the policeman, and the butcher, among many others, but none of them seemed right for this sort of a question. Perhaps a social worker might be of some assistance, but he was not aware of any who remained in the town; he had assumed that all of them had left with the Mayor. Even if any had remained, with the collapse of the Las Vegas government, there was no one left to pay them. They would have long since moved on to other vocations, increasing the difficulty of tracking them down.

Who else cares for the needy? he asked himself, and the metaphorical light bulb instantly illuminated over his head. *Churches!* He glanced up at the large, electric clock that hung over the cafeteria door. There was plenty of time for him to do a little research before he had to start preparing dinner.

He realized he still had his hand on the telephone. He released it and headed for the door.

* * *

The priest knelt.

Respectfully, Eddie removed his wide-brimmed hat as he closed the towering, ornate church door behind him. His eyes adjusted to the dim, candle-lit interior sufficiently to allow him to discern the priest kneeling in the first pew. He walked up the aisle; the priest turned at hearing his echoing footsteps, stood, and faced him.

"Do you have a few minutes, shepherd?"

"Of course, Mr. Eddie. My time is yours."

"Thank you." With a start, Eddie recognized the man: he was the juror who pronounced sentence upon him and the banker; but he said nothing about it. "You're aware that we took in thirty-three refugees earlier today?"

"One of them is napping in my rectory," he replied with a smile. "A young boy."

"Good! I wanted—" Eddie glanced awkwardly around at the sacred surroundings as the echo of his voice slowly died away. "Is there a more comfortable place we can talk?" he whispered self-consciously. "I have some questions I'd like to ask."

"Of course. Come with me." He led him to the small, sunlit sacristy behind the altar. The room was not large; the walls were bare, and several plain wooden chairs were positioned around a table of the same stark style, a large book at its center. The priest extended a hand to one chair and took another. "Now how can I be of service to you, Mr. Eddie?"

"I'm looking for advice."

"Regarding our newcomers?"

"Regarding our newcomers. Right now they're living on our charity, but I can't say how much longer that can continue." Briefly, he related the details of his conversation with the head nurse. "I was wondering what your church does in circumstances like these."

"We do what we can, Mr. Eddie, and all too often that's not nearly enough." He sighed heavily. "Charity is a cordial but fickle friend. You and I both saw its good side at your station this morning; people lined up gladly to help those unfortunate women and children. But I can promise you that in much less than a week that charity will start to wear thin. Such has always been the nature of charity."

"Are you saying people will throw them out?"

“‘Edge them out’ might be a better way of putting it. But yes, it will happen nevertheless. Even with the young one that I have taken on, for my means are meager, and the boy should have a decent home.”

“There has to be an alternative!”

“Oh, there is, there is! Otherwise...” He turned his gaze heavenward. “...I would not have been so blessed as to serve my congregation for so many years.” He made a complex series of motions with his hands, clearly choreographed.

Confused, Eddie asked, “But where does your income come from?” He cast an uncertain, fleeting glance upward questioningly.

The priest laughed. It was a cheerful, friendly laugh. “No, no pennies from heaven, if that’s what you mean. Typically I pass the plate at our services and people give what they can, each according to their ability. If there’s some special need, such as the new roof we put on the church last year, I go from door to door asking for a special contribution—and not only from members of my congregation, but from everyone.”

“And strangers will give?”

He laughed again. “No, Mr. Eddie. Generally speaking, they don’t. Maybe one out of a hundred might.”

“Is that enough?”

Again, his gaze went heavenward, although the subject of his glance was much closer at hand this time. “Well, we do have our new roof—but the builder insisted on a weekly mention during my sermon before giving me the discounted price. When it comes to charity, it’s often a two-way street.”

“What if there’s not enough charity to go around?”

“Then you do without,” he said flatly.

“Some of the refugees in the hospital have life-threatening injuries. How can they possibly ‘do without?’”

“Write that down!” the priest commanded emphatically. “That’s a wonderful appeal to use when you go door-to-door!”

Eddie did not react. He could not picture himself going from door to door begging for money. He had done something similar when he first established the town’s police force, but then he was offering a needed, valuable service; this time, he would merely be a moocher looking for a handout.

The priest took no notice of his silence. “Another thing you can do is hold some sort of a fundraiser. Dance socials are always a winner. There’s little enough innocent fun in this wicked town that you’d probably get a good number of people to come out. I hold one here once a month, and the turnout is fairly good. Once I get them in the door, I hit them with raffles, games, and prizes, and that raises the take. Bake sales are another way to pull in money, although you do need to first convince the ladies to bake for you. In the old days, if you had the right connections you could get a government grant, but in these new days that’s no longer an option.” He thought for a minute, then added, “Speaking of government, since you’re pretty much in charge of the town, why don’t you just levy a temporary tax? To help the refugees. It’s a good cause. People would pay it, I’m telling you.”

Eddie’s eyes widened in horror. “A tax? What right do I have to take someone’s money without their permission?”

“Governments tax all the time.” He gestured at the book in the middle of the table. “‘Render unto Caesar’ and all that,” he quoted. “It’s the price we pay for living in a civilized society.”

“I would hardly call it ‘civilized’ when you take money from people at the point of a gun.”

The priest shrugged. "It's the way of the world."

"Not my sort of world."

"But you'd be helping people!"

"I can't justify doing evil in the name of doing good."

"Ah, yes. No evil means, regardless of the goodness of the ends. Very laudable." The priest considered for a moment longer and chuckled good-naturedly. "Then I sentence you to bake sales, dances, and knocking on doors!"

Eddie did not smile. "Or do without?"

"Or do without."

The silence dragged out for a moment, then Eddie stood up and extended a hand. "Thank you for your time and the ideas."

The priest shook his hand warmly in both of his. "Really, you should think about a tax."

Again, Eddie did not smile. "I think not."

* * *

Dinner ended.

"That was without a doubt the best meal I have had in many a week!" the wagonmaster praised. He chuckled dryly. "Not meaning to denigrate my own compliment, but I really haven't had much more than trail food for weeks either. Seriously, though, this was really good!"

"I've had the benefit of a good teacher who trained in Paris to be a chef."

"He taught you well."

"She." He reddened slightly.

"Ah. Sorry."

"Not a problem." They sat at the round mahogany table in the ornate observation car, and Eddie leaned back in his chair. "So you're from Los Angeles?"

"Yep. While it was still there, I should say."

"It's gone now?"

He laughed dryly again. "Ashes and bones. Dust and rot. That's all it is now."

"Why? What happened?"

"It burned to the ground... what? Over a year ago," he explained without emotion. After a short, pensive silence, he continued. "You might recall how things had been getting progressively worse in California for quite some time, even back in the days when things were still somewhat civilized. There had been a lot of fighting, even though it was pretty much kept out of the newspapers—back when there were still newspapers!" He laughed without mirth; it seemed to be a defining characteristic for the man. "I remember how Washington just kept sending more and more troops, but it wasn't doing anyone any good. It just added to the number of men who were running around shooting guns." He shook his head sadly at the thought. "It was pretty bad."

Eddie nodded. "I was in San Francisco toward the end, and it was pretty much the same thing there, too."

"Then you know what I mean. It wasn't too long after we heard the news about the X Project exploding that some troublemakers with their backs against the wall decided to pull their own doomsday scenario and set their slum on fire. The winds had been blowing pretty hard for days, and it just fanned that fire so big that the firemen couldn't hold the line. Next thing you knew, the whole damn city goes up in flames and thousands of

people were running for their lives.” He paused, reliving the scenario in his mind, as a haunted, distant look crept into his eyes.

Eddie found himself on the edge of his seat. He took a deep breath and tried to relax. “How did you escape?”

He held Eddie’s gaze firmly. “I didn’t.” He waited a moment to let that sink in before continuing. “My sons and I headed south to get out of the way of the fires when we were captured by some paramilitary group calling themselves the ‘Party of the People.’ They kept us penned up inside an old Army base and used us as forced laborers.”

“What?! Slavery? In America!”

Seeing the shocked expression on Eddie’s face, he chuckled. “Thanks, but it actually turned out to be a good thing for me and my boys, because that was during the time when the refugee problem was at its worst. The Party kept up a pretty solid defense, so most of the homeless folk were pushed south into Mexico. Did us a favor by capturing us, they did. Kept us alive.”

“Was your wife with you?”

He snorted. “She got lucky—died in childbirth about fifteen years ago.” He shook his head. “She would never have survived what me and our boys went through.”

“I’m sorry.” Awkwardly, he tried to change the subject. “And your sons are here in town?”

He stared hard at Eddie. Seconds passed. “No.” He looked away, then back. “I’m getting to that.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, reddening brightly at his obvious faux pas.

The wagonmaster took a deep breath before continuing. “Well, we had been prisoners about a month when one day we got our big chance. We were in a chain gang out on a work detail and this one guy decided he’d make a break for it. He had gotten his hands on a key for the leg irons—don’t ask me where!—and he unlocked his own, real sneaky-like, then handed one of my boys the key, and when no one was looking he just turned tail and ran. Well, the guards noticed pretty quick, and all of them went off chasing after him, leaving the rest of us behind. And why not? We were all chained up to each other, so we couldn’t have gotten very far even if we tried. But they didn’t count on my boy having that key. All of us got ourselves loose, the whole chain gang, and we lit off like bats out of Hell! Don’t know what happened with the guy who gave us the key, or the guards. We never saw any of them again. Least not those guards.”

“You were captured by other guards?” he anticipated apprehensively.

“Hey, who’s telling this story?” Angrily the wagonmaster turned away for a moment, then resumed his tale. “We figured our best bet was to get away from the coast and all the refugees deserting the populated areas, so we headed east across the desert. It took us a lot of hungry days, but we eventually made it out to the Imperial Valley. Things were still pretty normal there—if you can call living with no electricity normal!—because by then the X Project had already blown up and people had lost contact with the rest of the country.”

“Do you have any news about what happened to New York City?” Eddie interrupted anxiously. The memories stung when they came on too fast.

“Nothing since the X Project blew up.”

His face fell. “I see,” he said.

“In any case, there weren’t a whole lot of people in the Imperial Valley, and that suited us just fine, as we had had more than enough of other people right then. We took on jobs as farmhands and it started to look like things were going to work out, but it didn’t last not two weeks before the

army of the Party of the People waltzed right in and took over. Maybe they were looking for us in particular, maybe not. Didn't matter. You didn't have to ask me and the boys twice—we were on our way that same day, abandoning most everything we owned and heading further east across the desert before they could catch us again. Couple of days later we reached the farms on the Colorado River along the Arizona border and took work as farmhands again. Things were pretty nice for quite a while—months!—and by the time last year's harvest was in we had saved up enough to set up our own farm further up the river, maybe a hundred miles north of Yuma—which, by the way, was already burned to the ground by then; all the cities are." He snorted cynically. "The farm was nothing fancy: just a barn and an old farmhouse, but more than enough to keep us alive." At that point he halted his narrative; he appeared to be lost in thought.

Eddie let him drift along for a short while, then prompted, "That was over six months ago. What happened next?"

He didn't respond for almost another minute, and this time Eddie waited him out. Apparently this was a man who could not be rushed. When he finally resumed, he did not look up. "Eight months, it was. Eight beautiful months like no time in my life had ever been before, at least not since my wife passed." He halted again, his head down and face blank. "Then a few weeks ago... they appeared."

"Who appeared?"

He looked up, wild eyed. "Back For God!" Eddie sat up in fearful empathy with the wagonmaster's anxiety. "Thousands of them! They poured up the Colorado Valley like a plague of locusts. We'd first heard about them from some of the newer arrivals, and by all accounts they were nothing but bad news! A ruthless, religious sect that controls the whole middle of California, they say."

Eddie nodded uneasily. "We've heard about them." He shivered involuntarily.

"Well, we hadn't. The first that me and the boys saw of them was the smoke from other folks' farms downriver being burned. Next came the first wave of farmers running away, mostly women and children, some in wagons, others on horses, but most of them just running on foot. They were pretty hysterical, some of them—and when I heard what Back For God does to heathen women, I can understand why! And anybody who could defeat a well-organized bunch like the Party of the People would have to be pretty powerful." He paused. "Now where was I? Oh, yes: the women. From what we could get out of them, their men had set up a defensive line and were going to try and hold the acolytes back. Turned out it didn't work, because less than a day later the men came high-tailing it up the river, tails between their legs. What was left of them, that is. Almost half never made it." He sighed mournfully, then shifted his weight in the chair before continuing. "Now, our farm was situated a little upstream from a narrow part of the river valley with mountains on both sides which we figured could serve as a natural blockade. For almost two days the lot of us worked like madmen fortifying the spot as best we could, when without warning the first of them red-robed bastards came into sight. Our defenses weren't organized, our plans weren't finished, nothing was ready, but here they came. Only a couple at first, and we managed to hold them off, but we knew the main body couldn't be far behind."

He took a deep, shaking breath before continuing. "We got all the women and children aboard a half-dozen wagons and a couple of carriages, hitched up what horses we could find, threw in some barrels of water, hardtack, salted meats, and several sacks of seeds, and within the hour I went off with them heading north. My boys stayed behind with the rest of

the men to help man the ramparts along the south end of our farm.” He paused dejectedly. “Last I saw them, they were waiting, watching.” He stopped again, his mind’s eye hundreds of miles to the south. His expression was flat, as if he could no longer feel any emotion; only his eyes burned bright with the memory. Abruptly, he stood and turned away from Eddie, walked to the rear balcony of the observation car, and leaned on the ornate railing. Still facing away, he resumed his tale.

“That was about three weeks ago. My boys must have done their job well, because no one’s caught up with us—and we were moving pretty slow at the end, there. The last week or so we were traveling at walking speed, so if they wanted to catch us, a single man on a horse could’ve had us, just like that!” He snapped his fingers over the railing at the setting sun. Slowly, he turned back to face Eddie. “But they didn’t. My boys did their job.” His voice did not break, but it somehow felt as if it had. “And now here we are, thirty-three of us with just two wagons, a few sacks of seeds, and one malnourished horse to our name, where forty-two of us started out with six wagons, two carriages, and fifteen horses.” He walked back to the table that still held the remnants of their dinner and leaned heavily on the back of his chair. “Two hundred miles, Mr. Eddie. Three weeks’ ride by wagon, one or two by horse. That’s all that separates you from a living Hell.”

Eddie could think of nothing to say. The man’s saga had been a sobering one.

Incongruously, the wagonmaster smiled. “But you folks have nothing to worry about.”

“What? What do you mean?” His question was almost a cry.

“No one knows you’re here! It’s been... what, two years since the country fell apart? And everything’s all so much a torn patchwork now. All the stories I’ve heard from other refugees like me say that all the cities are dead. Los Angeles... San Diego... Bakersfield...—I’ve seen the body. Phoenix... Tucson... Flagstaff...—I’ve heard firsthand obituaries.” He lifted his gaze thoughtfully. “Ah, what other places am I forgetting? Yuma...” He looked back down to Eddie and waved a hand in dismissal. “Lots. Doesn’t matter. They’re all dead. Everyone knows that. All the cities are dead—all except lonely Las Vegas, that is!” He chuckled. “And no one knows. Even I thought Las Vegas was dead. Every other city died—why not you, too?” He paused, then added, “Did I tell you our goal was really Lake Meade, not Las Vegas? We hoped we could get some farming going again... Me and thirty-two women and children...” He shook his head somberly, and stood for a moment in silence. “Fools, all of us,” he finally murmured, and reclaimed his seat. Unexpectedly shifting the subject, out of the blue he asked, “How many people you have here in town, Mr. Eddie?”

“We’re not sure. We’re guessing about five thousand. Could be three or seven. We have no way of knowing.”

“And you’re well armed?”

“Sir! In Nevada?”

“Sorry. Stupid of me to ask.”

“There’s also an Army base not far north of here that has a lot of materiel. If we were forced to mount a defense, I think we could do a serviceable job of it.”

The wagonmaster cast him a stern eye. “Could you do it on two days’ warning?”

Eddie did not so much as pause. “No. It would take at least that long to transport what we’d need from the Army base, and no one is really trained to use that kind of weaponry, or in tactics.”

“You ought to correct that.”

Eddie did not reply.

“Soon,” he stressed. “Very soon. If I could find a lost city, it’s certain that sooner or later others will, too.”

CHAPTER 14 – SOCIETY’S CHILD

Sleep would not come.

Eddie lay on his back in bed, troubled. Images of religious fanatics dominated one part of his overactive mind and Dickensian waifs another, both visions feeding a deep-seated unease that was new to him. In the old days when he was merely the Special Assistant to the Vice-President of Operations for Transcontinental Railroad, the trials and tribulations of his job had merely been frustrating rather than troubling, and any anxiety he may have felt had been kept handily at bay by his confidence in the superlative ability of the Vice-President of Operations herself, Dagny. But in these new days there was no one to whom he could turn for counsel and assistance; in fact, the situation had somehow, inexplicably reversed itself: he found himself the one to whom others turned. He was left with only himself to rely upon, and he felt himself nowhere nearly up to the task.

He had already resigned himself to following two separate courses of action come the morning. The first was to send men up to the abandoned Army base north of town to take steps to better equip the town’s makeshift militia. The second was to start knocking on doors to beg for money for the unfortunate refugees. The first task was trivial; he’d make the suggestion to the militia commander, explain his reasons, and that would be that; the chain of command they had established would take it from there. But the second task was more than Eddie could personally handle—or wanted to. To assist him in his begging, he considered wielding the men under his command who still worked for Transcontinental. Of the dozen whom he had inherited when he first arrived in town, only five remained, and there were few enough duties for them to perform even though scheduled train service had been revived many months ago. But today, facing so daunting a charitable effort, he now wished he had retained the other seven as well. Yet even as the wish formed in his mind, he tossed it aside. It would not have been fair to either the men or to Transcontinental to have kept them on the pay rolls standing idle the last year waiting only for this troubling day to arrive. In fact, it was ethically questionable whether he should order Transcontinental employees to help at all. And he had learned his lesson well regarding ordering railroad personnel to perform any task whose purpose might be misconstrued.

He sighed aloud in the dark. That he needed more help was clear; and not just the help of more hands, but also the help of more minds. He needed the brawn of many people multiplied by the power of their intellects, each man working of his own initiative toward solving the town’s problems. However, creating such a partnership in itself would give rise to yet another state of affairs that would require his attention, namely, that of defining, designing, and developing that organization. Not for the first time he wished he had some sort of a roadmap to create such an association, some tried-and-true formula that he knew would produce predictable solutions, like some mathematical equation whose truth had long since been hammered out and proven, and was now taken for granted. Sadly, in the realm of forming a helping society, no such roadmap existed.

Or did it? His eyes widened in the dark, seeing nothing yet seeing more. There *had* been many examples of formulaic organizations throughout history that dealt with societal problems—they were called “governments.” They routinely dealt with crises of charity—not always efficiently, but at least adequately. *No, not even adequately*, he corrected himself; the current state of the world plainly reflected a flawed approach.

Still, it was a start, an obvious, yet crucial clue to developing a solution. The next morning, he would visit the public library and read up on how governments handled charity.

Satisfied for the moment, he rolled over in bed and instantly fell into a dreamless sleep.

* * *

Governments forced.

After spending several long hours in the deserted library tracking down the details of one governmental charitable solution after another, Eddie came to the universal conclusion that governments dealt with that warmest of human actions—charity—by means of one of the coldest—force. In example after example, while the ends varied widely, the means were woefully the same. He had fully expected to encounter such shabby stories when he examined the politics of charity within the various People's States of the world, and in that he was not disappointed. Despite their avowed purpose to serve the common man, the reality was always the inverse; they uniformly made life worse for their citizens despite any high-sounding goals. But one unexpected discovery that shook him to the core was how his own purportedly-capitalist nation had addressed the question of charity.

He started that investigation with the ultimate authority, the Constitution for the United States of America. He had never before read his nation's highest law—it had been only superficially taught in the government-run public school he had attended—and his long-overdue initial reading was an eye opener. Having read it all the way through, he came away somewhat perplexed—he had somehow missed seeing the part about charity. He re-read it more carefully, but only managed to convince himself that the topic was not mentioned. Worse yet, it was clear that the Tenth Amendment bluntly forbade the national government from exercising any power not explicitly granted: *The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.* He sat up straight when the import of those words sank in. Since charity was not one of the delegated powers, it followed logically that the federal government had *no authority* to perform charity! The meaning of the Tenth Amendment was crystal clear: charity belonged in the realm of the States and the people. Eddie was both stunned and perplexed. How, then, could the Supreme Court have countenanced all of the innumerable social programs, grants, subsidies, and thousands of other handouts the government offered? The Constitution only authorized the federal government to do seventeen things, all enumerated in Article 1 Section 8, such as coining money and organizing the militia—responsibilities which, Eddie ironically noted, he had taken charge of in Las Vegas—but charity was not listed among them.

Since charity was reserved to the States, it was clear he should turn next to the Nevada Constitution. This time, he found the salient words on his first pass; however, governmental charity in Nevada was strictly limited to *Institutions for the benefit of the Insane, Blind and Deaf and Dumb.* To his knowledge, none of the refugees were either insane, blind, deaf, or dumb, so apparently there was nothing the state could legally do for them—*Not that there was any state government left!* he reminded himself.

Curiously, a footnote revealed that at one time Nevada possessed the constitutional authority to do much more for its indigents, but the authorizing clause had been repealed many years ago. According to the footnote, the elided phrase read: *The respective counties of the State shall*

provide as may be prescribed by law, for those inhabitants who, by reason of age and infirmity or misfortunes, may have claim upon the sympathy and aid of Society. Now *this* was the sort of authorizing clause he had expected to find in the national Constitution!—but didn't.

Certainly the refugees were the victims of egregious misfortunes, but the charitable constitutional provision had been repealed; aid was no longer permitted. Eddie wondered what had convinced the citizens of Nevada to revoke such a plainly-humanitarian power; it could very well have a bearing on his quest. Intrigued, he searched the library for information on the topic, and soon found a pamphlet containing a brief history of public charity, not only in Nevada, but historically as well.

Eddie found it to be an interesting exposition. He learned that since ancient times charity had been the exclusive realm of religious groups, but had become secularized beginning with the first Poor Tax levied centuries ago in England. Government-sponsored charity had never existed in the young United States, but a few individual states did opt to provide for some measure of charity, with Nevada being one of the first. The pamphlet also answered Eddie's question as to why the provision was repealed—the responsibility had been relinquished to Washington as a condition for receiving a federal subsidy. Eddie shook his head; the good people of Nevada had thrown away a constitutional state charity and sold it for an *un*-constitutional national charity!

Following up further, he searched the library looking for the text of the law which controlled the distribution of charity nationally, but could not locate it. No surprise; the library could only hold so many books—or perhaps that particular treatise did not exist? However, he did accidentally stumble across a slim pamphlet on charity containing an excellent essay penned by an American patriot of the highest renown, Davy Crockett, chronicling his experiences with governmental charity while he served as a United States Congressman. His essay provided Eddie with numerous irrefutable reasons to avoid any dalliance with the idea of government-controlled charity, for it was replete with warnings and admonitions, crowned by Crockett's most damning passage: *The power of collecting and disbursing money at pleasure is the most dangerous power that can be intrusted to man, particularly under our system of collecting revenue by a tariff... If you had the right to give to one, you have the right to give to all, and as the Constitution neither defines charity nor stipulates the amount, you are at liberty to give to any and everything which you may believe, or profess to believe, is a charity, and to any amount you may think proper. You will very easily perceive what a wide door this would open for fraud and corruption and favoritism on the one hand, and for robbing the people on the other.*

For the second time since entering the library that morning, Eddie was stunned. The observation was so precisely accurate, so true to reality, it seemed as if Davy Crockett had personally visited the America of Eddie's time, examined the actual workings of government, then returned to his own era to pen the pamphlet. That eminent patriot's voice reached out across the years to dash Eddie's hopes of finding any brand of viable, government-sponsored benevolence.

Apparently he had reached a dead end. In fact, his search had come up worse than empty; for not only was a comprehensive government charity forbidden by the constitutions, any attempt was fraught with peril. What, then, was to be done with the refugees? Were the only options left open to him bake sales, Saturday night dances, and knocking on doors? But that approach had its own major shortcoming: while it may take care of the needs of the moment, what about the needs of tomorrow? He did not fancy

himself knocking on doors for the rest of his days, chained to the never-ending demands of the indigent, a slave to charity.

He sighed aloud, because he knew the issue to be a much wider one than mere hospitalized refugees; they were not the only possible objects of charity, merely the ones at hand. What of the less crucial needs of society? As a clear example also at hand, Eddie considered the empty library in which he sat. There was no librarian to greet him, no staff to care for the wealth of knowledge it contained, no one to add new knowledge—such as information about the national charity laws—and no one to keep the older knowledge up to date. The front door had not even been locked against the possibility of theft or vandalism; Eddie had simply walked into the abandoned building. Having once been funded through the taxes of the now-defunct Las Vegas government, a dependable sponsorship for the library had vanished along with the Mayor and his entourage. Unless a new patron could be found, before very much longer the library would become a heritage lost; someone was needed to step in and take the trouble to knock on the closed doors of strangers in order to retain the open doors of the library.

Again, Eddie sighed. Wearily, he surveyed the various books and pamphlets arrayed on the table in front of him. He was ready to admit defeat. If it was only a government that possessed the resources to adequately tackle charity, yet that agent lay acutely vulnerable to widespread “fraud and corruption and favoritism,” then there could be no answer. Indeed, it was that very trio of sins which had ultimately brought down the once-great United States of America. There was no denying that public charity was a monster that consumed all within sight, for charity was a commodity never out of demand. The conundrum was an ancient one that pre-dated the original Poor Tax from centuries ago. Even the priest’s sacred book, many millennia old, foretold, “The poor you will always have with you.” Against the wisdom of the ages, what chance had someone like Eddie? *But what can you do when you have to deal with people?* he asked himself. He had no answer.

In theory, he knew what was needed: some custom or law limiting charity, a societal contrivance analogous to the mechanical governors found on the electric turbines in the Boulder Dam powerplant which prevented their armatures from over-speeding. Perhaps a like construct could be placed upon government charity to prevent its spinning out of control? The priest had suggested he levy a tax; but what could prevent the bottomless need for public charity from eventually draining the pockets of the productive men who made charity possible in the first place? Aside from his own personal moral qualms, any attempt at re-establishing taxation would set a dangerous precedent, and coupling the coercive power of taxation with the insatiable demands of charity guaranteed its own destruction, much as would connecting a tank of oxygen to the vacuum of space; the oxygen would be instantly dispersed, but the vacuum would still remain—and all those dependent upon the life-giving gas would perish.

The only rational conclusion possible was that if the vacuum would always be there—and surely it would!—then a coercive tax was the *last* thing that should be considered—better yet, not even considered at all! *But if not the coercive power of taxation*, he wondered, *what could be used to fund public charity—perhaps a more general, non-coercive tax, similar to what was being done with the police force?* He almost smiled at the oxymoronic idea, but suddenly his mind halted. Stunned yet again, sitting in silence, his mind leapt into high gear. *But why not a broad-based, non-coercive tax?* he asked himself, *a voluntary tax earmarked solely for governmental charity?* He was frozen into immobility at the immense

import of his simple insight: all that would be necessary would be to strip the government of its power of coercive taxation when it came to charity. It would be warm charity without the chilling use of force.

Moments passed as he absorbed the ramifications of the peculiar concept. Forbidding the government from using coercive taxation for charitable purposes would constrain a governmental charity to live within its means; it would have available only that money which the citizens might choose to voluntarily donate. Such scarcity would act as an analogous governor, keeping charity within reasonable bounds such that it would neither be completely ineffective nor stop the motor of the world. If there was not enough money to cure all the world's ills, then it stood to reason that the world would either be forced to prioritize its needs so as to remain within its means, knock on more doors to raise more money, or do without. He foresaw how a library could temporarily cut back on its services until some unfortunate refugees were healed.

At first blush, it appeared as if the concept might be made to work. But how would the cautionary wisdom of Davy Crockett mesh with voluntary taxation? Could it still lead to the same evils that had destroyed America? *Probably*, he admitted glumly. What's to stop unscrupulous lawmakers from ignoring the restriction against using tax monies for charity? Who's to force errant judges to enforce the restriction? Witness how these very men had routinely ignored the plain language of the Constitution on all too many occasions; and given the opportunity, doubtless they would do so again. When lawmakers and judges conspired to ignore their solemn oath to uphold the Constitution, short of armed revolution, how could anyone stop them?

With another sudden leap, Eddie realized that the answer was again simple. Given how Crockett had argued it should never be within the realm of government to provide charity, then the solution was obvious: don't have the oath-breaking lawmakers and judges involved at all! Someone else besides government must provide the charity instead; to wit: it must be made a separate, societal responsibility, as it originally once was. With rapid crystallization, the answer fell squarely into the lap of his brain. Why not separate Society and State, and render unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's, but to Society the things that were Society's?

He nodded to himself. That was it. He was convinced. He had found the solution. A formulaic approach could be established, yet avoid the pitfalls which had doomed the nation. Society would be that formula. Better yet, there would be no need to reinvent from scratch the organization that would administer charity; an excellent blueprint already existed.

Surveying the papers and books scattered across the table, he shuffled through the jumbled clutter until he came across the United States Constitution. Scanning it quickly, he found the section he was looking for: the seventeen enumerated powers of the now-defunct national government. It would be trivial to excise those powers and replace them with a new mission, one suited *not* to a coercive government, but rather one suited to a voluntary Society. The resulting document would effectively become the oft-mentioned but never-seen "social contract," except that its tenets would be optional, not mandatory. One need not sign it, but even having done so, would still not be bound by it.

He retrieved a blank sheet of the library's dwindling supply of scrap paper and began to transcribe what he imagined should be the enumerated powers for this new Society, a new Article 1 Section 8. The first power was obvious: *To make voluntary Guidelines regarding requesting donations and making expenditures toward the common good and the good of others, from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.* He stared into

space for a moment, pencil in hand, considering what other powers might be needed by Society. But could not conceive of any others; the one clause apparently covered it all.

No blind fool, he readily recognized the collectivist creed he had just penned for what it was. Including those twelve final words in Society's Constitution justifiably troubled him at first; but in the end he was forced to admit there were none better to capture the concept. The phrase did not imply any sanctioning of theft by a People's State, nor did it impose a ruinous burden upon men—after all, by definition a man could only act according to his ability—which rendered the first six words, in essence, a tautology. But despite their stating the obvious, those six words fulfilled their goal by clearly naming the source of Society's wealth outright: *from each according to his ability*, with that ability being characterized by each individual man. Similarly, the final six named its target: *to each according to his need*, with that need being determined by circumstance. And standing squarely between ability and need would be the Guidelines of Society. Given that those Guidelines were defined by a sympathetic Society, not by predatory looters, the producer could never be milked for the benefit of the needy, nor would the needy have a claim on the resources of the producer. The key feature differentiating Society from a People's State was that Society held no coercive powers, none at all. So despite his initial misgivings, ultimately Eddie let the collectivist phrase remain intact, despite its less-than-glorious history. In a voluntary Society, the mantra was proper and apt.

Deciding he may as well formalize what he had been doing in the courtroom, he drew a double line across the middle of the paper and penned a second clause below it, quoting the carved sign: *All men have the inalienable right to live their own lives their own way without interference, provided they respect the rights and property of others.* Considering how justice was being practiced in Las Vegas, he decided to chronicle a few important details based upon his own experiences as judge. *Individuals can only be tried once for a given crime. Those convicted by a randomly-selected jury of their peers of violating this Constitution are sentenced to a punishment that is appropriate for the crime and stands to reason, and have the option of accepting or not accepting the sentence. Those who do not accept their sentence are no longer entitled to receive any benefits granted under this Constitution.*

But before he had even finished transcribing the concept, he began to have second thoughts about including the clause as a part of Society's powers. Defending the rights and property of citizens was clearly a governmental responsibility, not a societal one; and he had learned just this day exactly how dangerous it was to ever consider mixing the two. It would be crucial—nay, a *sine qua non*—that they be kept utterly and totally separate.

Giving that thought a tangible manifestation, he carefully tore the paper in half along the lines he had drawn, fittingly physically separating the powers of Society from the powers of the State. He set aside, for the moment, the bottom half of the page; once he finished with the Constitution for Society, he'd insert the text into its own Constitution for the State.

That done, he returned his hand to adapting the rest of the realigned Constitution to serve Society's needs. One after the other, he made note of those sections that could be omitted as being irrelevant—such as the power of coercive taxation—and others that needed minor modification—such as the jurisdiction of the courts—but he kept intact the bulk of the organizational structure it outlined. It did not take long to shift the paradigm; soon he was finished.

He re-read his notes once, then again, and with every passing second, he became more firmly convinced. It would work. The eleemosynous entity known as Society would become a rallying point for the caring people of Las Vegas, bringing together the medley of helping hands and minds that Eddie had been seeking. It was a formulaic response—a *non-governmental* response—that could not possibly spin out of control. The vacuum of space would still exist, but there would be a self-controlled regulator which would limit the rate at which the oxygen might be expelled. There was no chance it would stop the motor of the world, nor was there any need to.

Satisfied, he carefully set his notes on Society to one side. Turning his hand to the Constitution of the State with the goal of repeating the same task, he was surprised to find that the process progressed very differently than it had with Society's creation: the text of the Constitution literally melted in his hands, like cotton candy in a laughing child's mouth. He began the process in the same manner, first replacing the seventeen enumerated powers with his new rules of court, but from there the progression diverged rapidly, starting with the venerable document's very first words. Gone was the Legislature and its law-making ability; it had been over a year since the bandit's trial, and since that day there had been no rational reason to add any new law beyond the twenty-two carved words which still hung over the judge's bench in the courtroom. Gone also was the Head of State; without a legislature, why have a leader? In an organization without powers, what need is there to charge an executive with executing those non-existent laws? And without a Congress to pass laws, what was the need for someone to sign or veto non-existent bills? Rules regarding elections and succession were similarly useless, given that no man needed to be elected or succeeded. The courts would remain, of course, but given the communal nature of the new court system, the bulk of even that section of constitutional text melted away.

Turning finally to the numerous constitutional amendments, one by one the guarantees of the Bill of Rights fell by the wayside as being unnecessary. All of their restrictions upon the power of government were either currently covered by the concise commandment carved in the courtroom, or the powers that the amendments were meant to balance no longer existed. The only amendment he felt worthy of keeping was a foreshortened rendering of the Tenth, the one reserving all rights to the people.

In the end, so many words had vanished that when he finally finished drafting the Constitution for the State, little was left beyond his new rules of court, a means for amendments, and the reservation of rights to the people. The rest had simply evaporated as being either redundant or unnecessary. Where there were once three branches of government, he was left with only one, the judicial branch—less than one, actually, since anyone could establish a court, not just the State.

Although he was convinced it was complete, one part of Eddie remained dubious. How could so much of the exalted Constitution prove to be so superfluous to running the necessary functions of a government? Returning to the top of the document, he carefully reviewed his edits, but he could make no justification for including any more of its text, nor removing any of that which he had left intact. While his instincts told him that his wording might possibly be tightened up to make it more precise, intellectually he could not imagine how. To his eye it was all correct and complete.

Sitting alone in the library, he nodded to himself, satisfied. Against all odds and the misguided wisdom of the ages, he had accomplished his goal. He leaned over the table, holding the two sets of scribbled notes side

by side, the Constitution for Society in one hand and the Constitution for the State in the other. As he bent over the few scraps of paper which would make it possible for thousands of men to live together in peace, he considered the implications of what he had wrought: the separation of Society and State. Like some modern-day Solomon, he had taken the powers long assumed to be the province of the State and had ordered them to be divided, giving most to Society and reserving very few for the original holder. While the result would be a radically different political world, it would also remain hauntingly the same. Where the old governments had passed laws, Society would now suggest Guidelines. Where governments had set mandatory tax rates, Society would instead recommend voluntary contributions. Like a traditional government, Society would have its Congress, its courts, and its Head of State—Head of Society, actually. The new Legislature would suggest and enact Guidelines for Society designed to help those less fortunate, then solicit, collect, and distribute charitable funds as could best be done; and where there were disagreements, Society's court would decide the Societal issue. Other than that, Society would have no power over men; its edicts would be completely voluntary. It was a perfect solution, for it would provide a disciplined vehicle for the kind-hearted people of the world who wished to help their fellow man, but not for the scoundrels who wished to rob that same fellow man. Although those who would abuse the system could not be stopped or eliminated entirely, the damage they might be able to do would be strictly limited.

Pleased with the results of his labors, Eddie prepared to leave. He conscientiously re-shelved the books and pamphlets he had accumulated, cleared the other clutter from the table, and folded almost reverently his notes for the new Constitutions, placing one in his left pocket and the other in his right.

He departed the library. There was much to be done.

* * *

The priest hesitated.

"You did what?" he inquired uncertainly.

"I separated Society and State."

He scratched an ear abstractly. "My apologies, but I'm still none the wiser for you repeating it."

Eddie was almost excited. "Remember our discussions about charity?"

"Of course," he replied without rancor. "It was only yesterday."

"Well there's another solution aside from the ones you mentioned."

"I'm sure there is. I'm no Solomon, just a humble servant of his Master."

"That's what I'm telling you! There *is* another way! You can separate Society and State."

It was a measure of the priest's patience that he held his smile. "Yes. You mentioned that."

"Let me explain..." Pulling two carefully-folded sheets of paper from his pockets, Eddie briefed the priest on his idea. The exposition did not take long, as there was not much to tell. He felt that its simplicity was its most salient feature. "...and it avoids all the pitfalls that Davy Crockett warned of," he concluded.

The priest had listened carefully out of professional habit, then he started in with the questions, intrigued. "And how many people would run this Society?"

“Let me see... There would be one Head of Society and an Assistant Head of Society, two Senators representing all of Nevada, and I figure on starting out with three Congressmen so as to avoid ties when voting. Add three Supreme Court Justices for the same reason, and that brings it up to ten people. Not too many.”

“And they’d pass laws?”

“Yes, but I thought ‘Guidelines’ would probably be a better word. Whatever it is they pass would have no force of law.”

“Then what’s to make people follow them?”

“Nothing. They’re only Guidelines.”

Confused, the priest stammered, “But... How would that work, if people don’t have to follow them?”

“Easily! Take the case of helping our refugee friends. Let’s assume their medical care costs a hundred willies in total.” His face colored momentarily. “Given that there are about five thousand residents here in town, each person’s share comes out to...” Briefly, he calculated in his head. “What, two cents?”

“But what if someone doesn’t want to contribute? You said the laws were only guidelines.”

“They are. I was getting to that. As you say, not everyone will want to contribute, but you just have to take that into account. I don’t know what the actual percentage would be, but let’s use your number from yesterday and say that only one in a hundred wants to help. That means the suggested fair share is two willies each.” Again, he colored; diplomatically, the priest did not comment. “So, assuming the Guideline gets passed, everyone in town would be asked to contribute two willies to Society.” The color deepened. “One in a hundred contributes, and the bills are paid. And there would always be people who’d be more than happy to give more than their fair share, so their actual donation might even be higher.”

“That’s certainly true. I see the same sort of generosity within my congregation.” He pondered Eddie’s words for a moment. “But ‘assuming the Guidelines get passed,’ you say? Why wouldn’t they?”

“I couldn’t say. Any number of reasons. Maybe the Congress or Senate doesn’t like how a given scheme operates and votes it down. Or the Head of Society vetoes it because it’s too expensive. It would work just like the United States government. And that’s part of the beauty of Society—everyone already knows how it operates.” Recalling his own ignorance of the Constitution, he quickly added, “At least they *should* know how it operates.” Again, he corrected himself. “‘Operated,’ I should say.”

“So your legislature would have to vote on every request for help?” he asked, the concern plain on his face. “There are a lot of charity cases out there, believe me. You’d be voting twenty-four hours a day!”

“No, no, that’s not how it would work.” He gestured with his notes. “This is only the framework, not the actual mechanism. Once Society authorizes some Guideline, you’d set up an individual Societal agency to administer the actual spending, such as an Agency of Meals, and Agency of Medicine, and so forth. The Head of Society would propose an annual budget to fund the various Agencies, just like the Head of State does—uh, used to do. Society would estimate the anticipated costs of all the Agencies, divide it by the number of people who they think will contribute, statistically speaking, and that would be the tax they’d be asked to pay.”

“Tithe,” prompted the priest.

“What?”

“Not taxes; tithes. Taxes aren’t voluntary; tithes are.”

“I see your point, but I’m not sure tithes is the right word either. And I doubt the contribution rate would be as high as the traditional ten percent.”

“Then what would you want to call it? A contribution? Alms? How about a duty?” He smiled pleasantly. “I like that one, especially given its double meaning.”

“I’m not so sure that’s the best word either. A duty is really a tax, and we would really want to stress the voluntary nature of the contribution.”

“Philanthropy, then? Patronage? Benefaction?”

Eddie waved him off. “Call it what you will; the idea is what’s important.”

“Very true,” he agreed. The priest stroked his chin contemplatively. “You know, it might be difficult coming up with that budget, Mr. Eddie. I can tell you from my own experience that it’s not easy to predict when someone will need help. Just look at the case with our newcomers!”

Eddie nodded. “That’s one of the reasons I came to see you. Before I go public with this plan, I’d like to have an idea of how much we can expect to ask people to pay. I was hoping we could use your numbers and extrapolate from there to estimate what the entire town would need, and how much they might contribute.” *Like the banker and I did with the money supply*, he realized. *Only today it’s the charity supply!*

“Wouldn’t your budget depend on what Guidelines get passed?”

“That’s another thing I’d hope you’d be able to tell me. What Guidelines do you think we should have?”

“More than you’d imagine. The needs are great.”

“You know, I just had an interesting idea.”

“I do now. What’s that?”

Eddie held his gaze. “Since you’re such an expert on charity, would you consider serving as the first Head of Society?”

Without hesitation, the priest laughed in his clear, friendly manner. “No, sir! In fact, let me turn the tables on you: this whole Society concept is your idea—and pardon me if I borrow one of your favorite phrases—I believe it *stands to reason* that there is none other who so clearly understands that vision any better than you. You’re a natural to be the leader!”

Eddie did not reply. There was no argument he could offer. The holy man’s belief did indeed stand to reason.

The priest let him consider the proposition for a moment, then added, “Tell you what, though. I understand and support what you’re trying to accomplish. I’d be honored to serve as your Assistant Head of Society instead and help make your idea a reality. But you’d have to be the man in command. Besides, this town wouldn’t want anyone else.”

Eddie remained silent for a moment. Again, there was no argument he could offer. “All right—at least for now.” Solemnly, he held out his hand. “Deal.”

The two men shook hands.

* * *

Society formed.

Although the road to its creation was littered with many bumps, they were minor and quickly overcome.

The first bump was in the explaining. It was fortunate for Eddie that there was much less urgency to decide the issue, unlike the night they restructured the local economy. This time it took three town meetings, one per week, before Eddie was satisfied that the people of Las Vegas sufficiently understood what it was he was proposing. There were two indications that his message was finally getting through: the first was that men no longer kept asking the same questions over and over again, and the

second was that campaign signs began to appear around town touting one prominent citizen or another for a post in Society's Legislature.

Another bump was the election itself. Rather than going through the elaborate effort of establishing polling places and creating ballots, a fourth town meeting was scheduled to select Society's leaders through shows of hands. Eddie and the priest were running unopposed for the top two posts, and when the big night arrived they were elected by loud acclamation. But there were many more candidates for Senator and Congressman than available billets, so Eddie held successive ballots; the candidate who received the least number of votes was dropped from the balloting, then another round of voting would occur. It was the only way that seemed fair to him. In short order, enough candidates were eliminated leaving five victors standing: three Congressmen and two Senators. One of the new Senators was a rich casino owner who had made his fortune in the coin conversion; the other, Eddie's banker friend.

Meeting in the cavernous confines of the waiting room of Transcontinental Railroad's Las Vegas station, it took the new Head of Society and his Legislature less than a week to populate their Supreme Court and hammer out a budget, and one week later the first notice of benefaction was posted. Much to the surprise of both Eddie and the priest, the appeal brought in many times the amount their austere budget required. The hospital was promptly repaid for the expenses incurred in caring for the refugees, leaving quite a tidy sum of cash in Society's coffers for future charitable purposes.

Flush with willies, the Legislature quickly passed a succession of Guidelines which provided pensions for the aged, soup kitchens for the hungry, and electric carts for the crippled. Eddie promptly vetoed each one. He still retained in his mind the unpleasant vision of knocking on doors, and tapping too heavily into the available charity of the town was his constant fear; besides, there was always the possibility of incurring an unanticipated, unexpectedly large charitable expenditure. After the vetoes, he explained to the Legislature that he felt it better to stockpile reserves and to build up a track record of potential expenditures over the course of many months, perhaps years, before committing to such bold initiatives. The suggestions made sense; his vetoes were not overridden.

Caution became the watchword of Eddie's administration. Aside from the appropriation to repay the initial bills of the refugees, the only Guideline he consented to signing in the first month of his tenure was a modest appropriation for the public library.

CHAPTER 15 – I'D LOVE TO CHANGE THE WORLD

Eddie cooked.

Like some general proudly reviewing his troops, he stood watch over a bevy of steaming pots and sizzling pans, their aromatic mélange drifting through the air already tinged with the delicate scent of lavender.

"You see?" the woman applauded, her voice brightly cheerful. "I told you it wasn't all that difficult."

He had to agree. "I never thought I'd be able to put together such a complicated meal. It smells wonderful!"

"Well, it's not over yet," she warned. "You still have to get it onto the table before it burns... boils... scorches..." She looked toward the ceiling, playfully pondering all of the possible calamities that could still befall their dinner, ticking them off on an insufficient number of fingers. "...melts... falls... smolders... bursts into flames..." He threw her a dark glance and she burst out laughing.

"Help me get this into the serving dishes, will you?"

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, the laughter still in her voice. "You wanted to do a French dinner all on your own, and that's just what you're going to do. Presentation is just as important as the preparation, remember. You've gotten this far without my help, Edwin, and now that it's almost done, I'm not going to start interfering."

He had not waited for her to finish her admonition before taking action. He turned off two of the burners and pulled the pans from the stove, swinging around to place them on their waiting trivets as she squirmed lithely out of his way. He tried not to notice how attractive her motions were; he did not succeed. "I'll let you set the table," he compromised, "if it'll keep you out of my way."

"My pleasure, Your Honor."

Before long they sat down to a fine dinner, and Eddie had to admit it was beyond excellent, even if he did say so himself. He could hardly believe he had done so superb a job on his own. Granted, it was her recipe which he had mastered under her tutelage, but the glory of the master reflected in the accomplishments of the student was just as much a burnished triumph for the student as it was for the master.

Nor was this the first masterpiece he had prepared. In the nearly two years since she had first cooked his breakfast on that memorable morning following his concussion, she had taught him much about the finer points of cooking; in fact, she had generally become something of a fixture in his life. Not that he sought her out; rather, she had, in effect, adopted him. Aside from their weekly cooking lessons, she would drop by unannounced at all hours several times a week, "just to say 'hello.'" No clueless prude, Eddie suspected she held some ulterior motive of a romantic nature; but she had never pushed the matter beyond a routine peck on his cheek whenever they parted. Nor had he pursued her, despite her stunning attractiveness; he feared that if he showed the slightest interest, the situation would transform itself in an instant, of its own accord, to a very personal one. Given the nature of her profession, he took embarrassed pains to keep their relationship on a strictly social basis; nevertheless it was no secret that he enjoyed her company as much as she enjoyed his, yet there remained a wall between them that he hesitated to peer over.

After dinner, in what had become another ritual for them, they took repose in the wing-back chairs overlooking the rear railing of the

observation car enjoying the warm evening over glasses of a sweet cordial she had brought along. It was there that the banker found them.

"Ah!" he exclaimed when he noticed Eddie's lovely guest. "I'm sorry to interrupt! I didn't think you'd still have company this late."

Blushing furiously, Eddie literally leapt out of his chair. "No! You're not interrupting! We were just relaxing after dinner." He held up his cordial. "Can I get you a glass?"

"No, no thank you." He glanced briefly at the woman. "I won't be staying that long. I was on my way home and needed to speak with you about a Societal matter as soon as possible." He glanced again at the woman. "Perhaps it should wait until the morning?"

The woman spoke up, deferentially stressing his title. "That's quite all right, Senator. It's getting late, and I really should be going." She set her glass down, stood up, and faced Eddie. "Thank you for the fine dinner."

"And you, for teaching me how to cook it."

She flashed a bright smile. "My pleasure, Your Honor." She gave him her usual peck on the cheek and descended the four steps from the balcony to the platform. Entranced, the two men watched her walk away until she was out of sight.

A few seconds later the distracted banker turned toward Eddie. "Where were we?"

"Ah..." He rummaged about in his mind, trying to focus. "Something important you had to speak with me about?"

"Oh! Yes, there was." He ascended the steps and took the woman's vacated seat, setting his briefcase on his lap. "I'm sorry to trouble you."

Eddie sat down. "Not at all. What is it?"

He sighed. "I think we have another problem." He opened the brief case and pulled out a thick sheaf of papers. "I was doing some analysis on the value of our paper money to see if we should consider devaluing it further when I noticed some anomalies." He paused dramatically, holding up the sheaf, waiting to be encouraged.

"Anomalies? Such as?" he prompted.

The banker dropped his bombshell. "It appears the value of the paper money is rising."

Eddie eyebrows shot up. "Rising? Why should it be rising? It's only paper."

"That's what got me wondering." He produced a graph littered with spiked lines of various colors. "Notice how its value has been dropping ever since we shifted to a silver-backed economy a few years ago." He slid a finger along a dark red line on the graph. "It dropped quickly at first, then more slowly, then flattened out. But as you can see..." He paused again.

"...it's rising again," Eddie finished. "What would cause that?"

"It could be any of several factors. I won't bore you with all the ins and outs, but I have a strong suspicion as to what it might be." For a third time, he paused; it was obvious he was again waiting to be prompted.

"Well? What do you think?"

Smiling, the banker dropped a second bombshell. "I don't believe it's the value of the paper that's rising. It's the value of silver that's dropping." He leaned back in his chair, smug.

Eddie hesitated, confused. "Well... Doesn't that make sense? A good number of mines have re-opened over the last year and added a lot of silver to the money supply. Wouldn't that drive down its value?"

"Yes, but not nearly so much" He pointed to a rising green line. "I took that into account. Here's the estimated output of the mines, and this..." He indicated a falling dashed green line, "...is the value of silver. You'll notice that it's falling much faster than the value of paper is rising. If you

look at the fundamentals, such as the velocity of money..." He began flipping through his papers, but stopped himself. "I do apologize. I promised to avoid the ins and outs, so let me cut to the chase: it appears to me that someone is circulating silver that doesn't exist. Quite a bit of it, too. That's why its value is dropping as fast as it is."

Two seconds passed before Eddie reacted. "You're making a joke? How can one circulate silver that doesn't exist?"

"It's not that difficult. Stop and think—isn't non-existent silver exactly what the old paper money represented? Silver in Washington that, for all intents and purposes, did not exist?"

"You're saying someone is counterfeiting paper money?"

"In a way. 'Writing' is probably a better term for it."

"I don't follow you. What do you mean, 'writing' money? And who could be doing it?"

"I believe it's my competitor. My guess is that he's writing IOU's against silver he doesn't own—in other words, he's practicing fractional reserve banking." He pointed to the graph. "No one else is in a position to have so big an impact on the money supply—" He flashed a self-conscious smile. "—except me, of course."

"You mean he's handing out people's deposits as his own money?"

The banker nodded gravely. "I suspect that if everyone went to his bank all at once and withdrew their demand deposits, he would not have enough silver on hand to cover the withdrawals." He pointed to a bright red line on his graph. It was rising, and the slope was steepening. "If I read my numbers right, he's already over-lent almost twenty percent of his silver assets."

"And no one's noticed?"

"Well, I noticed!" The banker shook his graph testily at Eddie in demonstration. "But you're right. Usually people won't notice anything because most of their deposits just sit around in the vault collecting dust. But it looks to me like he's either lending it out to earn interest, or just stealing it and hoping no one notices. If he goes too far, he risks the stability of his bank."

Eddie angled his head toward the graph with concern. "Does this mean another panic?"

"Yes, eventually. And some of his depositors could surely lose money. In fact, they may already have."

"So what do we do?"

"Well, first we have to confirm that my calculations are correct, and if they are, we have to get him to stop."

"How would you do that?"

The banker took a deep breath. "I have no idea. That's why I'm here."

Eddie sighed glumly. "Here we go again."

"At least there's no tremendous hurry this time. We can take a little while to think it through. We probably should convene a special session of Society's Legislature to deal with it."

"Not so quickly," countered Eddie. "If he's stealing depositors' money, it's not a Societal issue; it's for a court to decide. But before we take that step, let me pay our friend a visit tomorrow morning. His bank is just around the corner."

"And do what?" the banker challenged sarcastically. "Ask him if he's stealing from his depositors? Or merely risking their deposits? Bah!" He rose to his feet. "Trust me; he won't answer. And there's no way I can force him to answer—not without me ending up paying an involuntary visit to

your courtroom for ‘lacking respect for his rights.’” He lifted his briefcase. “What we need in this town are some laws with teeth in them!”

Eddie looked momentarily perplexed. Putting on a mantle of formality, he inquired, “You’re inviting Society to forcibly regulate your bank, Senator?”

“No, of course not,” he backpedaled. “But there has to be something we can do!”

“Let me talk to him first.”

“Good luck!” he replied gruffly, and strode off into the night.

* * *

The banker’s competitor scoffed.

“Son, if you think I’m going to let you paw through my books, you are out of your mind!” His eyes narrowed at Eddie suspiciously. “What business is it of yours to be meddling anyway?”

Another man may have been able to fabricate a plausible excuse on the spot, perhaps sidestep the question entirely; but Eddie was not the type of person to dissemble or dodge; it was not in his character. Instead, he gave a forthright reply. “Then let me ask you outright: are you retaining a one hundred percent reserve on your demand deposits?”

“That’s none of your business!”

“But if you’re not, then it could threaten people’s deposits! Wasn’t one panic enough?”

“Son, you may be Head of Society, but you’re not the head of this bank.” He rose to his feet. “I’m a busy man. If that’s all you wanted to see me about, then good day, sir!”

Eddie sat a moment longer, trying without success to think of some way to reach the man.

“Good day, sir!” repeated the banker.

Defeated for the moment, Eddie stood and left.

* * *

Eddie stepped outside.

The wide boulevard in front of the bank was full of activity. Shoppers strolled along the sidewalks, mounted horses ambled up and down the street, and laughing children ran weaving in and out amongst all of them.

He joined the unconscious dance in a dejected mood. He had to admit that the man was well within his rights; he deserved to have his privacy respected. But did that mean that the town had to wait until his bank crashed before they were able to take action? That was akin to closing the gate after the horse had escaped. At what point did a suspicion become a reason to disrespect someone’s privacy? And upon what authority? It seemed to be a slippery slope with no clear answer, when what was needed was a black-and-white differentiation. But he could not imagine what that might be.

His glum reverie was interrupted by some sort of commotion brewing ahead of him: he could hear a man yelling, a rearing horse neighing, and other angry voices. It did not take long for Eddie to pick out the cause of the uproar: a young teenaged girl was careening down the street at a good clip straddling an odd-shaped electric cart, leaving dust and curses in her wake. Close on her heels were two more carts, similarly piloted by a pair of her peers. As the lead girl neared Eddie, so did the commotion; a shopper stepped sideways to avoid a reined horse, accidentally bumping into him. Knocked momentarily off balance, Eddie began to take a step backward; but

his foot never completed the motion: close behind his heel was the curb. His foot abruptly stopped, and the momentum and inertia of his backward step propelled him over the curb, arching backward. Arms flailing, down he went, and with a sharp crack, his head impacted the unyielding sidewalk, then all went dark.

* * *

Eddie came to.

His head throbbed painfully as he lay on his bed in the sleeper car. He squinted open one eye, and the agonizingly bright morning sunlight forced him to quickly close it.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” a woman’s voice suggested in a playfully mocking tone.

He didn’t have to look to see who it was who spoke; the delicate scent in the air gave her away. Slowly, he forced one eye open, then the other. He squinted at her as he raised a hand to his head and gingerly rubbed a small lump. He closed his eyes with a soft sigh.

“At least no one punched you this time,” she offered helpfully.

“Small blessings,” he murmured. He moved to sit up.

“No, no!” she warned, a hand pressing upon his chest. “You should know the routine by now. You lay still!”

Gently, he shoved her hand away. “I’m all right,” he ventured, ignoring a slight swoon to his surroundings. He sat up, swung his legs to the floor, and took a deep breath. “I’m all right,” he repeated, a little more firmly.

“Are you sure?” she asked, all concern.

He ignored her question, instead focusing on her as if seeing her for the first time. “What are *you* doing here?”

“When you fell, I happened to be walking by, lucky for you. I deputized a few strong men to carry you in here—I figured it was just around the corner and a lot closer than the hospital. I already called the doctor. He’s on his way.”

Eddie stood up somewhat successfully. He held his arms wide, palms up. “See? I’m all right,” he reaffirmed. “I don’t need a doctor.”

“We’ll let the doctor be the judge of that, Your Honor.” She turned her head at the sound of footsteps climbing into the sleeper car. “That’s probably him now.”

It was. “Hello?” a masculine voice called out.

“In here!” Eddie and the woman replied simultaneously.

The doctor entered the compartment and his glance went from one to the other. “Who’s the patient?”

“I am,” admitted Eddie. “But I’m all right.”

“Let me check you out anyway. It’s never good to bang your head.” With rapid efficiency, the doctor examined his injury. When he had finished, he proclaimed, “It appears that no real damage was done, but you should take it easy for a while anyway.”

“If I’m careful and move slowly, I’ll be all right.”

“You ought to rest.”

“I’m all right,” he repeated.

The doctor sighed. “Pardon the pun, but on your head be it. Just try to take it easy for the next day or so.” He turned to leave, and Eddie immediately followed.

“Where do you think you’re going,” the woman asked sternly.

He turned at the door to face her. “I need to see the priest.”

“The priest?” Her mouth hung open slightly in confusion. “But the doctor said you’d be all right!”

“I need to speak with him about how this happened,” he explained, raising a hand to his cranium. “One sore head is enough.”

“Oh, you’re not that grumpy,” she replied with a clever smile.

Without another word, he turned to leave. Puns had never been among his favorite things, and two in a row exceeded his quota by a similar amount.

“I’ll stop back around noon,” she called to his retreating back. “I have a new recipe I want to try for lunch.”

“Okay,” his diminishing voice agreed. Calling over his shoulder, he added, “I might be a bit late, though. I need to talk with the policeman, too.”

* * *

Eddie stared.

The policeman waited him out.

“But they’re just kids!” cried Eddie. “I don’t want them locked up!”

“You are—” The policeman held up a clipboard clamping together several sheets of paper. “—the thirteenth person to come in here today complaining about those kids and their driving. Kids or not, something has to be done!” He tossed the clipboard back onto his desk with a clatter. “Or are you saying we should do nothing?”

“No, no,” he retreated. “But why do you insist that we toss them in jail? Isn’t that... well... a bit heavy-handed?”

The policeman pushed the clipboard aside and leaned over the desk. “What would you suggest we do then?”

“Lots of things! Have you spoken with their parents yet?”

“I’ve already looked into that option. Only one of the kids has parents here in town. The other two came in with your trainload of refugees. Legally speaking, they have no parents.”

“Well, have you contacted the orphanage then?”

“Of course. But from what I understand, they’re not living at the orphanage.”

Eddie blinked. It was not an answer he had expected. “Where do they sleep, then?”

The policeman shrugged. “You’d have to ask them that.”

“What?! How old are they? Eleven? Twelve?”

“Thereabouts. I couldn’t say for sure, but looking at them, my guess is that puberty is waiting for each of them just around the next corner.”

Eddie reddened faintly.

Ignoring his unease, the policeman persisted. “Orphans or not, shouldn’t children be required to respect the rights and property of others? That is the town law, you know—as if I have to explain that to *you* of all people!”

“Yes, but...” Again, Eddie hesitated. “...They’re just kids! Shouldn’t we be cutting them a little slack?”

“Slack? Are you saying kids should be able to violate the law whenever they like?”

“No, no, of course not.”

“But that’s my point: they should be respecting the rights and property of others. That’s not something you can slack on; it’s either all or nothing.”

“Yes, but...,” Eddie repeated, again hesitating.

“But what?”

He sighed aloud. "But should you be talking right away about jail? Isn't there some authority figure we can appeal to first? Someone a bit more compassionate?"

"Like who?"

"Like the person who is supposed to be responsible for those kids."

"Two of them are orphans, I tell you. No one is responsible for them."

Eddie shook his head in negation, ignoring the slight swoon it induced. "That can't be right. The way I see it, someone has to be responsible for a given child: it could be their parents, a relative, guardians; you know: *someone*. I know I'm repeating myself, but they *are* just kids after all. Somebody's got to be looking out for them."

"I would agree. But, at the risk of repeating myself as well, who?"

Eddie sat in silent thought for a moment, then ventured, "Well, let's look at it logically. Who is responsible for anyone?"

Now it was the policeman's turn to hesitate. "I'm not sure I follow you."

"Think of it this way." Eddie pointed at the policeman. "Who is responsible for you?"

"I am." The answer was as swift as it was proud.

"And what about when you were a baby?"

"My father," came the reply, just as quickly. Conceding he owed Eddie more of an explanation, he added, "My mother died in childbirth."

Eddie reddened. "Oh! I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"Thank you, but what was your point?"

As his color slowly returned to normal, he concluded, "My point is that somewhere between then and now, you assumed control over your own life. But regardless of when that point was, there was always someone responsible: first it was your father, then it was you."

"Ah, I see," the policeman anticipated. "The question is: when is it that a man—or an orphan—becomes responsible for himself? What marks that line?"

"Precisely!"

Attentively, the policeman leaned forward. "And where *do* you draw that line?"

Eddie held the policeman's eye for a moment, then looked away uneasily. "I'm not certain," he admitted.

"Not certain?" He leaned back dismayed, almost scornful. "You seemed pretty certain a half a second ago!"

"I *am* certain there's a line," he quickly clarified, then paused. "But I'm not sure how one would recognize it."

The policeman chuckled. "Well, wherever it is, I know a lot of grown men who've never crossed it."

Eddie nodded. "And so do I—we've certainly seen enough of them in court. They're like children in that they don't act as if they were responsible for themselves."

"Leaving the State to be responsible for them," he grouched. "Jail or exile, mostly. Restitution, when possible."

"That is true—" Eddie agreed, but cut himself off abruptly. "Is that the line we're looking for, then?"

"What, jail?" The policeman stared at him blankly. The statement made no sense. "I thought you said—"

No!" he interrupted impatiently. "Self-responsibility! That's the line we're looking for!" Eddie's mind had already shot far ahead of the policeman's. He paused momentarily as he mentally pursued the ramifications. "Yes," he asserted confidently. "That's the answer. The line is drawn at the point where each person decides to draw it."

The policeman's stare remained blank. "But... How does that mean anything, if everyone defines it for themselves? Didn't we just say how some men never get around to drawing it?"

"Exactly!" he agreed. "That's when you and I have to step in and draw it for them—the State, I should say. And isn't that just what we've been doing in court?"

The policeman heard the words, but he was not following the reasoning. "But I thought you just said that men must decide for themselves where to draw that line. What if they don't?"

"But they do, even if they don't. Failure to make a decision is still a decision, you know. It's a decision not to decide. And *that* is what defines your line."

The policeman paused in thought; the enigmatic assertion made perfect sense. "I think I'm with you now. If a man has crossed that line, it's reflected in his responsible behavior; and if he hasn't, it's reflected in his irresponsible behavior."

"Yes! And it's not the responsible men that you and I meet in court, it's the irresponsible ones; and the State has to take responsibility for them. The incorrigibles, we exile; the... corrigibles...?" He waved the word aside. "Whatever you call them, we merely punish. We make them realize they need to draw that line for themselves, and we give them the chance to better themselves. As we did with your first bandit a few years ago."

"A chance to mature?" the policeman suggested with a smile.

Eddie nodded. "That's the word. Men choose to respect the rights of others—to act mature—or they don't. It's a self-selected group."

"I'm with you now," agreed the policeman. "And I also see how this applies to our three rapsallions."

"That's right," Eddie agreed in turn. "It's obvious which side of the line they're on, or else we wouldn't be thinking of initiating the use of courts against them. Since they aren't taking responsibility for themselves to respect the rights of others, it's up to the State to assume that responsibility."

Again the policeman nodded. "With grown men, who could disagree? But with children, wouldn't the State come second? I'd say it's their parents who are primarily responsible."

"Of course!" Eddie retorted testily, as if the idea was not open to question. "And that prioritization will determine how we handle sentencing for them. We don't just throw them in jail, like you're suggesting. Rather, since the kids obviously aren't acting responsibly themselves, it's a much better idea to remand them to the custody of someone who will assume that responsibility: the obvious choice is their parents."

"And what about the other two? The refugee orphans? They have no parents." Even as he asked the question, the policeman realized the answer. He and Eddie spoke in unison: "The orphanage!"

Eddie raised a halting hand. "Assuming they'll take them in, that is. They can only afford to take care of so many children, you know, even with the stipend Society has been giving them."

"Well, it doesn't necessarily have to be the orphanage, does it?"

"That's true. Anyone could step in and adopt them..." Eddie hesitated, as if he did not want to name his thoughts aloud. "But if no one wants them or can't take them, for whatever reason..." He faltered again, still not wanting to name the logical conclusion.

The policeman did him the favor of finishing the sentence for him. "Then the State takes over. We'd have no choice but to treat them as an adult. And that means..."

Eddie nodded and looked away uneasily. “Ultimately jail or exile,” he answered matter-of-factly, understanding fully how those were the only choices remaining; but either option was infinitely better than letting the little hellions run wild. Although his face remained sadly distraught, it was clear he finally accepted such solutions as the last resort—but only as the last resort. He fervently wished there were a better alternative, but the possible direction of any third path eluded him. After a moment, he faced the policeman unapologetically. “It would appear your initial premise was correct; we are indeed forced to arrest them. And try them. And sentence them, if they’re guilty.” He took a deep breath. “And ultimately jail them if we must.”

The policeman tactfully acknowledged the reluctant acquiescence. “As you say, unless someone steps up to assume responsibility, what other choice is there except to have the State assume it?”

Eddie nodded gravely. “And the same would hold true if the parents or the orphanage could not effectively exercise their responsibility—if the poor kid kept on getting into trouble, for example—at some point responsibility would have to fall back upon the State.”

The policeman nodded in turn, just as gravely. “Then it would be a jail term for that poor kid. Or exile, in the worst cases.”

“Exile a child!” Eddie sighed loudly. “It would be a pity if that were ever to come to pass.”

The policeman held Eddie’s eye boldly. “But it *is* my duty to keep the streets safe, remember—even from children.”

Eddie did not shy away from the policeman’s steady gaze. “And respecting the rights and property of others is everyone’s duty—kids and grownups alike.” With a resigned sigh he finally looked away. “But you’re right: enforcing the fulfillment of that duty is the responsibility of the State—even when it comes to children.”

“When and as needed, sorry to say,” agreed the policeman. After a short pause, he added, “But I still have some questions. About practical applications.”

“Such as?”

“Well...” The policeman hesitated, knowing he might be borrowing trouble, but after another brief pause he resumed. He knew the issue would arise sooner or later in any case; they may as well deal with it now. “Some call this a wicked town, and for good reason. Wouldn’t you want us to protect our children from its pitfalls?”

“Such as?”

“Well...” He considered the question for a moment. “Don’t you think there should be a minimum drinking age, for example?”

“Why, no,” Eddie stated flatly.

“No?”

“No,” he repeated. “Most men drink responsibly, but there are always some men who simply should not drink alcohol. I’m sure the same can be said for children. Again: it’s a self-selecting group. If an adult—or a child—drinks responsibly, what business is it of the State? But if they cannot control themselves when they drink such that they don’t respect the rights or property of others, then the State can and should move against them. That’s the law for adults today. Why wouldn’t it work for children, too?”

“But what if the parents don’t want their child to drink?” He knew the question sounded academic, but the policeman was actually speaking for himself. Like most people, he did not condone widespread drinking among children; but, again like most people, his own introduction to alcohol predated the legal drinking age by many a year. In light of that personal

experience, he suddenly realized that eliminating the drinking age would not significantly alter that pattern. Kids would still be kids, regardless of any artificial statutory requirement—and creating one would only serve to criminalize typical adolescent behavior.

Eddie hesitated, as if he didn't understand the question. "If the parents don't want their child to drink alcohol, then wouldn't that be a private matter between them and their child?" He nodded his head gently and answered his own question. "That's right; family matters are none of the State's business. Because once you start down that path, you might as well have the State enforcing bedtimes, or deciding what kids should eat for dinner, or where and when they go to school. Those are all issues best decided within the family."

The policeman paused pensively. "I believe I see. It's not a public issue; it's a family issue. So long as the children are respecting the rights and property of others, the State never has a role."

Eddie nodded emphatically, but winced at a sudden pain. Apparently he still wasn't completely his normal self. "Correct! Neither State nor Society has a role. How could anyone justify standing between parents and their children? Or forcing policemen like you to enforce their personal edicts?"

The policeman was finally catching up with Eddie's train of thought. "Then I assume the same premise would hold true for, say, tobacco and gambling?"

"Of course. It's not for the State to say. Parents are responsible for raising their children as they see fit, until the time the children successfully assume that burden. That would include any vice, I would say."

"Prostitution, too?" interjected the policeman.

"Prostitution!" Inexplicably, Eddie glanced quickly at his wristwatch and blushed a beet red. "You mean..." He swallowed uneasily. "With a... a..." He could not vocalize the thought.

The policeman bluntly obliged. "Yes. Sex. With a child. Or a child prostitute, for that matter. And to make it black and white, let's say the child has the parents' permission, unlikely as that may seem." He folded his arms across his chest and stared coldly, waiting for an answer. Veteran policeman though he was, he was loath to hear what might come next.

A horror-struck Eddie opened and closed his mouth several times, but no sounds came forth. He paused to take a deep breath, then managed to blurt out, "But if someone tried to do something like that to a child, he wouldn't be respecting the rights of the child! Not at all! Even if the child agreed! It's not the child's choice that's the issue, it's the man's!" He took another deep breath. Exhaling shakily, he concluded, "Besides, a child is too young to know any better anyway."

"Too true," agreed the policeman. "If you left all the important decisions to children, they'd be living on a diet of ice cream and candy!" He smiled at the thought.

Eddie remained too rattled to react to the policeman's mirth, especially in light of the horrid images that dominated his consciousness. With a voice that still shook, he added, "And what sort of man would even *consider* doing that sort of thing to a child?" His eyes misted over, forcing him to blink repeatedly.

Grimly, the policeman lowered his folded arms. "I could tell you... except I that don't use that sort of language!" He appraised poor Eddie's distress. "Sorry, but I had to ask. Professional habit."

Still red-faced, Eddie could only nod.

"One more question, and I'll let this one go: how old would you think the child should be, before... you know."

“Past puberty!” he immediately cried, reddening anew. “That’s for sure!” He took another deep breath before finishing. “—and older is better!”

“How much older? Where exactly would you draw that line?”

Eddie was clearly uncomfortable with the continued questioning, but managed to hold his voice steady. “That’s why we have a jury: to examine the borderline cases and make a ruling based on the individual situation, just as we do today. If you ask me, two fourteen-year-olds would be one thing; but a fourteen-year-old and a forty-year-old... That could be something else entirely.”

The policeman relaxed; he had his answer. Even better, he understood the principle underlying it. *There’s a lot of law hiding behind those twenty-two carved words!* he marveled to himself; but aloud, he commended, “Those are good answers.” Diplomatically, he added, “I was concerned we might have to amend our town law to account for children.”

Finally recovering, Eddie replied, “Why should the rules be any different for children as they are for adults?”

“So I’m learning.”

Eddie’s eyes widened slightly at a sudden thought. “You know, I just realized all this would apply not only to children, but also to those men who live in the town’s asylum. They can be like children in a lot of ways.”

“A very good point,” agreed the policeman. In the course of performing his duties, he had dealt with such men from time to time. They needed protection under the law as much as any child—maybe even more so. “So the law is the same for everyone.”

“For everyone,” he agreed. “It stands to reason.”

The policeman chuckled at a sudden, random thought. “Dogs, too?” he joked.

Eddie’s eyebrows shot up, not recognizing the capricious question as humor. “And why not? There are a lot of well-behaved dogs who walk alongside their masters without the need of a leash, yet there are others that shouldn’t be let out of their cages even for a moment.”

“Or some men,” the policeman mumbled ominously; Eddie ignored the aside.

Neither man spoke for a lengthening pause until the policeman finally broke the silence. “So, getting back to the matter at hand, our first order of business is to arrest those kids. Correct?”

Reluctantly, Eddie nodded—more gently this time. It stood to reason.

“And when we get them into court, I assume you’ll be sentencing them to the custody of their parents and the orphanage?”

Eddie stood. “It does seem a logical first step. And a compassionate one, too.”

The policeman stood in turn. “All right. Let me get things rolling.”

* * *

The priest listened attentively.

“It hasn’t been the best of days,” confessed Eddie as he sat across the sacristy’s table from the holy man. “First, I couldn’t get any information out of that banker, then some rambunctious teen almost ran me over.”

“Perhaps. But kids will be kids,” the priest needlessly observed.

“Yes, but driving one of those carts that way can mean trouble!” Unconsciously he reached up and rubbed the back of his head. The lump had already begun to subside.

“True, but what can one do about the exuberance of youth?” he offered philosophically.

“That’s one of the things I wanted to speak with you about. We can’t have kids running wild like that in the streets. There has to be something we can do.”

The priest shrugged. “Pass a law?”

“We already have a law: live your life your way, so long as you respect the rights and property of others. But those kids weren’t respecting the rights of anyone, driving like that. I was lucky it wasn’t worse!” After a pause, he added with a sigh, “I suppose it had to end up in court sooner or later, and now is probably the best time. In fact, I was just talking with the police about having them arrested. Certainly those kids are guilty of not respecting the rights of others, especially that girl in the lead cart. It was her fault that I was knocked over.”

“Your sore head testifies to that,” agreed the priest. “And it’s a certainty she’ll accept the sentence of the court. I don’t think there’s a person in town foolish enough not to.”

“Too true. But what sort of sentence might we impose? I was thinking about remanding them to custody of their parents or the orphanage.”

“Why not bring back the good old driver’s license so you can take it away from her?”

Eddie shook his head emphatically, noting in passing that his abused cranium did not complain so much—at least not as much as before. “I’ve already considered that, but came to the conclusion that a driver’s license is a terrible idea.”

“Maybe,” the priest conceded diplomatically, “But at least it would have stopped that girl.”

“Would it?” Eddie tilted his bruised head inquisitively. “How would having a license have stopped her?”

“I already told you: because you could take it away from her, and then she couldn’t drive.”

He shook his head more gently this time. “And what’s to stop her from just driving without the license?”

“The police,” the priest replied matter-of-factly, automatically, and without thought.

“How? Would you have them stop everyone driving a cart just to see if they had a license? Or make people pay for a license plate? And it’s not just carts that would need a license—what about horses? Remember that incident a few weeks ago?”

The priest nodded grimly. Everyone in Las Vegas knew about the impromptu noontime race through the center of town—especially the terrified people who had to scramble out of the way. “Yes, I do. We were lucky no one was hurt. When you got them into court, you ruled that they should apologize and promise not to pull that sort of stunt again.”

“That’s the only sentence anyone could think of at the time,” he admitted. “Jail or exile didn’t seem to be warranted—they were just a bunch of good boys having some fun they shouldn’t have been having. But do you really think making them apologize was effective?”

The priest considered for hardly a brief moment. “No. I know human nature, and apologies are easy when they mean nothing.”

Eddie gave him a satisfied nod. “You see?”

“That’s why you should think about requiring driver’s licenses.”

He shook his head gently. “As I said, that would be a terrible idea.”

The priest cocked his head. “True. But you have not said why.”

“Because you’re punishing everyone for the actions of a few troublemakers.” He leveled a finger at the priest. “Look at you—you

always ride your horse responsibly. Why should I saddle you with a license?"

The priest smiled. "Clever humor."

Eddie stopped. "What?"

"Horse...? Saddle...? I thought you were making a joke."

He waved him off with uncharacteristic impatience; three puns within an hour were three too many for him. "No, no. My point is, why should you pay for the misdeeds of others? And think of the cost! Who would pay to administer it?"

The priest shrugged. "Society?"

Eddie folded his arms determinedly. "By what right? Where would Society get the authority to pass such a Guideline?"

The priest smiled broadly. "There are two Senators, remember. As Assistant Head of Society I get to vote to break any ties. If you can't convince both of them that driver's licenses are a bad idea, you may find yourself having to convince me. And right now, I'm not convinced."

Eddie again waved him off, an edge of impatience still clinging to his actions. "No, no! Society can't pass that sort of a Guideline at all! How could Society mandate a driver's license? Where would that power come from? Since no man has the ability to mandate any sort of coercion, how could he possibly delegate that ability to Society or to anyone else?"

"But what about—"

"There are no buts! Society can't mandate anything at all, not even something as trivial as a driver's license. It just stands to reason."

"So you're saying Society does nothing? You'd just let people run red lights and such?"

"Of course you don't let people run red lights—not that we've had the traffic lights turned on for the last year!—because it wouldn't be very respectful of the right of others to travel, now would it? However, you are correct. Society does nothing. Dealing with that sort of thing would be up to the State."

The priest opened his mouth to protest; but seeing the objection written plainly on the man's face, Eddie anticipated, "No, I tell you. This cannot be a matter for Society to decide. Otherwise you're saying we should give Society the power to force people to do things—like getting a driver's license or stopping for red lights—but it's never been the case for Society to force men to act. In fact, it would demonstrate our lack of respect for the innocent if we did. Society and State are completely different entities with completely different powers and spheres of influence, and we know it's critical to keep them separate."

"All right." The priest spread his hands in friendly capitulation. "I see I can't argue with your logic. Which leaves us... Where?"

"Which leaves us right where we were—without a solution." Eddie sighed glumly. He sat silently for some seconds, considering. "If only there were some way to ridle herd only on the troublemakers without inconveniencing the innocent."

"Then you'd be the first man to turn that particular fact of life on its head."

Eddie halted abruptly; he stared at the priest.

Seconds passed, and the priest smiled self-consciously under Eddie's wide-eyed scrutiny, squirming uncertainly in his seat. "What's the matter?" he finally asked.

"And why *not* turn it on its head?"

The priest held his awkward smile. "Turn what on its head?"

"The driver's license!"

"What in heaven's name do you mean?"

He was becoming excited now. "Rather than a driver's license—how about a *can't-drive* license?"

"A what?"

"A *can't-drive* license! Rather than sentencing that teen to meaningless apologies, let's give her a *can't-drive* license instead!"

"What would that mean?"

"It means just what it says: she can't drive. And if we do catch her driving, we up the punishment—maybe a night in jail or something for the first offense, then two nights for the second. You get the idea!"

The priest gradually lost his smile as the idea sank in. "You might be onto something there..." The smile slowly returned as his excitement grew along with his understanding. "You definitely might! Using that scheme, you wouldn't be bothering the innocent at all, only the guilty!"

"That's right! So the police wouldn't have to stop everyone. They'd only have to interfere if a man was not respecting the peace in the first place. Like our horse racers. We can even post their pictures around town, like we're already doing with the men who get themselves exiled."

"A *can't-drive* license," pondered the priest, nodding. "I like it!" He snorted a short laugh and added, "Even if it does sound so very oxymoronic."

At a sudden thought, Eddie reached across the table and touched the priest's shoulder. "And that'll take care of our errant banker, too!"

"What," the priest anticipated, "a *can't-bank* license?"

"Yes! Yes! We give him a warning to stop garnishing other men's deposits on the sly—that's theft, you know—then if he continues anyway, the jury can sentence him to shut his bank down! Not Society, but the State!"

The priest stroked his chin. "That would also work with that miner east of town who's been fouling the stream. We can give him a *can't-mine* license."

"Yes, that's right. Polluting like that is akin to trespassing, because that's a violation of the property rights of everyone downstream."

"Agreed." After a brief pause the priest laughed abruptly. "And I can think of more than a few men in this town who well deserve a *can't-drink* license!"

Lost in thought, Eddie could only nod absently.

"And a *can't-carry* license for that fellow whose gun always seems to be going off at the wrong times inside the city limits."

Eddie continued to nod distractedly. "It would work against a whole host of problems," he mused aloud. "Particularly those where there's no particular person injured, such as with the miner and that banker."

"So you're saying he'll never be able to bank again?"

"No, no. We can sentence him to a reasonable duration that fits the situation."

"Such as six months of a *can't-drive* license for your rambunctious teens?"

"Yes, something like that. Maybe a year. But it need not be permanent."

"You know," the priest ventured at a sudden thought. "Sentencing someone to a year's exile can be considered akin to a *can't-live-here* license—and exiles already have a duration."

Still only half listening, Eddie sat in thought for a moment longer, then replied. "Yes, that's true. And another good feature: we don't have to put someone in jail as our only option. They get a chance to mend their ways before we need to get serious with them."

The priest could only nod. Such forgiving charity appealed to him.

Eddie nodded in turn. "I think we have our answer: the can't license." He hesitated. "But one thing still troubles me."

"And that is...?"

"I was thinking this morning—just before I fell and hit my head!—that waiting for trouble to happen may not be the best idea, especially if you can see the problem coming, like we can with that bad banker. Fractional banking isn't necessarily a bad thing, if it's managed well. It's the misuse of it that's bad. The same can be said of the silver mines—all of them leave some sort of scars upon the land. But how much damage is acceptable? How much is too much? Where do you draw the line?"

"I understand what you're saying. Fractional banking might not cause any problems if, say, ninety percent of the deposits were always available. But if it were only ten percent available..."

Eddie nodded. "You understand. There have to be standards, and I'm thinking that it should be Society who sets them."

"You would have Society mandate there be no fractional banking? But you just said it wasn't necessarily a bad thing."

"And it's not—provided it's managed well and people know that it's being done and what risks they're taking." Again he waved a hand, tossing his own words aside. "But that's not the point either, because Society can mandate *nothing*! Nor would we want to start over-regulating business again. When I suggested last night that Society might want to regulate the banks, our banker-Senator did not take well to the idea at all."

The priest laughed. "I can see why! Especially since he suffered for so many years under the whims of one Mister Wesley! No one wants a return to those good old days."

"I agree. Which is why Society must do it—and that means the regulations must be voluntary."

The priest laughed again. "What?! Voluntary regulations? That's as extraordinary as your 'voluntary taxation' brainchild." The smile faltering, he dubiously added, "But how would regulations like that work? If they're voluntary, I mean."

"Easily! Society would set the Guidelines, and businesses would adhere to them—or not, as they see fit. If they meet the Guidelines, they could advertise the fact. If they don't, they can't. That way, people would be aware that a particular business might be using risky practices—or at least unorthodox ones."

"I think I see," he ventured. "So if we passed a Guideline saying not to practice fractional banking, a bank could still do that, only they couldn't say they meet Society's standards."

"Exactly! So in a questionable situation like that, people could make up their own minds whether or not they wanted to take on the risk."

"Ah, but what if the banker claimed he met the Guideline, but didn't?"

"Then he'd be guilty of not respecting the rights and property of others—that would be fraud, you know—and the courts could move against him."

"And give him a can't-bank license," asserted the priest almost merrily. He understood.

"That's right."

The priest smiled. "Looks like we'll have to amend Society's constitution after all."

"Yes, it does. Something like, 'Society shall have the power to set voluntary Guidelines for the conduct of business and other affairs of men.'"

The priest's smile broadened. "Including marriage?"

Eddie shrugged. "Why not? You're probably the best man to write the Guideline for that."

“I am only the messenger,” he demurred, gesturing to the tome that lay between them on the sacristy’s table.

The two men sat in silence contemplating the ramifications of the proposed change. Finally Eddie spoke. “Yes, that ought to do it. Once we pass the banking Guideline, one banker will be able to say he meets it, and the other will not—or he can choose to mend his ways and meet it. After that, people can make up their own mind where they want to put their money.”

The priest snorted with a wry smile. “I know where *I* would put *my* congregation’s money!”

“And I, mine.” He recalled another aspect of his conversation with the errant banker that morning. “We should add an audit requirement, too. That would give us access to the bank’s books to ensure compliance.”

“But that’s something that would go into the Guideline,” the priest pointed out. “Not the constitution.”

“That’s right. I think our one short sentence should do it.”

“Agreed.”

Eddie let out a deep breath. “All right. That’s it, then. I’ll start the wheels turning to amend Society’s constitution.” He placed his hands on the arms of the chair, elbows out, in preparation to stand.

The priest studied him silently for a moment and shook his head slowly and pensively, his expression reflecting disbelief.

Eddie momentarily relaxed his grip on the chair and remained seated. He threw the priest a perplexed glance. “What? What’s the matter?”

The priest rose from the table and idly ambled over to the sacristy’s window, speaking as he walked. “It’s all these remarkable ideas you keep coming up with. Voluntary regulations... Can’t licenses... Society... And more... So many blessings!” He lifted his attention to the sky outside the window, saying nothing, then raised his hands to chest level, his fingers tightly intertwining; he assumed a serious demeanor. After holding the pose a moment, he addressed the sky. “You work in mysterious ways”, he called out; it was obvious he was no longer addressing Eddie. “You saved Your people from Armageddon, yet continue to test them at every turn. But time after time Your hand draws us back from the precipice. I thank You for Your intercession and mercy—but please...” He paused, turning his head away from the window only slightly, awkwardly, almost apologetically toward Eddie, then back to the sky. “I only want to know: who is this man? Who is this man who always respects the rights and property of others, this man who does not sacrifice his love or his values, this man who eschews death and taxes, leaving only life and production in his wake? I pray You will answer my plea. Tell me! Who is this man? Or should I ask, ‘Who is Eddie Willers?’”

A shock like an electric bolt shot through a thunderstruck Eddie; he had not seen the final question coming. His chair squeaked loudly as it shifted under his startled weight. He did not speak.

The priest continued unabated. “Who is Eddie Willers?” he repeated firmly. “What senses do we lack that we cannot see another world all around us, yet he does? From whence comes this fountainhead of life, this sighted one in the kingdom of the blind? Please. Enlighten Your servant. But Thy will be done. Amen.”

After a respectful pause, the priest turned completely from the window to face the town’s stunned savior and continued in a more conventional tone. “I hope you don’t mind the interruption.” He inclined his head toward the window. “But I had to stop and ask.” With a quick smile, he added, “Professional habit.” He paused in thought, the more serious demeanor returning to his face, then continued. “I trust you recognized the

fictional reference, and its obvious association with you. You see, I could not help but think of the correlation between my question about Eddie Willers and that cheap piece of slang the world has echoed so much of late: ‘Who is John Galt?’ Because when men ask that senseless question, they ask it out of fear and futility. They mean it as a cry of surrender to calamity, to bad luck. It’s a plea for help against a doom they know cannot be stopped. That question has become the final refuge of the incompetent, with this John Galt person being nothing less than despair personified. But here—” He held out both hands, palms up, toward Eddie. “—we have its opposite: hope. No, not hope,” he corrected himself. “It’s much more than mere hope: it’s certainty. A certainty that life is *good*, that it can and will be better still; that men can and do respect one another and care for one another, that doom is not inevitable; rather, it is a fate that can be thwarted. Life is not reduced to a choice among unrelenting miseries; rather, the choice is how wonderful that life can become. No, no; please don’t gape, Mr. Eddie. I’ve seen you do it so many times here in Las Vegas, the answers you keep coming up with, one after the other. And I just realized what one question sums up all those answers: ‘Who is Eddie Willers?’”

There was not so much as a flicker of a pause on Eddie’s flushed face. “I’ll tell you who he is: just this guy. An ordinary man who always tries to do whatever is right.”

The priest’s broad smile broadened even further. “So we agree, then!”

Without another word, the thoroughly embarrassed subject in question leapt from his chair and headed for the door.

“Admit it, Mr. Eddie,” the priest called after him jovially. “It *stands to reason*, doesn’t it?”

Eddie did not reply; the answer was obvious. As he reached for the knob, the priest called out to him insistently, “Mr. Eddie...”

Hand on the doorknob, slowly he turned. “Yes?”

Still smiling broadly, the priest teased, “Must I be forced to give you a can’t-hide license?”

Without another word, he left.

* * *

Fractional reserve banking ended.

With the passing of the new Guideline setting banking standards, informed depositors began pulling their money out of the bank that did not meet the standard, and promptly placed their money with the bank that did. The run was slow at first, but gathered steam quickly. Fortuitously for the town, the errant bank owner was able to make good on all of the depositors’ withdrawal demands, although it did turn out to be a close thing: the man was almost wiped out by the run and was forced to close his bank as a result. But Las Vegas had dodged a disaster. Secretly, Eddie suspected that the man had simply embezzled the missing silver, and repaid the depositors out of the pilfered assets. But Eddie had no proof of any misdeed; nor was any required for justice to be served since full restitution had been made. He felt that being forced to close his bank was punishment enough for the man.

Close on the heels of the voluntary banking regulations came many others: one defining the metal content of coins, another the cleanliness of restaurants and grocery stores, a third regulating how buildings were constructed and repaired. Each Guideline was written with the advice and participation of those affected by it, thereby insuring its acceptability. Labels were standardized, contract content regulated, even the courtesans wrote their own “Johns’ Bill of Rights”—which Eddie blushing signed.

To proclaim compliance with Societal standards, without conscious coordination an emblem began to appear around town: on storefronts, in contracts, on labels, coins, food packaging and more, an angular, eight-pointed star fashioned in the stilted style of an octothorpe. The icon quickly became Society's unsanctioned trademark, a physical manifestation of the inherent premises within any product or service that underlied its promise of conformance with the Guidelines of Society.

A few well-intentioned but ill-advised Guidelines were passed over the objection of those who would be affected by them, but the flawed rules did no damage: since no one agreed with them, no one bothered following them, and they were soon repealed as being moot. All in all, the end result was that the people of Las Vegas gained a more informed confidence in their business dealings, and the town's prosperity was able to grow more quickly as a result.

If the constitutional change had calmed the roiled waters of business, the sentencing change had a similar effect on the unruly behavior of the troublesome. The number of cases heard by the courts slowly declined in direct proportion to the number of can't licenses issued, and the town's tranquility increased in response. Nor did the new sentencing philosophy place an added burden on the police. Whenever an offender's picture was posted in the courtroom lobby, word would quickly spread around town that a can't license had been issued, thereby creating thousands of ad hoc deputies to ensure the sentence's enforcement. Several civic-minded citizens took to duplicating the sentencing notices and displaying them publicly around town, further expanding the enforcement effort.

With the pair of changes in place, the result was that few people ever knew that either Society or State even existed, since both stayed quietly out of the way of men until and unless intervention was required. Only when someone was in need, or when the rights or property of others was not respected, would either entity rear its respective, righteous head.

As the months passed, by all accounts life in Las Vegas waxed very good indeed; and Eddie's only hope was that it would stay that way. But there was still a great, wide world out there, and he knew it was only a matter of time before that world would reassert itself upon their idyllic existence.

Of course, one day, it did.

AUTHOR'S POSTSCRIPT

As you may have noticed, this book obliquely references several characters and storylines that do not appear herein, other than a cursory mention—not to mention that cliffhanger ending. That's because this is one of four books whose storylines all happen simultaneously, so some cross-pollination is unavoidable.

So if you were wondering who this Dagny person is, her story is told in Book Two, titled: *Galt's Gulch Eats Their Young*. If you, like Eddie, want to find out what happened to New York City, that apocalyptic tale is told in Book Three, titled: *How the East Was Lost*. And if you're interested in the gruesome backstory behind the existence of Back For God, that sad tale is told in Book Four, fittingly titled: *Back For God*.

Given that all four books occur simultaneously with overlapping characters and with plotlines and timelines shared throughout, it only makes sense that there should exist an anthology containing all four books, except with each chapter slotted into its proper place in the overarching timeline. That 700-page tome is unavoidably titled: *Atlas Snubbed, The Director's Cut*. Not only does it contain the text of the other three books, it also includes the thrilling conclusion to the story of Las Vegas not told herein. And for those enamored of *amour*, you won't be disappointed.

In any case, thanks for picking up the book! Hope you enjoyed it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken V. Krawchuk was born and raised in the Feltonville section of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the grandson of five immigrant Eastern Europeans. He attended Roman Catholic elementary and high school, and graduated from a Jesuit university with a B.S. in Physics. He began his career as a professional computer programmer at the age of seventeen, and at thirty-five he founded a multi-million dollar computer consulting firm. Seven years later he was awarded the first of three United States patents pertaining to computer database theory.

Mr. Krawchuk read *Atlas Shrugged* for the first time at the age of thirty, and the ideas portrayed in the book transformed him from a life-long liberal Democrat into an eight-time Libertarian Party candidate for public office, including three record-breaking campaigns for Governor of Pennsylvania.

Mr. Krawchuk has been a member of Toastmasters International since 1997, and has been a professional public speaker almost as long. He is still married to his first wife Roberta, and they have been blessed with three daughters and four grandchildren (so far), and currently live in suburban Philadelphia.

Other works by the author include *No Dogs on Mars*, a science fiction novella set 33 years in the future when SpaceX Starships ply the solar system, plus a plethora of Starship short stories and flash fiction at aStarshipStory.com.

ABOUT THE BOOKS

(NO SPOILERS)

Reduced to its essential premises, *Atlas Snubbed* is a pastiche parody sequel to Ayn Rand's epic novel, *Atlas Shrugged*. And fear not; it isn't necessary to have read *Shrugged* to appreciate *Snubbed*, although the parody is much richer if you have.

I call it a pastiche parody for several reasons. First off, it is pastiche in every sense of the word; for not only is the book meant to be a tribute to Ayn Rand and written in her style (at least to the limits of my meager ability), it is also a patchwork of "sampled" phrases and situations excerpted from her novels and other writings. Devoted fans of *Atlas Shrugged* will recognize how I relish taking the words of one character and placing them plausibly into the mouth of another, usually one who is likely to be a philosophical opposite, much like parents who hear their own words coming from the mouths of their babes—and not always in the most complimentary way. No surprise, then, that this novel is also a parody; and not merely a lampooning of Ayn Rand's writings and writing style—replete with long sentences sporting several semicolons, em dashes, and adjectives—but also an extrapolation, a sighting along the philosophical lines drawn out by her that end in some surely-unintended, yet plainly-foreseeable consequences. In other words, it's as much a lampooning of the philosophy portrayed in the novel as it is of the novel itself. So while there may be wry humor, poor puns, and alotta alliteration liberally littered throughout the book, overall it is a respectfully serious parody, oxymoronic though the concept may seem.

The genesis of this project came on the heels of my 2002 campaign for Pennsylvania Governor under the Libertarian Party's banner, spawned and spurred by the combination of two key factors:

Firstly, Ayn Rand is the philosophical matriarch of the Libertarian Party. In fact, in order to be a card-carrying member of the party, it has always been required that one must sign the following oath: "*I swear, by my life and my love of it...*" Uh, sorry. Just kidding. Actually, the oath is: "*I hereby certify that I do not advocate the initiation of force or fraud to achieve political or social goals,*" a pledge paraphrased—do you hear me? Paraphrased—from John Galt's epic speech in *Atlas Shrugged*.

Secondly, and more importantly, as the Libertarian candidate for Governor, I repeatedly found myself in a position where I was forced to defend Miss Rand's philosophy to the public at large, a task I ultimately found in part to be impossible. Not that I wasn't up to the philosophical challenge; rather my experiences drove home for me time and time again that some of her ideas are simply indefensible.

And so *Atlas Snubbed* was born. As envisioned, it would highlight some of the philosophical problems I encountered during the campaign and provide the story of their political solutions as I saw them. That statement bears repeating: this is a story of *political solutions*, not a philosophical treatise. I leave such justifications to those who are enamored of them.

Enough background; let's talk about the book. (No spoilers, as I promised.)

The storyline commences with the state of affairs that existed exactly at the conclusion of *Atlas Shrugged*. Thus, the first hours for Eddie

commence on the stalled *Meteor* in an Arizona desert. Like *Atlas Shrugged*, it is set in a fictional 1950s era where global Socialism is prevalent. The first chapter of this epic opens at 7:33 AM on a notional February 25, 1953—coincidentally the moment of my birth.

It doesn't take a lot of perspicacity to note that the chapter titles are all taken from the titles of popular music of the last fifty years, most of them being among my personal favorites (with a few very-notable exceptions). The titles and the songs themselves are intended to present a fitting commentary upon the events of their respective chapters. Of course some hit that mark clearly, while others only strike a glancing blow. Regardless, playing the song as the chapter is being read provides an interesting backdrop, to say the least.

Many people who knew of my intent to create this parody were concerned about its legal aspects, because given the... uh... let us say "legendary intransigence" of your average Objectivist, the odds of receiving official permission to pen a critical parody of the greatest novel ever written would appear to be precisely zero. Fortunately, the legal minefield had already been cleared by a woman having an interesting coincidence of name, one Alice Randall. In 2001, Ms. Randall released a parody of Martha Mitchell's epic tale, *Gone With The Wind*, cleverly titled, *The Wind Done Gone*, which tells the exact same story during the exact same time frame, even including many of the novel's characters and passages—except the story is told from the slaves' point of view. (I toyed with the idea of naming this tome *Atlas Done Shrugged*, but concluded that the title was insufficiently on topic.) As you would expect, the Margaret Mitchell estate took frenzied exception to the apparent infringement, but after a protracted legal battle (ending with *Suntrust v Houghton Mifflin*, 252 F. 3d 1165, 11th Cir. 2001) the courts ruled that the parody was permissible without permission, as is this one, and the thousands of other creative works of critical fan fiction that have proliferated in Ms. Randall's wake. The literary world is a richer place for her courage.

I would be remiss in my appreciation if I did not take a moment to thank the folks who helped to make this book a reality, starting with my patient editors, Janet Easlea and Henry Whitney. Among those who reviewed the final draft version were Don Baldino, Dean and Julie DePue, Michele Guerin, Thomas Charles Marcy, Dave Nesom, Steve Scheetz, and my youngest daughter Carissa. Those who were unfortunate enough to also review the early draft of Book One a few years earlier included David Easlea, Rich Goldman, Eric Lucas, Bart Smith, Henry Whitney, and Marilyn Zonis. Brett Hoffstadt of the Philadelphia Objectivist Society not only provided guidance in understanding some of the more-arcane issues surrounding that philosophy, he was also the fountainhead of inspiration when it came to breaking the book up into four, more-easily-digested servings, one of which you now hold in your hand. And I offer my sincerest condolences to my dear wife Roberta who had to listen to me ramble on and on and on for years on end as I wrestled with one plot complication after another. Without all of these good people and their invaluable feedback and unanimous support, I would never have gotten beyond the third chapter.

In any case, after eight political campaigns, dozens of readings of *Atlas Shrugged*, and nine years of occasionally uncompromising literary effort, you finally hold the results of my self-sacrifice in your hands. But please keep in mind that this critique is only my opinion; and the truth, as Arthur C. Clarke reminds us, will always prove far stranger.

- Ken
3:33 PM, November 27, 2011

TIMELINE

(WARNING! SPOILERS AHEAD!)

This book, like all books in the Atlas Snubbed series, begins on a notional February 25, 1953, although a few flashbacks can reach back in time a mite. The key events and their dates include the following:

February 25, '53

- Start of *Atlas Snubbed*.
- Eddie wakes up on the *Meteor*.

March 15 '53

- Eddie arrives in Las Vegas .

March 20, '53

- Electricity dies in Las Vegas.

March 23, '53

- Electricity returns to Las Vegas.

April 1, '53

- Raiders raid Las Vegas.

April 3 '53

- Eddie re-establishes the Las Vegas police force.

April 15 '53

- Bandit captured in Las Vegas.

April 16 '53

- Bandit trial in Las Vegas.

May 11 '53

- Money problems begin in Las Vegas .

May 12 '53

- The Panic hits Las Vegas.

May 22, '53

- Eddie begins broadcasting music.

June 1, '53

- Las Vegas crook refuses his sentence.

June 14, '53

- The Stationmaster's trial is held.

December 25, '53

- Train service to Boulder City begins.

May 19, '54

- The refugees arrive in Las Vegas .

June 17, '54

- Society forms in Las Vegas .

February 25, '55

- "Can't" licenses created.