

THE ANTHROCIDE SOLUTION

by

D. L. Hamilton

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To my late father, Linford Hamilton, who brought and taught me life.

To my father-in-law, Richard Yoder, who brought and taught me spiritual life.

To my Father in heaven, whose Son, Jesus, is the Resurrection and the Life.

Somewhere in the Bay Area, this very day, lies an underground vault with ten lifeless occupants who have waited several years—and will wait many more—to be revived...

PART 1:

THE CLOCK

CHICAGO, IL (IP) — The board of directors of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* set the “Doomsday Clock” at four minutes to midnight, declaring that the world remains on the brink of nuclear war and total annihilation. Recent defense and foreign policy decisions by the Reagan administration were cited as reasons...

Chapter 1

A wave of dread washed over Larry as he glared up Divisadero Street at the second-story window. His stomach tightened as he plodded toward the apartment building. He was nervous, not about what was up there, but about the void.

A little dust whirlwind orbited a Butterfinger wrapper around his ankles. It tousled his generic brown hair and blew grit into his gray eyes. San Francisco's daily onshore breeze was at its late-afternoon peak. He turned his back to the wind, rubbing and blinking. When he could see again he noticed the streetlights had come on though it was not yet totally dark. He could make out his landlady, Mrs. Lee, sweeping the front steps again. *She must do that twenty times a day*, he thought. He immediately scolded himself for maligning her. She was Chinese, of some indeterminable age over sixty, and was as close to a friend as he had in the world. Her English was not the best and, at her age, she was hardly in tune with what went on in a twenty-five year old's life. Still she was always kind, always sympathetic, and best of all, never judgmental. Most of their conversations took place with her sweeping out front. It struck him as strange that when he lamented his loneliness he never considered Mrs. Lee, as if she somehow did not really count.

"Hello Larry," she said, struggling with the R's. "This bowling night?"

"Hi, Mrs. Lee. No, tomorrow night," he said without enthusiasm. He grabbed the newspaper and headed up the steps to his apartment. He felt that sense of foreboding that had been a growing cloud for weeks now.

As if she could sense what he was feeling, she called after him. "You ask someone out for Saturday night. You alone too much." He appreciated that she cared about him.

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do.” They both knew it was a lie.

He opened the door to the neat but Spartan apartment. Its one bookcase was limited almost exclusively to Perry Mason *The Case of...* novels. A large aquarium gurgled just behind the sofa. Its two occupants were angelfish named Erle and Stanley. He thought about putting one of his Paul Simon tapes on, or even an old Simon and Garfunkle. Instead he just sat down and opened the paper.

He skimmed an editorial on the “Doomsday Clock” lambasting the Reagan administration for hurtling mankind toward The Final War. “The world remains on the brink of nuclear annihilation” it read. *Here it is almost 1983 and they’ve been spouting these same warnings as far back as I can remember*, he thought. He followed politics from a distance but could not get too worked-up over them like so many people did.

He stopped reading. The hum of Erle and Stanley’s aquarium made the silence more absolute and more oppressive. He picked up a small, framed photo from the end table. He knew he shouldn’t. He knew the kind of thoughts the off-center black-and-white snapshot would produce, but he stared at it anyway. It was his only picture of his mother and father together—the only one of his father, period. Larry was in it, too; a toddler snuggling between them as they sat on the grass in a city park. He could remember the park and that very day of the picture. At least he thought he could. He had no other memory of his dad; only of Mom crying uncontrollably as she tried to explain what a car accident was to a two-year-old. Quickly the scene in his mind changed to Aunt Arva trying reassure ten-year-old Larry that he could live with her and she would take care of him now that his mom was gone.

“Don’t worry Larry,” she had told him. “You won’t be alone, I’ll see to that.”

Not alone, he thought with a quick, bitter laugh. The heavy silence pushed him into dark reflections; to those painful “why” questions. Why had he never connected and made friends like everyone else? Why had he been the kid that, when people looked back at the class pictures, no one could remember his name? Why, in an area with literally thousands of lonely and even mistreated women, was there no one for him? Why could he not meet a gentle, caring woman who would help him cross his insurmountable barrier of shyness, and give him a love to live for? What did he have to live for? Why should he even bother to go on through the motions? He let his mind sink deeper than he

had ever dared to plunge. He caught himself pondering how long it would be before anyone would find his body if he ended his life. This caused him to snap-to and he shuddered at having allowed his thoughts to take such a fearsome turn.

He flipped-on the television just for some sound to distract himself. An evangelist with too much hair for someone his age was on. Larry's first impulse was to change the channel. He didn't like TV preachers; they looked and sounded too much like used-car salesmen. For no apparent reason, he hesitated—and listened.

“Jeremiah 29:11 says, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”” We need to realize that many of the great characters of the Bible had no inkling of the tremendous roles they were going to play in God's plan and the history of mankind. When Joseph of Old Testament times was imprisoned unjustly in a foreign land, he might well have expected never to get out, much less be a key player in God's plan. When Ruth traveled to Israel, dubious of even getting another meal, she had no expectations of wedding a wealthy man like Boaz, let alone of being an ancestor of the Messiah. Moses would have thought you crazy if you had suggested a week before the burning bush that he, a murderer hiding out in the wilderness, would confront Pharaoh, lead a huge nation out of bondage, and speak ‘face to face’ with God.

“I could go on, but my point is that this very day there are people who believe they are doomed to accomplish nothing. People who think their futures hold nothing, that their lives are without purpose, and even, tragically, that there is no use in their going on living. My friends, let me tell you, as surely as there is a God in heaven, He has a purpose for you. He can make use of you, no matter if you are the lowliest, the most untalented, the least influential human being on the face of the earth. In His hands you can do mighty works of eternal consequences to untold millions of people. Or He may use you just to dry the tear of a single, desperate soul. Whatever form it takes, I guarantee you that God has a purpose for your life. All you need to do is surrender control of that life to Him through the power of Jesus, and have the patience to wait for His timing.”

Larry did not know much about God, or the people the preacher had cited. He also did not understand what was meant by this idea of surrendering control. Still, he felt

certain the man was right about everyone having a purpose. His time would come, but how long would he have to wait?

The preacher launched into his appeal for donations, so Larry switched-off the TV. He felt more at peace than he had in a long time.

He picked up the paper again. He rarely read the want ads, but found himself opening it to the “Personals” section.

At first he only noticed the usual ads for palm readings and cheap divorces. He even asked himself what he was looking for. One of those lonely-hearts items like, “Attractive single female would like to meet fun-loving male?” No, not really. He would never have the courage to answer one like that.

Near the middle of the second column he spotted an unusual ad that seemed like it belonged more in the “Help Wanted” section.

Wanted

Male, 21-28 yrs., single, perfect health/condition for long-term hazardous scientific expedition in distant location. Must have NO attachments/family, may not return for many years. All expenses paid. Not glamorous, but fate of mankind may rest on you. Apply in person Sat. 9 am - 4 pm: 29886 Mission, Suite D, Hayward.

His first reaction was to wonder what kind of screwball would answer an ad like that. But somehow he could not stop reading it over and over.

Chapter 2

As he trudged the few blocks to Western Federated Insurance Company, Larry began to wonder if he should have driven the Camaro. The gray sky did not look like the usual morning overcast. More likely it was the end of Indian summer and the start of the November rains. *Oh well, I don't like parking it out in the weather where it can get its doors all banged-up anyway*, he thought.

He stepped off the elevator, wordlessly hanging-up his jacket, and took his desk. As a securities clerk, he was beneath the acknowledgement of the fast-trackers and ancient secretaries in the investment department. The only one who noticed his arrival was his boss, Michael Kincaid. Mr. Kincaid was the same man who had hired Larry after he had dropped out of Junior College. He was easy to work for, but in four years he and Larry had never held a conversation unrelated to work. The tall, stoop-shouldered man in his mid-fifties was making a beeline for Larry's desk.

“Good morning, Mr. Kincaid.”

“Larry, I have an assignment for you.”

“All right.”

“Mr. Wayne Russell is interested in an adaptation of that trading statistics report you put together each week and would like to meet with you an hour or so each day to go over it with you. You know who he is don't you?”

Larry had seen Russell a few times around the building. As with most of the executives, he had never condescended to speak to Larry. All Larry knew about him was that he was rising rapidly in the organization and always wore fitted shirts to show off his bodybuilder's physique. “Yes, I've seen him around.”

“You’ll need to take whatever reference data he might ask about and go up to his office Monday morning. Call his administrative assistant, Miss—Brown I think it is, and set up an appointment. She’s in the directory, look under the department heading.” Larry nodded and Kincaid disappeared down the hallway.

Larry found a number under “Brown, Deanna - Administrative Assistant” and tried it.

“Good morning, Western Federated, this is Deanna,” came a youthful, happy voice.

“Oh, yes—Miss Brown? This is Larry Blevins from the investment department? Mr. Kincaid said I should call and make an appointment to come meet with Mr. Russell Monday morning?”

“Yes. Mr. Russell said he had spoken to Mr. Kincaid and that he would have you call, Mr. Blevins.” Then she gave a little chuckle, “Boy, that’s a lot of ‘misters’ in one sentence, isn’t it?”

Her friendly voice so put Larry at ease that he actually played along. “It sure is *Ms. Brown.*”

They both laughed lightly. “I much prefer just ‘Deanna’ if it’s okay with you.”

“Sure thing, Deanna,” he said smiling. “Now what’s a good time for me to come up? And I’m with you; just call me Larry. Please.”

“Okay, Larry. Let’s see, there’s nothing on his calendar at nine-thirty and that’s after his first cup of coffee so it should be a good time if it works for you.”

“Nine-thirty’s fine.”

“Okay, great then Larry, I guess—”

“Wait, wait. I don’t know where you’re located.”

“Oh, of course,” she said with a laugh. “I’m sorry, I guess it would help if I told you where you’re going. You know where the small elevator is at the north end of the building?”

“Yes.”

“When you come off on eight just look around the corner to your left and you’ll see Carol—that’s the secretary—then just come on around and that’s my desk. Okay?”

“Sounds simple enough even for me, and I can get lost anywhere.”

“Isn’t it awful? I’m the same way, especially in this building, the way it’s laid-out. You should have seen me the first time I had to go to Personnel. I thought they were going to have to send a search party. I’ve wondered if there isn’t some kind of Bermuda Triangle in this building.”

Larry laughed. “Yeah, maybe that’s where all those people they tell us have quit or retired are. Someday we’ll stumble across them all while looking for the fifth floor rest rooms or something.”

This tickled Deanna. Larry was impressed that he had said something clever—and to a female, no less.

“Okay, Larry we’ll see you Monday at nine-thirty, then.” He could tell she was still grinning.

“I’ll be there. Bye, Deanna.”

“Bye-bye, now.”

Nothing significant. To most people, little more than some small talk. For Larry, though, it was one of the rare times in his life that he had talked casually with a young woman. He could tell she was young; and friendly, and charming, and very easy to talk to. He was most anxious to see the face that went with the voice, but was certain it had to be a letdown. He tried to guess which of the people he had seen in the cafeteria she might be, but without success. There were so many whose names he did not know and to whom he had never spoken.

Mercifully, it was the last night of bowling for Larry as the company league finished-up. Being the ultimate non-athlete he was, not even handicapping could overcome his penchant for choking whenever the team needed him. Jerry and Tyrone, his teammates, had only recruited him out of desperation.

Jerry Gill was the day-shift mailroom supervisor. He had dishwater hair, arms full of tattoos and eyes of uncertain coloration due to his constant squint from a ubiquitous cigarette. He made no attempt to hide his disdain for Larry.

Tyrone Kelsey, on the other hand, was good-natured toward him. He was a DP operations analyst at the company. At six-four, the husky Black man with a Fu-Manchu mustache looked imposing alongside Larry’s small-boned, five-nine frame.

Tyrone's easy-going demeanor led Larry to think he liked him. Still, he could not help wondering if he was really laughing at him.

"So, did you ask Brenda out yet?" Tyrone asked Larry during the first frame.

"Brenda?"

"That cute telephone receptionist down on the first floor I was telling you about last week. C'mon man, you gotta get with it."

"Oh, her. I think she already has a boyfriend—"

"Aw, man, you can't be worryin' about stuff like that."

"That's our Mr. Action," interjected Jerry.

"Okay. It's cool, because tonight's your night." Although Tyrone said it to Larry he gave Jerry a knowing wink.

After they lost their last game, the two dragged Larry to a nearby "hot spot," a dark, crowded cocktail lounge with a throbbing, thousand-decibel live band Larry could feel clear through to his internal organs. Larry sighed deeply as they sat at a tiny table. This was not his kind of place. He did not like liquor. To him, beer was a bitter, unpleasant-tasting cause for spending a lot of time in front of a urinal, disposing of what bore an unnerving resemblance to the beer itself. Any kind of hard liquor nauseated him. Plus, he found no enjoyment in getting drunk. He could not understand its reputation as a great time. It was like trying to stay awake to the end of a late-night movie only to keep waking up with several minutes of the show having passed by.

Tyrone introduced Larry to Carla, one of two barflies he had procured. She was downright homely, reeked of cheap perfume apparently used by the quart, and prattled-on incessantly about astrology. Not only was it a subject about which he knew little and cared even less, he could only catch every sixth word or so in the pulsating din. To be polite Larry bought her and himself drinks which he kept gulping hoping it would change his mind about her. Instead he started feeling sick within minutes. Jerry happened by and, seeing how reticent "Mr. Action" was, he invited the air-headed Carla to the dance floor. Soon they disappeared together. Larry, just as glad, was heading for his car when Tyrone spotted him.

"Where's Carla?" he asked.

"She and Jerry took off someplace."

“You let Jerry come and take your woman away from you? Man, I give up on you. You are one hopeless dude.” The disgust in Tyrone’s voice was heavy and final. He turned toward his date, “Come on Mama, let’s go to my place.” She hugged his arm and they hurried to the door.

Larry’s big night found him sitting home taking Emitrol and watching television. Once his stomach calmed-down the thought of getting to meet Deanna distracted his libido’s regret at the missed opportunity with Carla. He had a spring in his step as he walked to work on Monday.

Chapter 3

Larry knew it was silly to feel such anticipation as he rode the elevator to the eighth floor Monday morning, but he could not help himself. When he saw Carol, he recognized her instantly. He had seen and overheard her frequently in the cafeteria. She was memorable in two aspects. One was her appearance. She had short, red-dyed, tightly curled hair that, perched atop her long, skinny face and body reminded Larry of a human Q-Tip. Her other, unfortunate hallmark was a bitter cynicism about everything. To her, every rainbow had a black lining, every lucky break had a catch, and every person had a tragic flaw—one she was determined to uncover.

Larry's adverse feelings about seeing who Carol was were short-lived, once he spotted the young lady seated at the next desk with the nameplate Deanna Brown. While her voice had suggested it, her physical loveliness was more than Larry would have dared imagine. She was a petite blue-eyed blond, aglow with life. When she smiled, her cheeks filled her eyes and her nose wrinkled such that even her mildest expression of pleasure came across as exultant—and contagious—joy. It crossed Larry's mind that how she and Carol could coexist and not rub-off on one another would be beyond even Perry Mason's deductive powers.

"Hi. Larry?" Deanna asked. She jumped up and held out her hand. Larry's first impulse was to fall to one knee and kiss it but he managed to maintain enough decorum to shake its warm softness. "Have a seat for a second and I'll tell Mr. Russell you're here." She glanced at her phone. "He's on his line, I'll buzz in." She picked up the receiver and pressed a button. "Larry Blevins is here to see you. Oh, okay, I will." After hanging up she said, "He'll be done with his call in just a minute, then you can go in. It's just down this hallway, second door to the right."

“No Bermuda Triangle, I trust.”

She laughed lightly. “No, I’ve scouted this one out, it’s safe.” She then nodded toward the other desk. “Carol must think we’re crazy. Carol Williams, this is Larry Blevins from investments.”

“Hi, Carol,” said Larry.

Carol ignored the introduction and the greeting, and instead just waved her hand. “I don’t know anything, just something about Bermuda, and I don’t do islands; too many bugs.”

“Ohh,” said Deanna. “I’d love to go to an island, any island; Bermuda, Hawaii, Jamaica, it doesn’t matter to me.”

Larry half-sang, “I am an i-sland,” under his breath. He was immediately filled with embarrassment and disbelief at what he had done. Deanna, however, just carried on naturally.

“Ooh, Simon and Garfunkle,” she said. “I love Paul Simon.”

“Really?” Larry almost shouted. “I have every recording he’s ever made.”

“That must be a neat collection,” said Deanna with a big smile. “Oops,” she said looking at the phone. “Mr. Russell’s done. I better let you go. Enjoy your meeting.”

Wayne Russell was every bit as condescending as Larry had expected, but he could not get too bothered by it. They would need to meet for several mornings and anything that meant more trips up here where he could see Deanna was fine with him. Deanna was on the phone as Larry left, and he slowed up to inspect her hands for rings. Some kind of birthstone ring was on her right hand, and no rings on her left. It was not definitive, but it was a good sign she might be unattached. She mouthed a “bye-bye now” as he walked past her, and he smiled in return. After punching the elevator call button he stepped back out where he could see her, trying to look nonchalant.

“Bye, Carol,” he said. She only glanced at him, raised her chin slightly, and went back to her typing. The bell for the elevator rang. When he looked back at Deanna, still talking, she gave him another delicious smile and a little toodle-oo wave. The vision of it stayed with him all day.

Larry quickly realized why he had not recognized her. She never ate at the company cafeteria—he had no clue what she did at lunchtime. Her desk being so far

from his on the southwest corner of the second floor, he knew nothing of her comings and goings.

He purposely arrived early for the subsequent meetings. He would try to hold as long a conversation with Deanna as he could. Fortunately, with her effervescent personality and their common musical interests it was easy, even for him. Then the letdown would come when it was time for the meeting. He also tried to drag-out waiting for the elevator as long as possible, but it had the annoying habit of arriving immediately.

By Wednesday he was admitting his infatuation with her to himself. He felt the need to try to reason things out before he got in too deep. *First*, he asked himself, *why would a lovely creature like Deanna have any interest in somebody with as little going for him as I have?* The only answer he could offer was that, if she knew no more about him than he of her, she might not know he was Larry the loser. *Second*, *why would someone so fantastic be unattached?* This one was harder to answer. He did recall having read, however, about the gorgeous actresses, models, and even beauty queens who rarely dated because all the guys assumed they were unreachable or already booked-up with dates into the next decade. *Wouldn't that be something*, he thought, *if all these other guys let this angelic creature be overlooked just because they never asked, and ol' Larry came along and took her from them?*

Of course, he reminded himself, *he* had never asked her out either. To do so he would need to somehow overcome his crippling shyness. Well, Deanna was worth it. The question was, how to go about asking her out. He decided it needed to be something so compelling that she would be loath to miss it even if she was less than enamored with Larry as her escort. He scoured the entertainment section of the newspaper for any such upcoming event.

Larry felt a sort of chill at the hand of “fate” in operation when he spotted the perfect event: a Paul Simon concert some four weeks away. Did he dare buy tickets for the two of them? If only he could be sure she would go with him.

Hoping to break his logjam of indecision, Thursday morning he made a bold move. He stopped by a little flower stand on the way to work and bought a single long-stemmed rose. When he got to Deanna’s desk, he held it out to her.

“Oh, how pretty.”

“Yeah, an old lady was selling them on the street on my way to work this morning,” he lied. “I felt sorry for her, you know. So I just, you know, thought it might look good on your desk, or that, you know, you might like to have it.”

“Well thank you, how sweet,” she gushed. “I don’t have a vase.” She plunged it into her drinking-water cup. “There, that will work just fine. Thank you again, Larry. Oh, and it looks like Mr. Russell is ready, so you can just go right in.”

Larry headed down the hall, then realized that in his nervousness he had left his folder in the guest chair. He started back toward the reception area when the mention of his name by Carol made him stop before they could see him.

“I’m telling you, that Larry has a crush on you. He’s kind of weird, I think.”

“Oh, I think he’s really nice,” cut-in Deanna emphatically. With that Larry backpedaled a couple of giant steps and coughed loudly, then strode down the hall to the reception area. As expected, the two women were silent as he arrived.

“I swear. I’d forget my head if it wasn’t attached.” He laughed and picked the folder up off the chair. “Well, let’s try this again.”

“I’m sorry,” Deanna said gently. “I should have noticed it sitting there right in front of me.”

“That’s okay, no problem,” he called-out as he headed back down the hall.

To Larry, Deanna’s defense of him to the cynical Carol was a clear indication that all systems were “go.” He ordered two tickets to the concert as soon as he got back to his desk, then immediately chastised himself. *I’ve known her less than a week, and now I’m supposed to just march up and ask her out?* He began getting cold feet, as his fear insisted it was too soon.

The issue was brought to a head when Wayne Russell rang his phone.

“Hello?”

“Larry? This is Mr. Russell. I think we’ve got that report laid-out just the way I want, so we won’t need to meet anymore. Thanks for your efforts.” Larry went into instant panic, and hemmed and hawed while his mind raced for a way to buy more time.

“How about if I bring the finished product up in person one last time tomorrow—sort of like a note-burning ceremony.” he said.

With a slight laugh Russell said, “Okay, sure. I know you’ve put in a lot of time on this, and you’ve done a fine job. I guess a bit of ceremony is called-for. See you tomorrow then.” He spoke in tones used by parents when their child brings home his first finger-painting. To Larry, all that mattered was that the time for the showdown had been thrust upon him.

He began daydreaming various scenarios. In one, a suave Larry ambles up to Deanna’s desk and flashes a ticket where she can see it. After she gushes about him getting to go to the concert, he reveals the second one and says something clever like, “If you happen to know of someone who would like to attend, I’d love to have her company.” Then she says something like, “If you mean me, I’d love to.” They both laugh a bit, and begin discussing where to go for dinner first, what time he’ll pick her up, where she lives, the whole bit.

In another, he just grabs the phone, dials her extension and says, “Hi, Deanna, this is Larry. I have tickets to the Paul Simon concert and was wondering if you’d like to go with me.” Short. Simple. Private. And via phone, relatively non-threatening; but not as hard to turn down as the face-to-face scenario.

At lunch Larry sat down where Tyrone was by himself reading.

“Hi, Tyrone.”

When he first looked up at Larry he frowned a bit, then softened it into a slight grin. “Hey, Larry. What’s going on?”

“Tyrone, I need your advice. I’ve got tickets to a concert that I know this woman I’m interested in would love to attend. Only, you know how shy I am around women. So, should I just dial her extension and ask her, or go wave the tickets under her nose in person?”

“In your case, Larry, I’d say definitely in person. You got to develop some guts when it comes to women or you may as well pack it in.”

“I know, I know, but if she turns me down I’ll probably turn twelve shades of purple and make an idiot out of myself.”

“Look. You got to just be cool about the whole thing. Make her think that if she don’t go with you, it’s her loss. In fact, get a sure-fire backup date just in case. That way, if your first choice turns you down, you just shrug it off—right in front of her—say

‘That’s too bad’ and go straight to your second and make the date. That way the one who feels dumb is your first choice. Who is she, anyway?”

Larry had an uneasy feeling Tyrone would tell him he was setting his sights too high. “I’d best not say, just yet.”

“Okay, have it your way.”

“So who could I get for this ‘backup date’?”

“How about Arlene down in Data Entry? She’d never turn down a free concert with anyone, long as he’s breathing and wears pants.”

Larry knew Arlene from her hanging around Tyrone and Jerry. She was an average-looking woman who tried to out-shock the men by being crude. Somehow he could not picture himself with her, even though Tyrone was probably right as far as her being an easy date to get. The thought of her alongside the lovely Deanna was enough for him to set that suggestion aside.

“All right. Thanks Tyrone. Wish me luck.”

“Hey, dude. You gotta make your own luck.”

The next morning he rode the elevator with both apprehension and anticipation.

Chapter 4

He had decided on using the “look what I got” approach, which he had rehearsed repeatedly. As the doors opened he steeled himself, tucked the folder under his arm and marched around the corner. He stopped short when, to his dismay, he saw Wayne Russell leaning over Deanna’s desk. He was discussing a form of some sort with her. Both looked up immediately.

“Ah, good morning Larry,” said Russell. Deanna just smiled.

“Just go on ahead and finish what you’re doing,” said Larry trying to be as blasé as possible. He was hoping fervently that Mr. Russell would take him to his office so at least on the way out he could speak with Deanna. There was no way he was going to ask her out with him standing there.

“No problem, we can stop for a minute,” said Russell. “So, this is the final delivery in person, huh?” With that he reached out and took the folder from Larry. “And thanks again for your efforts, Larry. I’ll be sure and mention it to Kincaid.”

Larry smiled and fidgeted for a moment not knowing what to do, as the other two, and Carol, all stared at him. Deanna’s phone rang as Larry said, “Okay, well, thanks.” He ambled slowly in a roundabout fashion toward the elevator. Russell looked as though he was about to ask if Larry needed anything else when Deanna spoke up.

“It’s Mr. Spencer from Seattle.”

“Oh,” said Russell looking at his watch. “Okay, I’ll take it in my office. I’ll be right back so we can finish up here.” With that he disappeared down the hallway.

All right, there’s a lucky break, thought Larry. *Not much time though.* He hurried back to her desk just as her phone rang again.

“Good morning, Western Federated, this is Deanna.”

Better cut this short, Larry decided. The unexpected delays and the need to hurry were getting him flustered. He reached into his jacket and pulled out both tickets. Deanna, taking a message, looked at him quizzically. When at last she hung up, he thrust them at her and blurted, “Look. I’ve got these.” He dropped them on her desk.

She studied them for a second. Her reaction was much more subdued than Larry would have liked.

“Oh. Paul Simon tickets.” Her smile seemed just a bit uneasy. She scooped them up and held them out to him a little too quickly. “Good for you.”

He resisted the natural reaction to take them back from her. *Better get to the point quick*, he told himself.

“I—would you like to go?” She shot a glance over to Carol. “With me, I mean,” he continued as she looked back at him. She seemed to be trying to think how to answer, but said nothing to break the uncomfortable silence. “You know, together—like a date,” he said, trying to prompt a response from her.

Carol made a small gasp and when he looked at her, her eyes were wide with incredulity and she was just covering her slack jawed mouth with the heel of her hand.

Deanna, shaking her head and half closing her eyes finally spoke. “I...don’t think so.”

She looked again at an increasingly red-faced Carol.

Larry blushed as his mind reeled in confusion. How, in asking Deanna out, had he committed what apparently was some kind of blatant gaffe? He felt it best to just end this discussion as gracefully as possible. He remarked, as casually as he could, “Well, maybe some other time then.”

At this, Carol let out a quick little groan, shielded her eyes with her hand and began tittering with laughter. Deanna leaned forward a bit, tilted her head to one side, tightened the corners of her mouth and said as if speaking to a child, “Larry, Wayne and I live together.”

“Wayne? Oh. Mist—Wayne Russell,” he stammered, pointing down the hallway. Carol was in quiet hysterics. “Okay, well, I—didn’t know—it’s—okay.” He began backing toward the elevator with his mind screaming for him to get out of there quick.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Deanna said dryly, waving the tickets.

His mind absolutely refused to allow him to walk back over to her desk. “Oh, uh, no. Y-you keep them and use them. I—I don’t have any use for them anyway.” He immediately regretted his words. He hurried over to the elevator and pressed the button.

“What?” he could hear Deanna exclaim. “You’re leaving your tickets? Larry?”

He could only see Carol who was conversing with Deanna mostly by making faces, shrugs, and gestures. The elevator, for the first time, was taking forever. At one point he heard Deanna say something and saw Carol pointing and mouthing, “He’s still at the elevator.” *So, now I’m a sideshow freak*, he thought. After an eternity the elevator doors opened and he hurried into the vehicle that would take him from this chamber of horrors. Just as the doors were closing Deanna rounded the corner holding the tickets out in front of her.

“Larry,” she called out, but he let the doors close.

Carol, the main trunk of the company grapevine, could not let an opportunity like this pass. By lunchtime it seemed like everyone had heard her version of Larry’s blunder. He decided he would just buy one of the cafeteria’s ready-made sandwiches and go for a walk and eat it so he would not have to face anyone. Once he got in line to buy it, though, he discovered that it had started raining. Since eating at one’s desk was not allowed, he was forced to eat with everyone else. He scarcely got sat down when Jerry, Tyrone, and a host of their bowling buddies found him.

“Hey, Mr. Action, word is you been up hittin’ on Wayne Russell’s woman,” said Jerry.

Larry sighed deeply. “Look, how was I supposed to know he and Deanna were an item?”

“I thought everybody knew it,” laughed one of the crowd, with general agreement.

“How long they been together, two years?” asked Tyrone.

“Nah, been at least three. You need to get your head out of the clouds, boy,” said Jerry.

“Man, I asked you who she was,” said Tyrone. “You should have told me. I’d have kept you out of trouble. I could have told you to keep away from that Deanna Brown chick.”

“Yeah, and Russell don’t take kindly to anybody hittin’ on his little lady friend,” added Jerry. “You made yourself a mighty bad mistake, there.”

Larry knew he was exaggerating. It made for a better story to tell the next person that, not only had this Larry clown asked out the live-in lover of a top company executive, but also he was one bad dude and Larry better be looking over his shoulder from now on. All he wanted though was to get away from everybody. He crammed the rest of his sandwich into his mouth so he could just get up and walk away. Before he could finish, Jerry spoke up again, this time more towards Tyrone.

“Then again, seein’ as how you gave her and ‘Waynie-poo’ your concert tickets, maybe he won’t be so hard to deal with after all.”

“What?” said Tyrone. “Didn’t you take ‘em back down to Arlene like I told you to? Aw, man, I give up on you. Don’t be comin’ around askin’ me for advice on women no more.” Then he grinned slyly at the others, “I guess there’s some things can’t be taught; we just gotta come by ‘em natural.” They all laughed and Larry, feeling his face getting hot again jumped up and stormed off.

He stayed glued to his chair, certain that he was being whispered about all afternoon. He slipped away early, without even telling Mr. Kincaid. As he headed home he rubbed the stubble of his five-o’clock shadow, his mind searching for answers where there were none.

“Good evening Larry,” said Mrs. Lee with a smile, as always. “How everything go today?”

“Not so good, Mrs. Lee,” he said looking at the ground. “You remember that girl I said I was going to ask out? The one at work?”

“Aw, she turn you down? Handsome boy like you?”

“Worse than that; she’s living with one of the senior executives. It took me by surprise so much that I made a complete idiot of myself. Now I’m the talk of the whole company.”

“Don’t worry, there plenty other girl out there for nice hard-working boy like you.” As he started for the stairs to the second floor she brightened. “My granddaughter graduate from junior college. She coming here next semester, go to USF. She smart. Study to be teacher. You like her. She so pretty.” Then in a conspiratorial tone of voice, “She *very* nice girl. Not live with nobody, either. Just study hard, make good grade. But, you know, also like to have fun, too. She good girl. Maybe when she come you meet her.”

“Sure, Mrs. Lee,” he said unenthusiastically. He was in no mood to talk about females of any kind, nice or otherwise, or about dating.

He picked up the newspaper and entered his dark apartment. He plopped down on the sofa and slapped the paper down beside him. Stanley and Erle’s aquarium provided a pale glow of light from behind him. He sat motionless for almost two hours, deep in morbid thought. Eventually his stewing brought him to that same point of misguided reasoning that children use when contemplating running away from home. *Just wait till I’m gone, then they’ll be sorry.* But it was not packing a suitcase and running away he was pondering. It was something more hideous and permanent.

He thought about calling Aunt Arva, but she would not understand. Since it was not Saturday she would not even understand why he would dare to call and disrupt her precious solitude. A reclusive spinster, she had raised Larry the best she could, knowing nothing about adolescent boys. She had feared his becoming one of those rebellious hoodlum teenagers of the late sixties who were letting their hair grow long and taking pills and Lord knew what else. So she had ingrained into him that his only means of expressing love to his departed mother was to never get into any trouble—and to stay away from anyone who might lead him there. Arva, in no way a religious woman, had concluded that Nirvana consisted of three cats and huge quantities of peace and quiet. Since he had moved out, one call a week was fine. More was permitted only for an emergency.

It was a call of nature that finally aroused him from his stupor, but when he returned he sat back down in the same spot, this time turning on a lamp and picking up the paper. He found that same peculiar advertisement in the Personals that had been there the week before. That phrase regarding the fate of mankind was an intriguing one. *Must*

be some Antarctic research team studying one of those atmospheric problems or something, he guessed. He started imagining what it would be like to be involved in such an endeavor.

Then he caught himself and scoffed at the whole idea. Spurned suitors did not go off to join the Foreign Legion anymore, that sort of thing was just plain silly. Run off to some remote mountaintop or someplace? Now that made a lot of sense—fine selection of eligible women he would meet that way. It was crazy to even consider it. Still, he certainly fit the qualifications—his life was going nowhere and he was definitely unattached. If there was even a shred of truth to that “fate of mankind” business, could not that be the purpose for his life the TV preacher had mentioned? *Need to be there between nine and four tomorrow, huh? Or is that just left over from last Saturday?* He debated with himself until, having eaten a bowl of soup, he told himself to just forget it and went to bed. Yet it would not leave him be, and his fitful attempt at sleep was not the result of his horrible day of humiliation, but of the mysterious advertisement that only a fool would answer.

The next morning he resolved to put the ad out of his mind. He got into his one extravagance, a year-old metallic-blue Camaro, and headed for The Read-Cycler. It was a used-book store he frequented among the little shops along Sacramento Street. He decided to see if there were any *Perry Mason* paperbacks he had not already read.

“Good morning, Mr. Bergman. How are you doing?”

The question had more meaning than when normally asked. Larry had seen the health of the little shop’s proprietor, Murray Bergman, deteriorate noticeably in the four years he had known him. Mr. Bergman looked as if he should have retired years ago, and was always griping about having to be there all the time, but The Read-Cycler was his pride and joy. He was glaring at a stack of a dozen or so books on the table with a look of frustration.

“Oh, good morning, Larry,” he said with an undiminished New York accent. “This darned arthritis of mine is acting up again.” He looked directly into Larry’s eyes for a long moment.

“Could you use some help?” Larry asked.

Mr. Bergman was clearly glad that Larry had asked and embarrassed to admit it.

“It’s just that some days like this, I can’t even put them up on the fourth shelf,” he said gesturing toward an empty shelf section. Larry quickly scooped the books up and began shelving them.

“Be sure and keep them in order,” he fretted as he hovered over Larry. It was obvious he hated having to let someone else display his merchandise. “I tell you, it’s terrible to get old and not be able to do the little things.”

“Maybe you ought to hire someone. You know, just part time, minimum wage, to do the lifting and stacking. Might even allow you to take a day off now and again.”

“Aah, they would probably steal me blind.”

Larry chuckled. “No, you’d hire someone you could trust. You wouldn’t want anyone you’d have to worry about.”

“So, you looking for a job? You I could trust. I can’t think of anybody else.”

“No,” Larry said with a laugh. “Thanks, I already have a job, but there must be some reliable college students or something around.”

“Not unless I could get a personal reference from a reliable source. Besides, all that paperwork and expense for payroll and all. Who needs it?”

You do, thought Larry, but he just gave a little shrug with his eyes. “Well, I hope you start feeling better, Mr. Bergman. Are these the recent additions over here?”

“Yeah. Don’t remember there being any of Gardner’s stuff in there, though.”

He poked around in the store for quite a long while but ended up buying nothing. When he got home he began to actually pace around his apartment. *It couldn’t hurt to go talk to these folks*, he thought. *I’m not doing anything else today. Might be good for a laugh at least. Maybe their plan to save mankind would be unique enough to prove fascinating even if I declined to participate. But, nah, who knows how many others will have already interviewed. By now they’ve probably already made their selection. The ad is probably one of those that got left in by mistake. Why should I drive all the way over to Hayward on the other side of the bay for nothing?*

The debate went on long enough that by the time he got there it was already three in the afternoon.