

***“THIS IS
RICK WAISELL...”***

A novel by
Philip Berroll

“I sometimes felt as if I were watching the psychodrama of the baby boom generation – a tale rooted in old grudges and revenge plots hatched on a handful of college campuses long ago – played out on the national stage.”

– Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*

Six

IN THE COURSE OF HIS LONG, SUCCESSFUL LEGAL CAREER, MORDECAI Schusterman had developed a ritual that more often than not, had served him well. When he met a client for the first time – whether it was in his office, a courthouse, or, as on this occasion, the visitor’s room of the Kings County (Brooklyn) Jail – he took a minute to regard them, silently, from head to toe. “The once-over,” he called it. Schusterman believed that in this way, by some silent, telepathic process, he could gain a deeper knowledge of the person: who they were, how they thought, how they would need to be presented. Of course there was no logical proof of this, but Schusterman was convinced of it. And if this belief, and the sense that he had a valuable tool which gave him a vast advantage over his opponents, made him better at his job, well, that was all that mattered.

As he applied the technique to his new client, he could feel it working. It was fitful, incomplete, like a static-filled radio broadcast, but *something* was definitely coming through. This young man was slightly disheveled and moved with a robotic stiffness; clearly he was stunned to be in a place like this. Yet he seemed different from other men of his status who had fallen into similar circumstances. Such men, in Schusterman’s experience, had been overwhelmed – they cried, they sweated, a few had the smell of a bladder or bowel “accident.” But this fellow had a bland, cold expression, as if he thought he could make the situation less awful by refusing to acknowledge its awfulness.

On his side of the table, Rick was wondering what was wrong. Why didn't the lawyer say something, what was he waiting for? Schusterman had been sent by Ray Brimmer, the treasurer of Rick's last campaign. Rick had no personal attorney, and he knew that Brimmer was in a business – a small real estate firm he'd inherited from his father – where a good lawyer was absolutely necessary. But in the two years of his stewardship, Brimmer had been on a lucky streak: he hadn't sued anyone, no one had sued him. So while he had Schusterman on retainer, he knew him only by reputation. And even that was sketchy. Essentially, Brimmer had told Rick that the man was experienced and politically connected.

Now, finally, Schusterman spoke. "Which do you prefer?" he said.

"Excuse me?"

"How do you prefer to be addressed?" His voice was a nasal croak, with a strong Brooklyn accent, like some secondary hood in a Thirties gangster movie. "Congressman? Mr. Waisell?"

"Most people call me Rick."

He shook his head. "Too casual. It's better to have some formality in this relationship. I'll call you Richard."

"Suit yourself."

Now Schusterman fell silent again, and looked down at the table. Or did he? Rick couldn't tell if his eyes were open. Good God... Brimmer had said that Schusterman was "a veteran," without being more specific. The guy had to be at least eighty. Was he nodding off, or worse?

But the lawyer straightened up, and pointed a short, bony finger at Rick. "You," he said, "are a victim of changing mores."

He seemed to expect a response, but Rick was at a loss. Besides, he was too busy thinking of what he was going to do to Brimmer for saddling him with this crazy old man.

"Have you ever read La Rochefoucauld?" Schusterman asked. "Have you even heard of him?"

"Can't say that I have."

"Mm – you're not alone, which is unfortunate. He was a 16th Century French writer, a nobleman, with what I would call a distinct perspective on human behavior. Cynical as hell, but

very clear-eyed. Read his *Maxims* if you can find it. He says things that sound incredibly ugly, but often have a real core of truth. And one of his most truthful observations is this: ‘Hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue.’”

Another long pause; again, clearly, he wanted a response. “I’m sorry,” Rick said, “but I’m not sure where you’re going with this.”

“*Vice*, Richard. As in vice squad, the people who arrested you. Thirty or forty years ago, they’d be more likely to go after an art exhibit or a burlesque show than a whorehouse. And why is that? Certainly not because there weren’t any whorehouses” – he gave a short chuckle – “the police knew where they were, who ran them, who were the regulars... including judges, city officials, business leaders and yes, congressmen. Yet most of the time, there were no raids. *None*. Why do you think that was?”

“The cops were paid off?”

“Yes. But there was also a deeper reason. It was understood that they had a role – they fulfilled a function. They were accepted as places where a respectable, sophisticated gentleman could go. Not every day, perhaps, but certainly on occasion. After all, this was a time when a goodly number of women did not realize that they were supposed to enjoy intercourse. You didn’t have magazine columns discussing sexual technique. It was understood that for some men, these places were necessary... and so they were tolerated. Quietly, tacitly, but they were tolerated.”

Was the old fart senile, was that it? Was he dreaming of the days when he could still get it up? Rick made an immense effort to appear interested, in the hope that Schusterman would soon finish his speech and get to the matter at hand.

“Now, of course, we live in an era where everything is permitted, and there is no such thing as shame. Art and entertainment can be as explicit as they wish. There is no hypocrisy, because the concepts of vice and virtue have become meaningless.” He leaned forward, slightly. “But where does that leave establishments such as the one where you were picked up?”

“You tell me.”

“Like a fish out of water. These days, it’s assumed there is no longer a need for such places... or if there is, then only for what used to be called ‘the lower orders.’ Certainly not for

men of stature, such as yourself. Which means, ironically, that when someone like you is found using them, the stigma is *greater* than it would have been in the past.”

“You’re saying, what? I look like a freak?”

Schusterman winced. “That’s a rather unpleasant way to put it, but... you get the general idea.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“I didn’t say it was logical, and I didn’t say it was fair. But it is what it is.”

For a few moments, Rick found himself thinking that none of this could be real, that it was one of those dreams that contained so little of the fantastic – no singing dwarves, no flying animals – that you could easily believe you were awake, except there was always one little detail that gave it away. In this case, the lawyer. He couldn’t be a *real* lawyer, not this droopy old fool blabbering on about French writers and whorehouses. That was it. Goddamn it, when would the alarm go off?

“Richard?”

“Whuh?”

“I said, the publicity. Expect your picture to be on the front page of the *News* and the *Post* and *Newsday* by tomorrow. And it will be the lead story on local TV news, and radio...”

“Don’t they have anything more important to write about?”

Schusterman made a harsh, gurgling sound that Rick interpreted as a laugh. “I can see you don’t know much about the press, my friend.”

“Only that I tried to be helpful to any reporter who covered me.”

“Makes no difference. Hyenas respect the lion until they see him bleeding. No, sir – you can forget about your reputation. I suggest we concentrate our energies on keeping you a free man.”

This sounded good to Rick, because it was narrow, concrete, pragmatic. *Focus on strategy*, he thought, on the immediate problem; that was where he always felt most comfortable. And he didn’t want to consider the full meaning of *forget about your reputation*. “Fine with me,” he said.

“All right. As you might imagine, I’m known to all the criminal court judges in Brooklyn, and the district attorney is a personal friend of mine. So even if we get some hotshot young

prosecutor who wants to make a reputation on your back, he'll be slapped down. The only wild card, as I see it, is the jury. Oh, sure, I could do my best to screen out any unfavorables, but in a case such as this, it would still be a crap shoot. What we have to do, therefore, is keep them out of the mix."

"You're saying..."

"I want you to plead guilty."

He said it in the tones of a doctor in the movies, announcing that his patient had contracted a fatal illness. All that was missing was "I'm terribly sorry."

"Whoa," Rick sputtered, "Whoa – hold on now – you don't –"

Schusterman put up his hand, palm flat, in front of Rick's face. "Please, let me finish before you jump in. This is not as bad as it might sound. Do you understand the difference between a felony and a misdemeanor?"

"Uhh... one is worse..."

He nodded. "A great deal worse. Suffice it to say that a misdemeanor usually doesn't have much effect on your life. A felony affects *everything*. Who will marry you, who will hire you, who will rent or sell to you... your right to vote..."

Part of him, again, wanted Schusterman to wrap it up. Part of him had the sense that somehow, it would be better if he didn't – better if Rick did not hear what was at the end of this new spiel.

"If you plead guilty to a charge of solicitation, which is a misdemeanor, I have no doubt that I can get the prosecution to go along. You see, prosecutors and defense attorneys have many things in common, though they're loath to admit it. And one of those things is that they both would rather not face a jury if they don't have to. Thus, the plea bargain. It's quick, it's clean, there's less uncertainty, and less work. That's why, in this case, they'll take your plea even though it would be to a lesser charge than the one they'd likely prefer."

"Which is?"

"Statutory rape."

"*What?*"

Naturally, Schusterman had his connections. He now told Rick exactly what they had told him.

“That is insane. I had no way of knowing –”

“What you knew or did not know is irrelevant. Whether you were with an underage girl or an elderly woman is *also* irrelevant. You were there when the police arrived. There were underage girls on the premises. That’s all that matters.”

Rick smacked his palm on the table. “This is bullshit,” he said, “total bullshit! How could they – there are no witnesses –”

The door opened, and the cop standing outside the room stuck his head in. “Everything all right?” he asked Schusterman, who nodded.

When the door closed, Schusterman said, “I would imagine that there is at least one witness – I understand that English is not her first language, but she can be prepped. And normally the testimony of someone in that profession doesn’t count for much, but in this case, she’s an immigrant, young, poor... you get the picture. But let that pass. You have to remember something. The proprietor was arrested along with you...”

“A pimp.”

“But also a businessman – who wants to return to his business as quickly as possible, because for him, time truly is money. So he’ll be quite happy to cut a deal. *He* will plead to a lesser charge, and pay a fine. The cost of doing business. Probably he’ll also promise them that he’ll be more thorough about checking the girls’ birth certificates.” That gurgling laugh again.

“The crux of it is, they let him stay open... and he gives them something in return. It makes perfect sense, I can’t blame them. Put yourself in their shoes. Who would you rather have – a garden-variety procurer, or a sitting member of the United States Congress?”

Once more, Schusterman dipped his head; but this time he exhaled deeply, clearly drained from his last oration. He remained silent for a few minutes. So did Rick, who was numb.

At last, the attorney looked up. “You’ll be fined, and placed on probation. There may be a few other things – nothing major. I think I can convince the judge that you’re not a flight risk, so bail won’t be an issue.” He stood. “You should be out by late this morning. I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

Schusterman extended his hand. Rick – half in a fog, acting more on instinct – grasped it. It felt soft and clammy.

“You’ll be all right,” said the old man. “Of course, your political career is over.”

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Ten minutes later, as he sat in the holding cell, Rick could sense the numbness beginning to wear off, like anesthesia after an operation. The first stirrings of everything he had felt when the cops hustled him into the patrol car – panic, terror, despair – were coming back.

He tried to fight them off. He could not, would not let himself lose control. “You’ve got it,” he muttered softly, “you’ve got it.”

He began to retrace his steps, slowly, deliberately, trying to discover the exact point where he had miscalculated, gotten it wrong. The conversation in Trayler’s office; that was a strong possibility.

Rick had been in the House for about six months. Trayler, a Democrat from Tennessee, had invited him over for a drink and to discuss some pending legislation. They were each on their second Jack-and-ginger when Trayler casually asked him what he did “for recreation... you know, cooze, tail.” Rick replied, honestly, that he was too busy to give it much thought.

His colleague snorted with mild disbelief. “*Nobody’s* too busy for that,” he said, asserting that everyone he knew “took care of it” in some fashion – “your wife, your girlfriend, your boyfriend, or putting some bimbo on the payroll and callin’ her your ‘secretary,’” though Trayler allowed that few people were doing it that way “since Hays and Mills got caught.”

“I mean, come on,” he said. “You’re a decent-looking guy. And your title alone gets some ladies wet. You don’t have to depend on your right hand.”

This subject made Rick extremely uncomfortable. “Vince, I’m sure I’ll meet someone eventually,” he said, “but right now the job takes up all of my time. Is that so hard to believe?”

Trayler shook his head. “Not at all. A lot of us felt that way when we first got here. But you learn two things. First of all, plenty of stuff takes care of itself, you don’t have to. You can make time for yourself... however much time you want. And second,” he grinned, “I’m not talking about a five-course meal. Just a snack, once in a while.”

And he proceeded to tell Rick about the snack bars he knew. They were not as large or elaborate as the ones Schusterman had recalled; often they were just apartments tucked away in high-rises in the Virginia or Maryland suburbs. Or a girl could be sent right to your home or

office in the evening – “like one of those escort services,” Trayler said, “except they don’t advertise.”

He had made it sound so easy, Rick thought. No need to think about how to dress, or what to bring. No need to provide a meal or entertainment. No need to spend time finding the right person, someone who wouldn’t tell him, “Sorry, but honestly, the height thing makes me uncomfortable... I thought I could get past it but I was wrong,” or get the glazed-eye look when he talked about redistricting issues or why Carter’s “malaise” speech had been a big mistake, or say “That’s it?” when he shot off too quickly for their taste. These women would smile and nod politely. They would laugh at his jokes. They would do *whatever he wanted*. Hand them the cash – Trayler emphasized that he not, under any circumstances, use a credit card – and they were his.

Right from the beginning, Rick was very careful. He budgeted himself, putting aside a certain amount of money every month, and spaced out his visits accordingly. He avoided places that he considered “pricy.” No way was he going to get into debt; finances, Trayler said, were “the first place they look. One more thing for which you can thank that fuckin’ Nixon.” (He told Rick about a politician in Ohio, some moron who tried to pay the girl with a check... which *bounced*.)

If Rick was going out for the occasion, he always made sure he was not being followed. He would take a cab to some other location – a movie house, a hotel – get out, walk around for five minutes in the lobby, then go back on the street and flag down a second car to take him to his real destination. He always wore a hat, and shades. If he was feeling especially paranoid, he pasted on a brush mustache.

Only two things mattered to Rick: that it not take over his life, and that no one suspected. And that was how it was playing out. He was keeping it in perspective – it was not an addiction or an obsession, nothing that was bankrupting him or keeping him awake at night. It was a means of relaxation, and his reward for faithfully serving his constituents. He worked hard, harder than ninety percent of those other guys, and he deserved a little something for himself. And no one knew except Trayler, a few other colleagues who used the same services, and their suppliers, all of whom had reasons for not talking.

At first Rick had no preference – he knew that some men wanted a specific race, hair color, breast size, but he couldn’t care less. As time went on, though, he did develop one

particular taste. Too many of the women, he found, came off as worldly, jaded, “efficient” beyond the demands of their profession. In their twenties or early thirties, they seemed decades older. Even as they followed his wishes, even as they laughed when he wanted them to laugh and stroked him as he wanted to be stroked, he could never forget that he was one of dozens they were seeing that week, and hundreds they had seen in their careers. He was nothing special, because he was nothing new.

Sometimes he would ask them how they got started. One told him flat out it was the one thing she wouldn’t discuss. Others had stories that were such obvious bullshit, he wound up waving them off, saying “Forget it, never mind.” Even when the accounts were believable, he couldn’t get into them, couldn’t picture the young, innocent creature being described.

But every once in a while, he’d encounter someone whose story would not be necessary. The signs of her inexperience would be subtle, but clear – the nervous giggle, the way she fumbled with her hooks and buttons, the pot or coke she offered to help them “loosen up” (the older ones never needed anything). These were the ones who treated it more like a party than a business. One of them was half way out the door before she remembered to ask for the money.

Rick began to make it clear to his suppliers that this was the kind he wanted. They tried to oblige him, as best they could. The problem, of course, was that each fresh face was good for only so long before she, too, would take on that hard, cold, been-around look. The giggles would sound forced; they would want the money up front. Rick would know what was happening: they’d been worn down by all those other slobs.

So he began to expand his horizons. It was logical to see what was available in New York. Not only did he have an excuse for being there, and not only was it larger than D.C. – so much easier not to see or be seen by anyone – but it was a bazaar of endless variety, the market that never closed. You could find whatever you wanted if you knew where to look.

A supplier told him about the place. An old brownstone in Brooklyn Heights, Remsen Street between Henry and Hicks. No one admitted without a reference and an appointment.

Rick arrived on a clear, calm night in early January. The woman who let him in seemed to be in her mid-forties; she was dark-haired, fleshy, and spoke with an accent he did not recognize – Greek? Hungarian? “I am Elena,” she said, in a tone that was almost solemn. “I am hostess.”

“I see.” Rick always tried to keep the conversation with “hostesses” or proprietors to a minimum. “Where do I go?”

“Up,” she said, pointing toward the staircase. “Second door on left. She waits.”

When he got there, the door was already open a crack. He pushed it forward.

The girl was sitting on the bed, wearing a turquoise bikini. Her hair was dirty-blond, unruly; she kept pushing it out of her eyes. She was slender, with very pale skin. Rick focused in on her face – would he be disappointed, would she have the hard expression? No, it was a thin, hopeful smile. She wanted to please him, unsure if she could. *Perfect.*

He smiled back. “What’s your name?”

“Judy,” she said, though with her accent it came out “Joo-ty.”

“Hello, Judy,” he said. “You’re very pretty.”

Her expression did not change. Rick repeated the compliment, and she said, “English not so good.”

He nodded. That would be fine, he thought – a little chat was always pleasant, but not absolutely necessary. “Okay,” he said.

She made a strange gesture, folding her arms and raising them over her head. After she repeated it several times, Rick took a guess as to what it meant. He mimed unbuttoning his shirt, unzipping his pants; she nodded energetically.

“You go first,” he said, pointing at her. He always preferred it that way.

She understood. The bra and bottom were off within seconds.

Rick looked her over as she stood before him. Her skin had the same unbroken paleness from top to bottom. Her breasts were small; her nipples had a kind of oval shape, as if they had been stretched sideways. She had a large beauty mark about halfway between her navel and the russet-colored triangle below. She smelled of musk.

“Very pretty,” he said again. “Very pretty.”

“Prih-dee,” she repeated.

“Oh, yes,” he said, almost in a whisper, as he reached out and took the left, then the right nipple between his thumb and forefinger. He played with her slowly, switching off between the two small ovals, then began to work them both at the same time.

That was when he heard the shouts, and the footfalls, and the pounding on the door.

“*CHAOS!!!*”

Rick looked up. There was a man standing in a corner of the cell, against the back wall – tall, black, slightly stooped. He wore a fraying, filthy raincoat, torn pants, and shoes without socks; his short, greasy beard stuck out in patches that had somehow managed to connect. Rick didn’t recall seeing anyone when he returned to the cell. It was as if the man had silently oozed up from the floor.

“The world is in *chaos*,” he said. “Men seek, but they do not find. Millions walk the earth *unfulfilled*, *unsatisfied*.”

Rick sighed – he recognized the man, or thought he did. He had seen him on the subway, or in the park, or in front of one of the restaurants Rick patronized. Or someone like him, anyway. Dirty, smelly, worthless, his brains marinated in booze or heroin or PCP or whatever these people were currently using, screeching his cracked message as his dragged-out suicide neared its completion. Instinctively, Rick followed the rule observed by all New Yorkers in these situations: *avoid eye contact, no matter what*.

“They pass me every day.” It wasn’t clear whether the derelict was talking to Rick, an imaginary friend, or the world in general. “They ignore me, they *shun* me, but I see them all the same. I see *into* them. They are bilious – seething in bile and bitterness. Acid courses through their veins, it eats away at the chambers of their hearts... till nothing remains but a rusty shell, throbbing like a fat stiff prick. I see it all...”

Suddenly his yellowed eyes focused directly at Rick. “But you know this, don’t you, my son?”

“*Son*,” not “*brother*?” Whatever; Rick decided that it was best to play along. “Know what?”

“The state of the world. The disappointments of men.”

“Oh.” He tried as best he could to show some enthusiasm. “Sure. Certainly.”

“*Of course* you do.” The vagrant nodded, almost violently. “You’re a man of knowledge. You have *insight*, you have *clarity*. Yes, yes... I could tell as soon as I looked at you. What’s your name, son?”

“How about Dave?”

The man's face broke into a huge grin. His teeth were even yellower than his eyes. "Indeed, why not Dave? Why not Phil or Don, or Yakov or Hideki? Feel free to have many names. I myself am called by so many..."

"What do you feel like today?"

"Call me Stanley."

"Stanley it is." This might be amusing for a while, Rick thought. At least it would take his mind off his situation. "So you think I'm a smart guy, huh?"

"Yes, indeed. Very smart. And very angry. You feel you are the victim of a grave injustice – is that not so?"

Rick made a sweeping wave with his hand, indicating the cell.

"Of course," said Stanley. "A terrible injustice. And so unfair. Why is it, my son? Why do some find themselves in places like this, while others – far less intelligent, far less capable, far less deserving – continue to walk free? Why do common, clumsy, boring men live out their days in peace, while the exceptional ones are chained and tormented?"

"Who exactly," said Rick, "are you talking about?"

"Why, *both* of us, my son."

That was not amusing at all. "Listen, Stan, or whatever your name is – let's be clear on one thing. I have absolutely nothing in common with you. Okay? *Nothing.*"

Stanley chuckled. "Why are you here?"

"That is none of your business."

"That's fine." He shrugged. "I already know the answer. I have no need of specifics. You desired something and you set out to get it, however you could. You did not restrict yourself in the manner of common, unexceptional men. And for that they hate you. They live under those restrictions, why shouldn't you? They are not allowed to enjoy themselves – what gives you the right? So they take their revenge by persecuting you."

He lowered himself to the floor, sitting a few feet away from Rick. "And I understand this... because that is precisely my own situation."

Rick was close enough to smell Stanley's breath, which of course was absolutely rancid. "I don't know what your 'situation' is," said Rick, "but it is not mine, okay? I am here because

some pimp made a deal to save his ass, and I have political enemies who are probably involved. This is a political prosecution, *and I am not guilty.*”

“Of what? Tell me, please – I’m just curious. What exactly are you accused of?”

Rick wanted to stand, or crawl to the other side of the room, or in some way put distance between them, but he couldn’t let Stanley think he was in any way intimidated. “I repeat: none of your fucking business! What are you, some kind of plant? Is that it, they sent you here to get a ‘confession?’ You get me to say something they can take out of context and use against –”

“Please, please, Dave – calm yourself.” He looked hurt. “You wrong me, son, truly you do. I told you, I have no *need* for your particulars. I only want you to know that I understand, that I sympathize.”

“Great. Sympathy accepted. Now why don’t you leave me the hell alone.”

“And to offer you my help.”

For the first time that night, Rick laughed. “Your help?”

“That’s right.”

“What exactly, in the whole fucking world, could you do to help me?”

Stanley looked at him for a long, unnerving moment. Then he said, “Nothing concrete. I can’t take any action, or aid you financially. All I can offer is... a certain kind of power which I possess. It can’t be calibrated or measured in any way. But I can assure you – if you allow me to share it with you, it will enable you to achieve *every one of your goals*. As well as some that you haven’t even thought of yet.”

“If it can’t be measured, how can you share it?”

He held out his hands. The skin was cracked and filthy. “Reach out. Connect with me. I know I repulse you. That’s why it matters if you do this, because it’s not easy. If you can bring yourself to make the connection, then I’ll know you deserve to share what I have.”

Rick hesitated, but then thought, what the hell – it might make the lunatic go away. Besides, while he was not superstitious, neither was he averse to using any kind of motivational tool. Maybe he could use the reminder that he shared Stanley’s “power” the way other people used a charm bracelet or a religious medallion. It wasn’t the craziest thing he had ever heard. He reached out and clasped the dirty hands.

Stanley looked up at the ceiling, as if in an ecstatic trance. Rick felt no electric charge, no juice, nothing. All he noticed was that the hands were cooler than he'd expected.

After a few minutes, Stanley released him. "The exchange is complete," he said. "Why don't you rest, my son. You have a long day ahead, with many struggles. But never forget that you will prevail."

He retreated to the back wall. Rick told himself that he should stay awake – what if Stanley had something else in mind, or someone new came into the cell? But fuck it, if he felt his pants being removed he would wake up, and fight them off. Or maybe he'd just sleep through the whole thing. He got into the fetal position, and shut his eyes.

Several hours later, when the cops woke him, he was alone.

* * * * *

Dr. Arnold Holtzer coughed, scratched his nose, cleared his throat, and waited a full minute before he asked, "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all? Is that possible?"

"Okay. You're right. I'm thinking about... about the time."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, don't take this the wrong way, but I'm not sure what more we can accomplish before I leave here in" – Rick glanced at his watch – "25 minutes."

"How do you know you can't learn something in 25 minutes? Or ten minutes, for that matter?"

Maybe because I haven't learned anything in six months, up until this very moment?

"I don't know. I never thought of it that way."

Dr. Holtzer nodded, in that slow, ponderous shrink way that (among many other things) greatly irritated Rick. "I'm just wondering. Do you feel any differently now from when you first came here?"

"About what? About this?"

"About anything."

Oh, what he would have given to tell Holtzer the truth: that he felt exactly the same as in the first minute of their first session – he was there because he was ordered to be there, it was a complete waste of time, what he did was no different from what millions of other guys had been doing for millions of years, he'd been singled out because he was a public figure... *There is nothing wrong with me. Go ahead, make your bullshit report to the court, tell them I haven't changed one tiny bit. See if I give a fuck. I've fulfilled all the goddamn requirements. There's nothing else they or you or anybody can do to me. I know it and so do you.* “Well,” he said, “I can definitely say I've learned my lesson...”

Another nod. “Anything else?”

“Oh... I'm sorry, you know? And embarrassed. I let a lot of people down.” *I let nobody down except myself. I'm embarrassed that I wasn't more careful. If I had been careful, this wouldn't have happened. No one else has cause to feel 'betrayed' or 'disappointed' or anything. I served them to the full extent of my abilities. My private life is none of their business.*

“Do you think you'd do it again?”

He did not have the luxury of anger, or of honesty. Of course there were things they could do. Tail him, tap his phones, call the papers and TV – especially in two or three years or whenever he mounted a comeback. He imagined that Holtzer's final report might put him down as “less than fully cooperative” or “sometimes resistant”... but that was better than “hostile” or worse, “shows no remorse.”

Rick shook his head. “No. No way. That, I'm sure of. Regardless of what I think about whether it's fair or – I'm not stupid. I didn't get as far as I did by being stupid. Doing it again would be the *height* of stupidity. So no, it will never happen again. Of that I can assure you.”

Then Holtzer asked him what he would do if he felt the urge in the future. Rick said he would buy a magazine or rent a movie and beat off in the privacy of his home. But of course he hoped to find time for a real relationship. No, he had no plans to get back into politics. He had no definite plan for the immediate future. Perhaps he would write, or teach. Maybe he would travel around the country or overseas.

“Our time is up,” said Holtzer. They shook hands. Rick resisted the impulse to call him a charlatan and an asshole. “Goodbye, Doctor,” he said.

“Good luck,” said the analyst.

“Thank you.”

Holtzer’s office was just off Washington Square. Rick decided to go there, to sit in the park and relax for a while in the early June sunshine. There was no place he had to be, which was usually the case these days.

He found a bench toward the middle of the park, looking north toward the marble arch at the end of Fifth Avenue, taking in the usual scene of students, dealers, vagrants, women pushing strollers and carriages, lunch-hour types with jackets slung over their shoulders. A street musician doing a bad Dylan, playing for change. No one paid Rick any notice – he was wearing shades and a baseball cap, dark t-shirt, jeans and sneakers. That and a coat in cold weather had been his daily uniform since the day of his resignation, and it had worked: he was not accosted on the street, insulted in the supermarket, or otherwise reminded of his disgrace. At first there had been a good number of angry phone calls and letters, but they had tailed off as time went on.

Even the press had left him alone. Not that he would ever forget what they did to him. Yes, Schusterman had warned him, but there really was no way to be prepared for it, for the full force of the barrage. Until you experienced it, no one could tell you what it was like to see the wax-skinned anchorman announcing the story, practically smacking his lips, with your mug shot plastered in the background. Or to find a small mob of eager-looking men and women with notepads, microphones, cameras camped outside your apartment at all hours. Or to see the headlines: CONGRESSMAN NABBED IN BROTHEL RAID, LAWMAKER CAUGHT FISHING FOR JAILBAIT, WAISELL: “I THOUGHT SHE WAS EIGHTEEN.” (He had never said any such thing, the quote was completely fabricated, but who would believe him?)

Then there was that hatchet job, “Rise and Fall of a Boy Wonder,” in *The Other Paper*. Fucking Strasler! That smug, pompous bastard, going way beyond the arrest, roasting and flaying him, casting every aspect of his career in the worst possible light. Rick hadn’t thought about him in years, had neither known nor cared what his old enemy was doing. Yet he wasn’t surprised to find Strasler at *The Other Paper*. It made perfect sense. Their political coverage was laughable; none of them understood how things really worked. Always looking for scandals and conspiracies (if A went to a party where B was also present, and A’s brother-in-law C was a friend of D, and B and D were crooks, then it must follow that A was also a crook). A bunch of hopelessly naïve little twerps, endorsing candidates who had no chance of winning, then

dumping on the winners as “corrupt” and “sellouts.” Didn’t they understand that you had to make deals to get anything done? No, in their minds that made you “unprincipled.” Oh, yeah, Strasler fit right in. That rich, self-righteous prick, still looking down his nose at anybody who had to work his way up...

But even Strasler was leaving him alone these days. Now Rick was anonymous, one of Stanley’s “common, unexceptional men.” More than that; it was as if he had *never* been exceptional, never been paid attention by anyone who mattered.

Certainly that was the attitude of his former colleagues, the ones he’d come to think of as friends. Sure, a few of them had taken him out for drinks (to a bar in Chevy Chase, far removed from the Hill) on his last night in office. But since then, nothing. Not from any of them – not Trayler, not Kittredge or Gund or Castelloni. After his third or fourth call went unreturned, he understood how it was. Even Leftoff, from the Bronx, who had arrived late in ’81, winning a special election after the incumbent had dropped dead in the home of “a female companion.” Rick, with all of eight months seniority, had magnanimously offered to show him the ropes. The little twit had followed him around like a nervous puppy, hanging on his every word, proclaiming his undying gratitude and loyalty. And now? When he saw Rick a few months later, in Penn Station, Leftoff turned and ran – no, *sprinted* – in the other direction.

But Rick knew that he should not have been surprised. They were in the middle of Abscam when he first came to D.C., and he heard all of it – the chatter, the vulture-circling from the press, the complaints that the FBI had gone too far, the whispers about who would be next. That videotape of Kelly from Florida, stuffing cash into his pockets and asking, “Does it show?” Williams of Jersey, the one senator involved – Rick had spent a day canvassing for him back in ’70, when he was one of the good guys, targeted by Nixon; now he was quitting before his colleagues could vote to expel him.

It was striking the way all of them had quickly lost most of their friends in the Capitol. They became pariahs, nonpersons, lonely men walking the corridors in hurried silence. No one spoke to them unless absolutely necessary. No one came to them to make deals or talk strategy – what was the point, when they’d probably be out before the end of the year? Rick couldn’t help feeling a few pangs of sympathy for them... even Ozzie Myers, that loudmouthed idiot, the only one who insisted on staying until they *did* vote him out. It just didn’t seem fair the way the others

treated them, as if they were carriers of some rare, insidious disease, as if even a handshake would be fatal.

But of course he had gone along with the treatment; what choice did he have? And now it was his turn.

A man came over and set on the opposite end of the bench from Rick. He was short and heavy, his blocky torso straining against the folds of his cheap blue suit. With his thinning hair and pencil mustache, he could have been anywhere from his early thirties to almost fifty.

Rick barely noticed him, thinking instead about the future. Now that he no longer had to stay in New York, perhaps he *would* travel... not for pleasure, exactly, but to scout out potential locations for the comeback. Maybe somewhere in Arizona or New Mexico, where more people were moving every year – not just the old folks anymore, but people in their thirties and forties, with kids, people who were sick of the Northeast with the lousy weather and the crime and the blacks and the taxes. Or maybe Florida. His father had moved to Delray Beach, on the Atlantic coast, in '78, after retiring; then his sister came down with her young son, having broken up with her schmucko husband. The only problem there was that half the people were ex-New Yorkers; he couldn't count on their not knowing him.

“Look at that. *Look at that.*”

The blocky man was focused on something in the middle of the park. Rick looked in that direction. It was a dealer and a student, conducting a quick transaction.

“Fucking scumbags.” The man cupped his hands in front of his mouth and shouted, “HEY! I SEE YOU, YOU PIECE OF SHIT! GET THE HELL OUT OF THE PARK, PUSHER, BEFORE I CALL THE COPS!”

The student looked up, in a panic, but the dealer, who was rummaging through a gym bag, coolly ignored the distraction until he had extracted a small glassine envelope and handed it to the customer. Then both young men took off, in separate directions.

“THAT’S RIGHT, GET GOING! Sonofabitch. IF I SEE YOU IN HERE AGAIN, YOU’RE GONNA WISH THE COPS GOT YOU FIRST – I’LL CRACK YOUR HEAD OPEN, YOU WORTHLESS SCUM!”

He shook his head disgustedly. “Unbelievable. Right out in the open, in front of little kids. They don’t even try to hide.” Then, to Rick: “Can you believe it? I mean, where the hell are the cops?”

“There aren’t enough. A lot of them got laid off in the mid-Seventies.” This didn’t seem to register with the other man. “You know, the fiscal crisis?”

“Oh yeah, right,” said the man. “Bankrupt. Because they spent all that money on welfare and Medicaid.”

“Actually, a lot of Medicaid is paid for by the state.”

“Is that so?” The man looked more intrigued than hostile. “How do you know so much?”

Rick shrugged. He had learned to be careful in these situations. “I just... mm... read a lot.”

“Sounds like it.” His companion turned back to the scene in front of them. “You know what it is? It’s not just the cops. It’s everything. People have no respect for the rules, you know what I’m saying? For the rules and for authority. And if you say anything about it, that makes you a bad guy. You can’t discipline your kids – you hit your kids, and they’ll take them away from you. I mean, come on, like it’s gonna screw them up for life? My father would hit me if I got out of line, and I turned out all right. Your father ever hit you?”

“Once or twice.”

“There you go. And are you screwed up? Come on. It’s *crazy*. Even fuckin’ Carter, he said his daddy would do it sometimes. Some kind of switch or stick, maybe a belt. Didn’t screw *him* up, right? I mean, yeah, he was a jerk, but not, you know, some kind of head case.”

Rick mumbled “Hm,” trying his best to be noncommittal.

“Yeah, Carter – jeez, am I glad they got rid of him.” He attempted to imitate the former leader. “‘We have a muh-laze in this country.’ Like that was the problem. Problem was you, you dumb cracker asshole.”

“Well, he’s gone.”

“Damn straight. Good thing we have a real leader in there now. Am I right?”

Another mumble from Rick, which was not enough for the other man. “What,” he said, “don’t you like him?”

“He’s okay, I guess.”

“I know you *voted* with him a lot of the time...”

“Excuse me?”

He laughed. “The way you voted. What’s so strange? You know it’s a matter of public record, Congressman.”

Rick could feel his stomach growing tight, his eyes narrowing – so much so that the other man put up his hands and said, “Easy, easy. I’m not a cop, I’m not a reporter. It’s okay.”

“Then what are you?”

“Let’s start with who. Frank Boscorelli. My friends call me Bosco.” He held out his hand. With great hesitancy, Rick shook it. “You know, like that chocolate shit you put in milk when we were kids. Or was that before your time?”

“I’m not that young.”

“Sure you are. You’re the Boy Wonder. Don’t tell me I have the wrong Richard Waisell?”

“What do you want?”

“Cut to the chase, huh? Okay. What I do is... I’m sort of a recruiter. A talent scout. I represent some people who might be interested in somebody with your talents.”

“I see,” said Rick. “Could you possibly be any more vague?”

Bosco seemed terrifically amused. “You know, all that stuff I read about you, everybody said you had no sense of humor – I just knew they were wrong. Don’t ask me how, but I did. You can be funny, but your humor is whaddyacallit – subtle. Probably comes off better in writing than in person.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“Sorry... My people understand that you’re kind of at loose ends right now. And you might be hurting – you know, financially.”

“I’m not. I get a pension, and I have some investments. I’m okay.”

“Fine. But so what? You’re gonna sit around collecting your pension for the next fifty years? Come on. Somebody like you has to make himself useful.”

“I have some ideas.”

“That’s great. I mean that. But could you just indulge me for a minute and listen to another one?”

He had the manner of a salesman, and Rick had always disliked salesmen; their line of bullshit was too blatant for his taste. But he had to admit, the guy was good. He found himself relaxing to the point of at least being curious. “Go ahead,” he said, “take *two* minutes.”

Bosco smiled. “Okay. What I said before, about your talents. As in what you’re good at. Listen, you achieved something at your age that a lot of guys *twice* your age, who’d been trying for fifteen, twenty years, couldn’t do. Because you had the talent. And I don’t mean for raising money, or putting together a good staff, or targeting the right issues. Any idiot can do that. I’m talking about the most basic talent, the one that without it, you never get anywhere. You know what that is? Communication.”

“Making speeches, you mean?”

Bosco shook his head. “It’s a lot bigger – *deeper* than that. It’s the thing where somehow, you get the guy listening to you to believe you understand. You know what he likes, what pisses him off, what he hopes for, what he’s afraid of. Even when you don’t give a crap, which is the case a lot of the time, you get him to think you do. It’s a gift. Not everybody can do it – I sure as hell can’t. On the other hand, Reagan, he can do it in spades.”

“I’m not Reagan.”

“No shit. I’ve seen the videotapes. No offense, but you look like a guy who gives a good *impression* of giving a crap, which is not the same thing. Not everybody could tell the difference, that’s why you won. But I could. It’s in your eyes, or what they call your body language. The thing about Reagan is, he’s convinced *himself* that he cares... and he can, like, project that feeling onto his audience. Am I making sense? You get what I’m saying?”

“I get what you’re saying. But not where you’re going.”

Bosco nodded. “It’s like your humor. Like I said, we’re betting that you come off better in print.” He paused. “We want you to do a column.”

This was truly unexpected. “Seriously?”

“That’s right. After, you know, a decent interval of time... let’s say a year. You’ll run in the *News* or the *Post* – they haven’t decided yet. A column a week, then in a while they’ll make it two a week. If you do well enough, down the line we can talk about syndication, across the country.”

Part of him was flattered, and excited. Part of him, as always, was deeply skeptical. Was it a joke by someone, perhaps his former friends – was he being videotaped, or would they just jump out of the bushes, laughing, as soon as he said yes?

“This is very interesting,” he said. “But are you saying... I mean first of all, you don’t think there would be some kind of, ah, reaction if my name... I could see doing it locally in a couple of places, but –”

“Tell me something. You resigned what, six months ago?”

“Closer to seven.”

“And how long has it been since you’ve seen your name anywhere, even the free papers in the supermarket?”

“About the same.”

“Now add another year to that.”

“Okay, but don’t you think... like I could see *The Other Paper* doing another –”

“Fuck *The Other Paper*. Who reads that stupid rag, a bunch of old hippies with their head up their ass? No mainstream publication will bother. Trust me, to them it’ll be old news. People in this country have no memory, *nada*. That’s one of the great things about it, you know why? It means if you’ve fucked up your life, just drop out of sight for a while and then poof, start a new one. Nobody will mind – a lot of them have done the same thing, or they know somebody who did. Doesn’t work that way anywhere else in the world. Out there, you might as well kill yourself because nobody forgets anything.”

He wanted to believe Bosco, wanted to give himself over completely to the salesman’s worldview. But he kept thinking of nagging little details. “And your friends can just make this happen?”

“You know how it is.” Bosco said. “They know people who know people who know people. Everybody owes somebody something.”

“And what would they want me to say? I’m not going to do that Reagan-is-God routine –”

“No, no.”

“– because quite frankly – I did vote with him a number of times, yeah, but I think he’s not exactly the sharpest tack on the board.”

“You won’t be writing about his brains. You’ll be writing about his smile, and his jokes, and how he doesn’t take any crap from the Soviets and the unions... you know, the things that got him elected.”

“I don’t hate unions. My father was a union member. I’m not saying they’re perfect, but –”

Bosco waved him off. “I know, I know. Same here. I grew up in a union household. My father was with the typesetters. Shop steward. They helped shut down the holy *New York Times* in ’62. Got my father a decent wage, so he could put me through college.”

Rick said, facetiously, “And this is how you thank him?”

“He passed away five years ago. But if he was alive today, this is what I’d say to him. I’d say, ‘Pop, your people did a great job. Such a great job that they put themselves out of business. They’ve outlived their usefulness.’”

“That’s not true for everyone.”

Bosco shrugged. “It’s true for the people who matter. Come on, am I telling you something you don’t know? Their membership’s been dropping every year for I don’t know how long. People can’t wait to get off the assembly line, or get their kids off. None of this class conscious bullshit like they have in Europe, thank God. You’re born into a class, you don’t have to die there. Workers want to be middle class, middle class want to be rich, even rich sometimes, they want to drop out and live on a farm.

“So where does that leave the unions? They used to stand for something, sure, but now – what, the ‘labor movement?’ Please. There is no fucking labor movement. They stand for themselves, that’s what people think. Or they’re just here to protect people who can’t move up. The lazy ones, the fuckups. Driving up business costs so the rest of us have to pay more for everything. Other than that, they’re not relevant. You know what I’m saying.”

“We’re a nation of independent contractors.”

“Exactly. Like you. Like me.”

Rick thought of responding to this, but why bother? At this point he was just playing devil’s advocate; this wasn’t an issue about which he felt especially passionate. He had all the information that he needed. “Okay,” he said, “the offer is interesting. But I’ll need some time to think about it.”

“Of course.” Bosco nodded. “Take all the time you need.” He handed Rick his card, and then he was off.

* * * * *

Bosco exited the park on Eighth Street, hailed a cab, crossed the Brooklyn Bridge and got out on the other side. It took him twenty minutes to find a working pay phone.

“Hello?”

“It’s me,” said Bosco.

“So?”

“It went great. Perfect.”

“He’ll do it?”

“That’s right.”

“That’s what he said?”

“He said he’d think about it. Don’t worry. He’s one of those guys that doesn’t like to say ‘yes’ right away, you know? He will. Maybe tomorrow, maybe in a couple of days. I guarantee you.”

“What makes you so sure?”

Bosco laughed. “Like he has an alternative?”