

Another Vanishing Act

Pat Russo & Pete Conner

Copyright © 2014 by Pete Conner & Pat Russo

All rights reserved

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and events portrayed in this novel are products of the authors' imaginations. Any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead), business establishments, events, or locales is purely coincidental.

ISBN-13: 978-1503383067

ISBN-10: 1503383067

Also by Pat Russo

*One Marshal's Badge: A Memoir of Fugitive Hunting, Witness
Protection, and the U.S. Marshals Service*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our thanks to everyone who encouraged us, read and commented on various versions of the manuscript, listened, or otherwise helped out.

A special thanks to Marilyn P., Diana F., Dave M., Sharon E., and my fellow writers in Joyce Magnin's novelists workshop.

And to Maria for listening to various drafts and giving valuable feedback; many, many thanks.

To anyone we neglected to mention, apologies for this "senior moment."

Be careful what you wish for.

That's what Pops, my grandfather, told me. Today I figured out what he meant.

This sudden enlightenment didn't occur while I was lost in meditation. It came to me while I was mopping the flooded floor in the second-floor laundry.

Mopping up is a job you'd expect the maintenance staff to handle, right? Me too. Lately it's become part of my growing list of responsibilities here at the Excelsior Senior Apartments.

I started out as both building manager and activities director. A few weeks into this gig, the maintenance super jumped ship and I temporarily picked up that job. Then the maintenance guys stopped showing up and I became my entire staff. I'm still waiting for the help-wanted ads to run in the paper.

It's not that the Excelsior needs a big staff. This isn't a nursing home, so we don't need a medical department. An occasional visiting nurse works fine for us. We don't serve regular meals like an assisted living, so we don't need cooks,

dishwashers, and waitresses. We call a caterer when we need food for some special occasion. The people who live in these apartments are fairly independent folks who have hit retirement age.

We really need a better term than “senior citizens.” I’ve never run into any “junior citizens” so the term doesn’t even make sense. If you use the term “golden agers” around any of the tough old birds I know, they’d either challenge you to arm wrestle or laugh you silly. Sure, age has caused a few problems for some of them but it’s also improved them – like fine wine, classic cars, or vintage jazz. I like to think of them as “antiques.”

Still, as I was wringing out my mop in the laundry, it occurred to me that maybe this isn’t quite the plum job that I thought it was some weeks back. That maybe if I was more careful about what I wished for – by thinking things through and checking them out – I wouldn’t end up disappointed when my plans didn’t work out. Pops always spotted the signs whenever I was heading for trouble and threw me warnings, ones that even I couldn’t miss.

He was always quoting these cockeyed sayings to me, ones that are nothing but head-scratchers to kids. As I got older, I knew another one was headed my way when I’d hear those famous words, “You know what they say...”

“Danny,” he’d tell me, “you know what they say, Don’t count your chickens before they hatch” or “Early to bed, early to rise,” or some other nonsense. Every dusty proverb still haunts me like some cosmic “I told you so.”

I was moving the waterlogged peel-and-stick tiles in the laundry back into position with my soggy sneakers when I realized that Pops would have warned me away from this place. I could almost hear him saying, “You know what they say Danny, the grass ain’t always greener on the other side.”

Even I knew that I was seriously under-qualified for anything but a maintenance manager’s job here. But I had myself convinced that I could help the people living in this place. That I could run the facility and make everybody’s lives

a little happier with a few well-planned activities. During the world's shortest job interview, I even convinced Mr. Fryer, the director of the board that runs this place.

Less than ten minutes later I walked out of there, fat, dumb, and happy, with the job in hand – and without a clue about what I was getting myself into.

It didn't take long for me to hear complaint after complaint – from the few people who worked here and from the residents too. Getting gripes from unhappy residents was nothing new; I've handled them before and knew what to do. I listened, nodded my head, maybe asked a few questions, and promised to take care of the problem. Sometimes, a listening ear was all it took to remedy things. If not, I'd hear about it again. Then I'd get around to fixing the complaint. You know what they say, "The squeaky wheel always gets the grease."

This was the first time that I was getting dumped on by other employees, some of whom worked for me. Well, at least they worked for me at the time.

"No matter what we do, nothing is done fast enough for these people," the maintenance super said grouchily when I introduced myself. I looked at the piles of old coffee cups strewn on the workshop floor with the rest of the mess. Not surprisingly, he and his assistants looked equally unkempt.

"We can't keep them happy," he continued. "It would help if the penny pinchers running this place got us some supplies. And if the darn tools stopped disappearing." His last statement was accompanied by a cold stare at an assistant, who was nodding his head in rhythm to whatever was playing on his iPod.

I quickly learned that nearly every maintenance expense had to be approved by the board, accompanied by request forms, and amply justified. Who would generate this paperwork? Me. No wonder the place looks like it hasn't been painted since I was in grade school.

Rose – the woman who gives tours to potential residents, handles the phones, and the office work – barely spoke to me

during my first few weeks here. Eventually, I learned that she applied for my job but the director never acknowledged her application or gave her an interview. It doesn't surprise me that she's not coming in very regularly.

Bob, who regularly drives the residents to the grocery store and the pharmacy in our bus, was the most pleasant of the bunch. He greeted me with a smile, pumped my hand, and rattled off a list of all the things in the aging vehicle that need attention. The maintenance people wouldn't touch it and he knew there was no budget, so he'd managed to keep it going. But the old rig was headed to the scrap yard, he warned, unless I started the paperwork to get some parts or hire a mechanic.

"It's just a matter of time Dan," Bob said with a smile. "If the bus breaks down, these people will be climbing the walls. They live for these little trips, to get their prunes and their prescriptions. You don't want to rile them up Dan," he warned with raised eyebrows. "I hear them talk on the bus. They're scary."

Right now, I'll bet Pops is smiling, shaking his head at me, and saying, "Tried to warn you, you dumb cluck."

* * * * *

I'm not opposed to physical work. After all, it's probably my construction background that landed me this position. But I'm too busy with the maintenance jobs and paperwork to think about planning activities. My guess is that Mr. Fryer merged the building management and activities positions to pinch a few pennies.

It's disappointing because coming here was supposed to be a fresh start. I'd had my fill of construction jobs, even apprenticed a few times, and then moved up to managing an apartment building near Tucson. At least I thought I'd traded up – until I found out that being the "super" involved having residents ring your phone night and day.

The job became fairly routine. I'd start to fall asleep and the phone would ring again. I'd answer it, dress, and then

sleepwalk over to 14C or 7B and deal with the overflowing toilet, the noisy garbage disposals that somehow set off smoke alarms, or the lousy air conditioners that sputtered and wheezed worse than my Uncle Charley, who smoked unfiltered Lucky Strikes. The sleep deprivation was making me punchy. I even started sleeping in my clothes to save time.

I knew that things had gone far enough when I kept dozing off on the rare dates I lined up. There's nothing like suddenly waking up in a restaurant, blinking your bleary eyes, and watching yet-another woman leave your table and make tracks for the door.

I'm convinced that the area ladies rooms and local blogs are still littered with embarrassing pictures of me snoring at the symphony, snoozing with my nose in my spaghetti, and in other unflattering displays of public REM sleep. Bold headlines loudly advise other women against wasting an evening with the pathetic narcoleptic captured by these unforgiving camera phones.

Obviously, the "super" job and my terminal social life weren't all I wanted to leave in the dust. I've always had a weakness for the races – horse, dogs, or anything else that runs. Once, I even bet on cockroach races at the county lockup – but that's another story. Anyway, I figure that my habit would only be classified as a problem if I had anything that remotely resembled luck. When a certain ill-tempered financier made it clear that he was growing increasingly tired of my rising losses and my empty promises to pay him next week, it was time to make a move.

So late one night, I packed up the Honda and quietly drove away with a week's pay in my pocket and the extra cash I'd managed to squirrel away in a savings account. I decided to find another state with a mild winter, but this time, I wanted a body of water nearby. The Sunshine State seemed like the right choice, but I didn't have any other plans than heading in this general direction. Less than a week after I crossed the state line, I managed to land this new job. Heck, I'd barely managed to find a decent motel to give as an address.

At first, working here made me a bit sad. I wondered how

many of our residents are here against their wishes, sent by sons, daughters, and their respective spouses who couldn't bear the thought of taking them in. Many of these nice old ladies in their sweaters and running shoes were sent here when a spouse died, their children sold their homes – all in their best interests, of course – and Medicare and Social Security checks paid their rent and provided the small subsistence payments they spend when our bus chauffeurs take them to the local Walgreen's or Publix.

Their loneliness is apparent every time I walk into the building's large lobby in the morning. I'm always amazed at how many residents are there. One day, I asked a perpetually smiling grandmother why so many of them sat there so early. "We're waiting for the mail dear," she replied, looking at me somewhat indulgently, like you'd look at a child who had just asked a question with an obvious answer. Problem was that it wasn't even 9:00 a.m.; the mailman doesn't arrive until 11:00. Often, he comes later. The mail is the big attraction of the morning and the only explanation for our crowded lobby.

It also saddens me to think how many of them are waiting in vain, rarely getting a letter or a visit from their children or grandchildren. I've overheard many conversations by visiting families that confirmed this sad fact. The worst one occurred recently, a few weeks before the holidays. I was in the utility room off the lobby, performing emergency maintenance on the only working vacuum available to clean the lobby's well-worn carpet. I was clearing the junk jamming the cleaning rotors that prevented this ancient machine from giving us a clean sweep. That's when I heard them.

"Natalie, I'm feeling very guilty about her," said a man's voice. "We really haven't spent any time with my mother since she's been here. And it's been nearly five years since we moved her in after dad passed."

There was a long sigh, followed by a woman's voice. "Look Shawn, we've been over this before. Why bring it up again? We don't have room for her and when you're around her for more than five minutes, she drives you crazy. Besides, you don't need to suck up to her; it's not like she's going to leave you anything. She had to part with the few assets she

had to get in this place.”

“That’s not the point,” the man’s voice replied. “I’m thinking that maybe we should invite her for dinner on the holiday. Let her see her grandkids. Don’t you think she’d like that?”

“Look sweetie, that’s not going to work and you know it. Let’s get this visit over with and go have a couple of drinks. God knows we’ll need them. And maybe we won’t have to do this for much longer.”

I fired up the old vacuum cleaner so I didn’t have to hear the rest. I didn’t really have to hear anymore. I’m pretty sure that even I can predict those results. By the time I rolled that noisy upright into the lobby, there was no one in sight.

* * * * *

Once I finished up in the laundry, I went back to my office. My office – I never grow tired of saying that. One of the luxuries of having an office – even one that’s barely bigger than a broom closet – is occasionally putting my feet up on the desk like I’m a big shot. I swivel that chair around, lean back and get comfortable before I grab the racing form. Coming to Florida has meant entering a new universe of racetracks and opportunities. Not only are there the horses at Calder, Hialeah, and Tampa Bay Downs, there are greyhounds in Miami, Naples, and West Palm Beach.

When I first got here, I placed my bets using a computer in the local public library. When the librarian saw what I was up to, she made it clear that my behavior wasn’t appropriate. Not long after, Bob introduced me to a local bookie. I’d rather have more human interaction anyway. Sometimes, I can even pick up some decent tips from the old timer, who gets pretty talkative after a couple of scotches.

Today my reading period is cut short by the phone. The interruption is annoying, but I put the racing form down and plant my feet on the floor again. Whenever I grab the handset, I always try to answer the residents’ calls the same way: “This is Dan. How can I help you?”

I hear a weird rustling on the line, like someone is dragging the receiver across a table. Then a loud voice, nearly shouts, "Helloooo, hellooo." I immediately recognize Mrs. Zimmer, a fairly new tenant who moved in after her husband's death. Since she calls nearly every day, it didn't take long to learn that she's extremely hard of hearing. The few times I've been to her apartment, I saw the volume controls on her phone. Despite the technological assistance, phone conversations with her make me think I'm talking over a transatlantic cable.

Raising my voice to a suitable level, I say, "Hi Mrs. Zimmer. This is Dan. How are you today?"

She never bothers to answer; she starts speaking in that quavering voice of hers. "I got up early today. I don't sleep well anyway since the good Lord took my Winston, bless his soul. I forgot to take out the garbage again because Winston always did that, so I got myself dressed because I didn't want anyone to see me in my nightclothes. And do you know what I saw in front of the trash room? The ugliest bug I have ever seen!"

This is an ongoing conversation that we have and I've begun to like the familiar routine. Maybe Mrs. Zimmer needs someone to talk to, so most of the time I don't really care.

"Yes Mrs. Zimmer. You told me about that bug yesterday and the day before that. In fact, we talked about the bugs you've seen nearly every day."

"This is a very different bug, young man. It's bigger and it's uglier."

"Mrs. Zimmer, like I've been telling you, I have the exterminator coming first thing Monday morning."

She sounds like she's getting upset now. "But what am I to do in the meantime? What if this bug attacks me? What if they come into my apartment? I don't move as fast as I used to. You have to do something now!"

I try to be reassuring. "Mrs. Zimmer, I'll be upstairs to

head off that bug invasion as soon as I can.”

That seems to satisfy her and we end the conversation with me estimating when I might be up. As soon as I put the receiver down, the phone rings again. For a moment, I stare at it with a weird feeling of déjà vu. The back-to-back calls create the same anxious feeling in my stomach that I’d often had in Tucson.

I’m interrupted before I get out half of my standard greeting.

“This is Sally Upchurch in 119. There’s a big spot on my ceiling. I thought it was that problem with my eyes again, but they’ve gotten better since the cataract surgery. I’m worried because it’s getting bigger. Can somebody look at it?”

Darn. I was hoping that the flood in the laundry room wouldn’t affect any of the rooms on the first floor. Time to add that to the to-do list.

After fielding back-to-back calls, I’m ready for a break – even a quick one. Just as I pick up the racing form, I hear a voice.

“Dan, you promise these people that you’ll look into their problems or stop by, but you never do.”

I don’t even have to look up. It’s Simon, one of the residents whose company I’ve been enjoying. Simon is a different animal. While he’s never told me much about himself, he’s obviously been around the block a few times. I wouldn’t be surprised if he hasn’t exactly been a law-abiding citizen.

I can’t help but smile at this guy, so I switch on the answering system, and see him leaning against the open doorway. “Simon, most of them don’t even remember that they called. I learned that my first few days here. So what’s new?”

Simon shrugs his shoulders. “Same old same old.” Then he points toward my racing form and asks, “You doing any

better with the ponies?” I’m sure my expression answers that question, because he immediately follows up with another one. “How much are you in for these days.”

I held up four fingers. “Four hundred huh? That’s not too bad.”

Even though I don’t like reporting my losses, I shake my head and tell him, “No man; that’s four large.”

“Wow, you don’t waste any time digging a hole.” After pausing for a beat, Simon continues. “You interested in an opportunity to make a few bucks to put toward filling that crater you’ve dug?”

I surprise myself by saying, “Why not. Things couldn’t get much worse, could they?”

Simon smiles back with a broad wink and then answers. “If you got the cojones pal, I got the plan. Here’s the idea. Next time one of your antiques kicks the bucket, don’t report it. Dispose of the body and cash the Social Security and pension checks.”

Talk about crazy. “Sure Simon,” I tell him. “Sounds like a free ride – to the state pen. You’re nuts. You can’t get away with that.”

Simon cocks his head and never stops smiling. “Dan, would it surprise you if I already had? Remember the sweet old lady in 323 that moved out a while back?”

“Sure, Mrs. Lewis, right?”

“Right. Well, she didn’t exactly move out. I hadn’t seen her during any of the excursions to the stores – and I knew she was pretty regular about getting her cough medicine and the other garbage she took. So I went up one day and knocked. There was no answer, so I used my passkey...”

“Passkey? How the heck did you get a passkey?!”

“Ahh Dan, sometimes nature provides. Careless people

leave things lying around. I take what opportunities fate offers.” Simon’s grin is starting to unnerve me.

“Anyway, I go into the dame’s place and there she was sitting in her rocker.

A closer look told me that she’d already bought the farm. I never saw nobody visit her, so I gave her a ride to her final resting place late one night. Then I began passing it around that she told me she was moving to California with her niece. Been cashing her checks ever since.” Before the words completely leave his mouth, Simon pulls a huge wad of bills from his pocket. I can’t take my eyes off it.

“Right. Next you’re going to tell me that Mrs. Pembroke didn’t move out either. Did you waste her?”

“Nah Dan, I never ice ‘em. I just show up at the right time and take advantage of the opportunity that fate delivers. Been doing that my whole life. In this case, it adds up to a few extra bucks a month for yours truly.”

When it hits me that he isn’t kidding, I feel myself turning red and I start stammering. “But, what about the city inspectors? What about the nosy board that has to approve everything? What about...”

“Hey relax, pal. Nothing to inspect and nothing to worry about. They disappear without a trace. It’s fool proof.”

“And what happens to the bodies? You carve them up in the same butcher shop they used on *The Sopranos*?”

Simon laughs and gives a dismissive wave of his hand. “Nope, but my brother-in-law does have some deserted farmland that I’m fertilizing.”

“Doesn’t it occur to you that eventually their family will show up?”

“Dan, think about it – the average check is at least 700 smackers a month. At the rate folks here are failing, it won’t be long before there’s a pile of monthly checks. You do the

math pal. That fills up that hole of yours and gives you plenty of reserve.”

“You’re nuts. Get out of here!”

“Okay Dan,” he says laughing. “Hey, I’m just yanking yer chain man. Listen, no hard feelings, right? Hey, how about us hitting the track on Saturday? Lunch is on me. I might even be able to coach you into winning back some of that cash. Whattya’ say pal?”

“You know me; even a bad day of betting beats a good day at work.”

“Great, great! Meet ya’ there at high noon.”

With that, he steps back into the hallway and disappears.

I sit and stare at the doorway, not quite sure if this guy is kidding or not. I’ve heard scams and get-rich quick schemes before, but this one seems – I don’t know, creepy. I see the message light blinking on the phone, but I ignore it for now. I need a few minutes to think about what just happened.

* * * * *

I pull into the motel parking lot, still thinking about the day’s activities. There were more calls from Mrs. Zimmer, complaints from residents who were either too hot or too cold, and an upcoming board meeting for which I’m unsuccessfully trying to prepare.

I turn the car off and glance at the microwave dinner and the brand-new six-pack sitting on the passenger seat.

Before I can grab my food, a fresh breeze from the waterway brushes against my face. As I lean back, I take a deep breath of the salty air wafting through the open windows. It’s so quiet that I can hear the clicks as the streetlights blink on.

That’s when somebody changes the channel.

The car door suddenly opens and my arm nearly leaves its socket as I'm yanked outside, spun around, and bounced against the car a few times.

A beefy arm is firmly imprinting my face into the paint job while ratcheting my left arm behind my back in a direction it doesn't normally go.

I think the evening is ruined.

"You really know how to hurt a guy's feelings," croaks a raspy voice that's likely in cahoots with the beefy arm. "You leave without a forwarding address. Didn't you ma teach ya' any manners?"

At first I didn't recognize the voice. Now that I do, I don't find it the least bit reassuring. My future is ruined too.

"Bruno? Ahhh, how are you?"

"Like I said, my feeling's hurt. But mine's nuttin' compared to Mr. C's."

"Oh, Mr. C told you to come here?" I sound like I've had a lobotomy. Don't all bookies call the muscle when a guy runs out? Duh.

"Nah, I came here fer fresh grapefruits. Whattya' think?"

"How did you find me?" There's nothing quite as wimpy as making small talk with some gorilla who has pinned you helplessly against your car while he's frisking you for cash.

"Yah think we don' know people? We hear tings. We hear youse lost four large on da' ponies again. Dat's fast work pal."

"Hey, I've got a good job here Bruno. I can put away lots of cash to pay everybody off. Scouts honor!"

"You nuts? With your job at the ol' folks home? I'll be in a wheelchair before I can collect. Remember, youse in fer almost ten Gs."

“Ten? I only owed Mr. C four. And it’s only four down here. That’s eight.”

“Who’s paying my travel expenses? I don’ travel cheap, ya’ know.”

“But Bruno, I’ve got good inside info on the races down here. I can pay it back. Really!”

“Sure pal. You telling me dat’ your luck’s changed?”

Then I hear something that sounds suspiciously like a laugh. But with Bruno, you can never be too sure – or too careful. And even though he calls me “pal,” I’m not fooled. Bruno calls everybody that – even after he’s broken your thumbs. Your knees. And he’s sinking his beefy mitts into your collarbone.

Then, something strange happens. Bruno sounds almost – sympathetic.

“Listen pal. I always liked youse. Don’ ask me why, but I’m gonna’ visit some friends down here fer a while. Den I’ll be back. You better have some dough; lots of it. Yah’ get me?”

“Sure Bruno. I understand. Thanks.”

“Jus’ stay put an’ count to somethin’. Pick a big number.” Bruno may have a way with words, but he’s not too keen on figures.

I slowly count to fifty before I start to rotate my neck and massage my arm. Nothing’s broken, but it’s amazing how sore you can get with your head plastered against a car.

The car door is still open. My empty wallet is on the ground near my feet. But the six-pack I bought is gone. And so is Bruno. For now...

After Bruno's visit, I spent the rest of the evening at the neighborhood tavern, where I watched my life pass before my eyes. I'm not much of a drinker but in this case you could say, "The condemned man drank a hearty meal." Somehow I still managed to walk home without major incident.

Sleeping, however, was out of the question. Maybe staying awake through the wee hours was my way of remaining alive a bit longer. "Early to bed, early to rise" probably doesn't apply to those of us waiting on death row.

Keeping my mind on anything at work today is a wasted effort. I find myself staring into space and going over the same problem that kept me awake all night: how to come up with some quick cash before Bruno shows up again.

I've already spent what little money I had during my trip here from Tucson; the rest disappeared while waiting for my first paycheck. Despite what I told Bruno, I haven't saved a dime. Of course, sneaking away in the middle of the night is an option that already worked once. While it buys me some time, it also guarantees an even nastier beating. When Bruno catches up with me again, whatever goodwill he showed last night will have vanished.

Holding up convenience stores is not my style. And trying to win what I need at the track is as risky as a game of Russian

roulette; I'd probably walk away with even less money, knowing my luck. My thoughts always end in the same place: with Simon's apparition materializing before me like the Ghost of Christmas Yet-to-Come, holding out the huge wad of cash he had yesterday.

No matter how many times I think it over, I still end up stuck in dead-man's Jeopardy. Behind door number one, we see Bruno cracking his knuckles; then cut to a scene of me lying mangled in a trash bin. Behind door number two, we see Simon – stylishly dressed in a red leisure suit from Dante's – handing me a long document that needs my bloody signature.

My choices are as clear as the entrées on a French menu. “And Monsieur will have ze Rock? Or ze Hard Place, yes?”

As I stare at my desk, I realize that I have only one option. Without the cash I need, I'm a dead man, so I go looking for Simon.

I check all the places where I usually run into him, but he isn't there. Thinking that maybe God doesn't want me to meet up with him today, I decide to see what the picnic area needs to ready it for the upcoming seniors' picnic, an annual event held together with the local senior center.

As I open the exit door, I immediately spot Simon playing cards with three unhappy looking gents. Unlike the other guys, Simon is sporting a big grin – which I'm sure has something to do with the pile of dough in front of him.

When he sees me approaching, Simon waves, smiles even bigger and asks if I want him to deal me in. After some quick introductions to his glum and silent friends – and some hastier goodbyes – we walk back toward my office. We take the shortcut along the back of the building and I feel like I'm walking my last mile. I worry about people figuring out why we're together and what we're planning.

Already I'm feeling guilty and I haven't done a thing. I rationalize the guilt away by thinking that I'll tell Simon that I'm only staying with his scam long enough to get Bruno off my back.

As we get closer to my office, I feel relieved to get away from prying eyes and ears. My hopes are quickly dashed when I open the door. There's Bob sitting in a folding chair, playing solitaire. Normally, I'm glad to see Bob; I'd even offered my office as a place for him to wait between bus runs. Now I have to figure out how to get rid of him quickly – without raising suspicion.

Before I can say anything, Simon becomes a one-man welcome wagon.

“Hey buddy,” he exclaims, slapping Bob on the back and causing him to nearly lose the deck that he's been dealing from. “You should have joined us this morning for the game. I tell you, I'm gonna' need an armored car to take my winnings to the bank!”

Bob, who leans over to pick up the stray cards, wisely doesn't reply. The quick smile and the wink he shoots me says he doesn't want to encourage Simon.

Simon, who doesn't seem to notice, keeps yakking. “Between last week and today, old Artie probably lost his pension. I doubt that we'll see him for a while. The other coots are so scared that they fold if they're holding anything less than a full house. But I'm working on them.”

Bob silently folds up the chairs, wraps his cards with a rubber band, and puts them in his pocket. As he reaches for the door, he turns around and motions at the racing form on my desk.

“I'd advise looking closely at number five in the third at Hialeah gentlemen. And avoid Mother's Helper whenever she runs.” Then he's quickly out the door. I wonder if he suspects that something is up.

Simon, who has suddenly stopped talking, stares first at the closed door, then at the folded chairs, and finally at me.

“So, Dan,” he says. “What's on your mind?”

Before I can say anything, somebody starts pounding on my door, it opens, and then Mrs. Preston sticks her head inside. Well, she sticks it in as far as she can and still hold onto her walker. Obviously upset, which isn't like her, she reports that two ladies are fighting on the third floor. Wondering how two scuffling senior-aged women could be mistaken for "ladies," I take the stairs two at a time rather than wait for the elevator.

By the time I arrive, I've missed the action. From talking with various folks, I piece together a version of what happened. Seems that bug-phobic Mrs. Zimmer was cautiously on her way to the laundry room, warily watching for any insects that might be stalking her. Because the second-floor laundry is closed, the room was packed with folks waiting for their wash. She found the last empty washer and realized she'd forgotten a dirty towel. After putting her laundry in the washer, she returned to her room to get it.

As soon as she left, Mrs. Murphy – who normally uses the second-floor laundry – entered the room looking for an empty machine. She found out that whoever was using the last vacant machine left, so she removed the unwashed clothes, dropped them on the floor, and put her wash in its place. She was about to turn on the machine when Mrs. Zimmer returned.

Seeing her items on the floor where they were vulnerable to bugs, Mrs. Zimmer yelled, "I'm using that machine!" She may not have actually been yelling; because she's nearly deaf, she has no clue about how loud she's actually talking.

Her loud voice put Mrs. Murphy on the defensive and she quickly prepared for a turf war, just like her brothers taught her in south Boston. Using much saltier language, she told Mrs. Zimmer to get lost.

Not to be outdone, Mrs. Zimmer stepped closer to reclaim the washer, and Mrs. Murphy pushed her away. Unfortunately, since Murphy's cataracts threw off her aim, the push wasn't quite on target, whacking Mrs. Zimmer soundly on the nose.

Mrs. Zimmer began hollering that she'd been hit. Turning

to see the crowd in the laundry room, she concluded that since she had witnesses, she could call the police and press assault charges. She took off to make the call, not even stopping to pick up her discarded clothes. Mrs. Murphy shrugged it off and went back to her laundry.

Hearing that the police were being summoned, I went after Mrs. Zimmer, hoping to head her off. The board has been getting complaints from the police department about the number of nuisance calls from our residents. Since her door was still ajar, I knock and step in – just as she was hanging up the phone. Seeing me, Mrs. Zimmer describes what happened, probably in the same agitated, tearful tone she used when Sgt. Mulligan answered the call. Another visit from the local cops was exactly what I was hoping to avoid.

When Officer Cleary arrives, he listens to Mrs. Zimmer sob out her story, complete with her fear that her laundry was now bug infested. Then the ever-patient officer listens to Mrs. Murphy's side of things – with Mrs. Zimmer and me standing closely behind him. Mrs. Zimmer keeps interrupting, saying that Mrs. Murphy is lying and that she wants this dangerous woman locked up before she hurts someone else. Pointing to the crowd seated at the end of the room, she informs the officer that they'd witnessed the whole event. A shouting match begins when Mrs. Murphy snidely tells the officer to ignore old Mrs. Zimmer, since she's "a few ham sandwiches shy of a picnic."

With what looks like a wry smile, the officer asks the ladies to please settle down. He tells Mrs. Zimmer that she's welcome to file a formal complaint at police headquarters, which he will add to his report. He even picks up Mrs. Zimmer's wash, inspects the items, and declares them bug-free. The whole time, Mrs. Zimmer insists that she wants Mrs. Murphy behind bars. As Officer Cleary leaves, she continues yelling, "I don't want to file a complaint! I want you to lock her up!"

After the officer leaves, Mrs. Zimmer turns to the other residents, asking why none of them stepped forward like good citizens. She's greeted with a few raised eyebrows and plenty of silence. Incensed all over again, she threatens to turn them

in too. I try to reason with her, even attempting to carry her laundry, but she just scowls at me, wrenches her laundry basket away, and says she intends to call the police chief. As she stalks off, I wonder if her first stop will be the outdoor barbeque, where she can incinerate her vermin-filled laundry.

As the crowd disburses I see Simon, who's looking disappointed. "Nuts," he says as he walks toward me. "I was looking forward to some slapping and dames yanking each other's hair."

I hear someone call my name and stop to see two residents heading my way.

The pair – who normally use the second-floor laundry – complain about an odd smell they noticed on the way to do their wash. I shrug my shoulders at Simon, who rolls his eyes, shakes his head, and says he'll wait in my office.

Mrs. Cosentino agrees to show me where they noticed the odor. "What did it smell like?" I ask her, as we head down the hallway. "Was it a cigarette or a cigar?" There's a long pause with no answer, so I raise my voice a bit and ask again.

Mrs. Cosentino looks at me, a quizzical expression on her face. "Hmmm?" she mutters.

"Was it like cigars or cigarettes? Or was it a pungent odor?"

"Oh no," she says, shaking her head. "There was no punching; just some pushing. Those two should really act their age." We walk a bit further and she says, "I swear it smelled a bit like a skunk. Or maybe industrial-strength cleaner. Can you smell it yet?"

Not noticing anything, I walk a bit further. Two doors before the end of the hall, I get a whiff of a familiar aroma that stops me in my tracks.

"Oh dear! Here it is," she says, putting her hand over her mouth and nose. "Now do you smell it?"

“Yes”

“How would a skunk get in here?”

“It’s not a skunk. That’s pot.”

“Pop? Who would drink soda pop that smells like that? They must be foreign,” she adds, as she excuses herself to get her wash into the dryer.

Realizing that the smell could be coming from any of the four apartments in this area, I drop to my hands and knees and check each doorway. As I’m sniffing, I hear the elevator open and an elderly resident catches me in the middle of my bloodhound act. Before I can explain, she sprays mace in my direction, unlocks her door and yells, “I’m calling 911.”

I lose my balance briefly and fall against the door just as it opens. I’m quickly blasted with an odor familiar on college campuses and at rock concerts.

“Hey,” says a cheerful voice smiling down at me. “What’d you do fella? Lose a contact lens?” I look up to see an older gent dressed like Mr. Rogers – in a tie and a button-down cardigan – casually raising a number to his mouth and inhaling.

“I’m Dan, the building manager,” I say sheepishly as I try to get to my feet. “You know this is a non-smoking building, right?” I punctuate the sentence by losing my balance again.

“Sure, of course. I mean, yes,” he says laughing.

“Then you have to stop smoking those cigarettes.”

“But this is prescription. It’s cannabis,” he says smiling. “Doctor gave me a card and everything. I’ll show you,” he adds, as he steps back into the apartment.

Trying to rise again, I see the loose door sweep caught in my shoelace. I take out my trusty Philips screwdriver to fix it. That’s when I realize that as long as the door stays open I’ll have more residents complaining about the odor. Going in

could mean that I'll risk getting a second-hand high.

I quietly close the door and notice a young woman asleep on the couch. The resident comes out of the bedroom and follows my gaze to the couch.

"Is that your granddaughter?" I ask.

"Ha, ha. Good one man. No, that's Anne. She brings me my prescriptions. I'm a regular customer and they know that the neuropathy makes it hard for me to get around."

Anne opens her eyes as soon as the resident mentions her name. She even wakes up smiling.

"Oh, we have company?" she says looking at me and picking up a dish. "Where are your manners Herb? Here, have one of my homemade cookies."

Not wanting to appear rude, I help myself and take a bite. "How long has that piece on the door been giving you trouble?"

"Oh, no real trouble. It just makes it hard to keep the door closed."

"I'll take care of it as soon as you put that thing out Herb. Deal?"

"Sure, sure," he says laughing. "Where *are* my manners Anne? I should offer our new friend here a hit."

"Oh, no thanks," I say, turning back toward the door with my handy screwdriver. "Do you have that prescription card?"

"Oh," laughs happy Herb. "Is that what I went in there for!"

Less than a half hour later, I still haven't seen the prescription card but I have seen pictures from Herb's last two cruises, consumed two more cookies, and managed to fix the door. Herb's promise to keep the window open and the door firmly shut should keep the hallway odor-free.

As the elevator starts its descent I notice that my head feels strange. The sudden stop on the second floor – where we pick up one passenger in a wheelchair and another with a walker – makes me grab the handrails. As the passengers fight to get out on the first floor, I'm feeling woozy. For a moment, I consider sitting down, letting the door close, and switching off the elevator for a short nap.

Remembering that Simon is waiting in my office, I hit the open button and head out the door, nearly colliding with Mr. Carson, one of the residents.

“Careful Dan,” he says. “You know what they say: Haste makes waste.”

Everything suddenly feels like it's in slow motion. I start to apologize and then realize that Mr. Carson is joking. Even in my woozy state, I'm enjoying talking with someone who has a sense of humor. I've had a few conversations with Mr. Carson, who is always polite. This is the first time I noticed that he might be something of a character.

“That's right Mr. Carson,” I say, drawing on the wealth of my grandfather's proverbs to fight fire with fire. “But they also say that ‘He who hesitates is lost’.”

“Ha, good one. I'll have to cogitate on that one for a while,” Carson says as he cleans his somewhat thick glasses. “Drive safe now Dan. Rumor has it that there's plenty of slow-moving traffic around these parts.”

Remembering Simon, I resume the trip to my office. Why have I never noticed how long a walk it is from the elevator to my office before?

As I walk in the door, Simon – who's sitting on my desk – throws down the racing form. “It's about time! You get lost or something?”

I'm about to answer as the phone rings, which throws me off for a second. Still feeling woozy, I just stare at the source of the ringing, not quite sure what to do.

“I think when those things make noise, it means somebody on the other end wants to talk to you,” says Simon. Even in my woozy state I notice the sarcasm dripping from his voice as he hands me the phone.

The call is from Mrs. Sistrek, who runs the town’s senior citizen center. Seems that I forgot about this morning’s call on the upcoming senior’s picnic – being somewhat occupied with dealing with battling seniors, the police and our resident pot smoker.

Mrs. Sistrek must have some military background. There is something unnervingly precise about everything she says and does. I can easily envision her as a drill instructor demanding nothing less than spit and polish from her cadets. In my current state, I worry that I’ll say something wrong.

As I apologize for missing the call, I move around the desk – and Simon – so I can sit down. Standing is becoming something of a challenge and so is thinking. “Mrs. Sistrek, I’m sorry. Something came up and I just got back to my office to call you.”

I’m happy when she tells me that I only need to pick up the flyers for the shindig and give her a count of the residents we’ll have present.

“Great Mrs. Sistrek. And my apologies for missing our appointment.”

“These things happen,” she says. “Let’s touch base later in the week on that attendance estimate so I can finalize the menu.”

As soon as she hangs up, I put my head down on my desk and close my eyes. Then I hear a voice say, “What’s wrong with you?” I’d forgotten about Simon again.

He laughs as I tell him about Herb. I’m happy that he’s no longer seems ticked.

When I tell him how I’m feeling, he starts laughing again

and asks me if I was smoking with Herb. I tell him about fixing the door. That's when I remember the cookies.

That's all Simon needs to hear. "How many did you have? Didn't it occur to you that they were spiked too?"

Finally the conversation settles down and Simon looks at me and says, "So, Dan. Can you still remember why you wanted to talk with me? Think hard now."

Despite my hazy state of mind, I blurt out the whole story. I tell him about the money I'd bet and lost in Tucson, about my getaway. Then I tell him about my visit from a two-ton collection agency. I was like a kid in a confessional who needs to relieve himself of his guilt. Only I never knew a kid who did that. Our local parish priest, who knew all of our voices, would have immediately boxed our ears if we had.

After adding that I need to join him in his scheme, I state my one requirement. "I can't be a part of murder Simon. I can't have anything to do with that," I say. After all, I did have *some* principles. "One more thing – if I have to wait too long before collecting any money, you'll have to deliver it to me at the county hospital. Or maybe at the morgue."

Simon's smile never fades. "Don't worry pal. No one's talking about whacking anybody. You're looking at it the wrong way. We're providing a service. We're helping people who are lonely or are in pain and with nothing to live for. We're helping them save on burial costs and giving them a scenic resting place at a country estate."

"All I need from you pal," he says, with a hand on my shoulder, "is an occasional a list of residents who don't get visits from family. Then I'll take care of the rest. Now with some folks, I might be able to offer some medical assistance that can help them if they want to "pass on" earlier than nature plans. Think of it as the same service that Dr. Kevorkian provided, except they get it for free, while we pick up a few bucks along the way.

"To start you off, here's a grand as a small advance. There'll be plenty more where that came from."

Simon pats me on the back, reminds me how rich we'll be, and then closes the door behind him.

I sit with my chin in my hands, staring at the wad of bills on my desk.

* * * * *

I got a decent night's sleep for the first time since Bruno's visit. On the ride to work I listen to some good jazz and think that it might be an okay day – until I open my office door.

There's Simon in my chair, with his feet up on the desk, eating a jelly doughnut. I wonder how he'd gotten in, since I'd locked the door. Then I remember his mysterious passkey.

When he sees me, he puts the doughnut down, swings his legs to the floor and gives me a grin. Reaching for a bag on the other corner of the desk, he pulls out two cups of coffee.

Sliding one of them my way, he says "Top of the morning Dan my boy. Here you go; light and sweet, right?"

I thank him and begin removing the lid, wondering what's on his mind and how sticky my desk is going to be from that doughnut. Simon doesn't waste any time, launching into his reason for occupying my chair.

"I thought maybe we needed a breakfast meeting so I could give you the latest news. We've hit the jackpot. Lady Luck has smiled on us already."

He pauses for a beat, takes another bite of that doughnut, scattering powdered sugar over the desk, the chair and his shirt. Then – with his mouth full – he gives me the punch line. "The other day, I discovered that Mrs. Evans in 244 had gone to her reward. So it's time to pass the word that she's going to live with family. Let's see. How about we give her a younger cousin in southern California. The old gal woulda' liked it there, don't you think?"

I'm not sure what I react to first, the steaming coffee

searing my mouth or the knowledge that we now have a corpse on our hands. In spite of this, I manage to stammer a couple of questions in quick succession.

“How did she die? Where’s the body?”

Simon shrugs his shoulders. “Beats me, pal. I just happened to pay a visit and there she was. Right now, she’s resting comfortably in the fourth floor mausoleum.”

“But we don’t have a mausoleum.”

“Relax, Dan. I can feel your blood pressure inching up already. Nah, we don’t have any fancy schmancy place like that. I just like to make it sound ritzy. Don’t worry; nobody will find her.”

Simon comes around to sit on the front of the desk. Then he continues. “After you pass the word, I’m going to wheel her out through the lobby. All the other antiques will think I’m helping her get to the airport, but she’s really going to my brother-in-law’s country estate. Wait until you see how easy this gets done.”

“I don’t want to see it! Are you nuts!? Why take that kind of risk in front of everybody!” I could feel my face beginning to turn red.

“Dan, I told you. It’s a piece of cake. Leave it to me. I’ll keep her stashed for a couple of days. That way, we can wait for the news to pass around this joint. Then we’ll get rid of the old gal and begin collecting her cash.”

I feel my stomach taking a sickly plunge, probably from the lethal combination of Simon’s craziness, yesterday’s cookies, and knowing that there’s a corpse hidden in the building. But Simon’s not done.

“Hey, I gotta’ great idea! Why don’t you take the ride with me? Yeah, this way you can take a gander at the whole operation, from soup to nuts!”

I shake my head. The nausea now threatens to overwhelm

me, and I make a dash for the door, weakly stumbling toward the men's room. I can hear Simon's voice echoing in the hallway, "Dan, it's fool proof! Absolutely fool proof!"

As the bathroom door swings closed behind me, I can hear Simon shouting.

"Hey Dan! Dan!! Don't you want your doughnut?"

When I turned the corner and saw the smoke pouring out, it really stopped me in my tracks,” says Mr. Carson, as he leans forward in his chair. “My dinner was in flames!”

The two of us are sitting in my office exchanging stories about our dismal bachelor cooking adventures. Mr. Carson is telling most of the stories, and between bursts of laughter, he’s only getting out a few words.

“It’s hard to believe,” I say. “How did you manage to have a pan catch fire in a microwave?”

“I was trying out a new recipe for blackened chicken soup,” he says with a grin. “To get the proper flame, you have to use a pan with one of those coated handles, the ones that keep you from burning yourself. I remember seeing that handle in flames as I looked through the appliance window. I’ll never forget it.”

I’d bumped into Mr. Carson as he was coming back from a walk some weeks back. I’d gone outside to check on a landscaper that I’d hired for a few days. The two of us started talking and I invited him to my office for a fresh pot of coffee. I’m enjoying these mid-morning visits. Mr. Carson is one of the only people I see with any regularity. Today, we somehow got started talking about our sorry attempts at cooking.

“That was the first time – and thankfully the last time – that I set off the smoke alarm while making soup,” he adds. I can see the coffee in his cup nearly spill out as he laughs at his misadventure, “It’s funny now. But man, it sure scared the pants off me then.”

“You don’t strike me as an arsonist.”

“Well, it’s just a hobby, something to do on cold evenings. And believe me, nothing attracts a crowd like a smoke alarm.”

“Stamp collecting doesn’t interest you?”

“Not enough excitement. Besides, I like fires.”

“You know this is a non-smoking building, right Mr. Carson?”

He gives me a little smile and says, “That’s not even my stupidest cooking story. I can be a dangerous man in the kitchen. And please try to call me Ben once in a while Dan. It makes me feel geriatric when you call me ‘Mr. Carson’.”

His stories remind me of my own kitchen tragedies. While I’m thinking about which disaster to confess, Ben turns up the heat.

“Penny for your thoughts.”

“Promise not to laugh?”

“Your secret’s safe with me, my friend.”

I cringe at Mr. Carson’s comment about my secret, and it has nothing to do with my cooking. I worry about what he’d say if he found out about my association with Simon, the cash I owe, and about Bruno. I push those thoughts aside and offer an embarrassing kitchen incident instead.

“There was a small fiasco with a TV dinner once,” I say. “Seems I neglected to take it out of the box.”

“Sounds like an honest mistake to me,” Mr. Carson says with a nod.

“You’re absolutely right. The directions only said what temperature to set the oven. I was amazed at how much smoke a stupid box can create.”

“Sounds like you could have a lawsuit on your hands – if you can find the right lawyer. After all, if people can sue about hot coffee why not frozen dinners too?”

“Little chance of me winning that one,” I say. “I probably shouldn’t have eaten that turkey dinner if I was going to pursue a successful lawsuit.”

“You ate it anyway? You’re in worse shape than I thought,” he says, shaking his head at me. After a pause, he starts again as he heads toward the door.

“You know Dan, forget the lawsuit. I’m thinking that the two of us have what might just be a great idea for a talk show. A cooking show for guys; we could call it the Bachelor’s Smoke Alarm Club.”

* * * * *

After spending what seemed like ages helping old timers on the bus – listening to complaints about everything from hip problems to corns, and hemorrhoids – Bob was pulling the bus away from the curb for a trip to the grocery store.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something moving and heard, “Wait, wait! Don’t leave!!” Further back in the bus, a cranky blue-haired lady began griping. “Oh no. It’s Maggie. What a prima donna. Look at her; she’s dressed like she’s going to a party.” Her companion added, “She’s taking the bus? Where’s her limo today?”

He stopped the bus and opened the door to let his new passenger board, but the delay made him crabby. It surprised him that she flashed him a 100-watt smile as he helped her up the stairs. On this particular day, he had other concerns.

Bob regularly worries about a resident taking a fall. Every time he drives a trip to the drug store or the supermarket, he hears the theme from Gilligan's Island playing over and over in his mind – how a simple tour could quickly become a shipwreck.

He watched her until she selected a seat, as he did with every resident, and saw that she sat far away from the other ladies. Still in her early sixties, Maggie was much younger than many of the others, one of a handful who gets around without the aid of a scooter, a walker, or a cane. It's not her age that causes consternation among her older neighbors. Each time she emerges from her room she's dressed for an opening night extravaganza, complete with a different outfit and hairdo – even when she's only headed to the lobby to get her mail.

Rumors about her began spreading not long after she moved in. The gossip was that she was evicted from her last residences as a troublemaker. No one seemed to have prior acquaintance with Maggie, but that didn't stop the whispering or the cold reception she gets from the other ladies. On her first week here, she asked someone where the laundry room was. She got the reply, "You don't need to know where it is. You won't be here that long." Maggie reportedly responded with a string of four-letter words. She says that the others hate her because she's beautiful and talented. The fact is that they're only reacting to her foul mouth, quick temper, and snobbishness.

This cool reception hasn't slowed her down a bit. While the other bus passengers ignored her or gave her icy stares, Bob told me that Maggie began talking aloud – to no one in particular – about her shopping list, her plans, and her clothes, while rummaging through her purse as if no one else existed. Simon calls her our narcissistic diva.

On this particular trip, the other ladies focused on tomorrow's visit from an exterminator that will be treating each resident's apartment. They complained that they don't want strangers in their rooms, even though I'm accompanying him on each visit. Bob heard a variety of complaints.

"Last time, there was dirt on my carpeting; I don't think they wipe their feet," said one resident.

Another said, "One of my lamp shades was crooked after they left. Why can't they be more careful?"

The arrival at the local Publix was always a relief for Bob, and he enjoyed saying, "Here we are ladies. I'll pick you up in an hour." He used to give the shoppers thirty minutes, but found that none of them could adhere to that schedule. Depending on how nimble they were, he sometimes has to allow even more time. It always griped the ladies that Bob doesn't park close to the door in case they didn't do much shopping or wanted to get on early to rest their aching corns. They never considered that this meant Bob would be parked in a fire zone. The last rider to leave the bus that day was Maggie, who flashed Bob another smile, this time briefly putting her hand on his shoulder.

Bob didn't even stay in the parking lot that day. He went looking for a pay phone. While locating one of these relics was enough of a challenge, he wanted one that would give him some privacy. Bob resisted the notion of cell phones. Not only did he refuse to be constantly bothered, he said that he lived for years without carrying a phone and wasn't going to start now.

But driving around in search of a private place to make his call, he began wishing he had a phone of his own. He had to talk to Simon – the sooner the better.

Hearing that Bob was involved in Simon's scheme surprised me. Bob is a quiet guy, a bit nervous at times, and always seems to prefer his own company. The bigger surprise was finding out that Bob blackmailed Simon into bringing him on board. Seems that Bob came across Simon loading the deceased Mrs. Evans into the trunk of his car and quickly smelled a rat. He wisely said nothing at the time. Instead, a few days later he quietly gave Simon a choice: Either give him a piece of his action or get ratted out.

If Bob only knew what life-ending options ran through Simon's twisted brain at that moment. Then again, maybe he

already suspects. Somehow, Simon kept it together and welcomed Bob aboard, saying that the bus and Bob's other duties would be a useful part of his new operation. I still wonder if Bob's days were numbered the minute he moved in on Simon. Eventually, it will be "Bye bye Bob" and we'll be looking for a new driver too. I'm making sure I know the routes, just in case.

While waiting in the lobby before the bus trip, Bob overheard a troubling conversation, one that might bring an end to the get-rich-quick scheme that he'd recently bought into. He nearly ran off in search of Simon after hearing it, but the bus's late departure would cause the antiques to complain and would raise questions about his whereabouts. Nervous about raising suspicions, he was forced to wait.

The conversation he heard included three residents: George, Louie, and Mrs. Ashburn, whose first name isn't used for reasons unknown even to her two friends. George is the troublemaker of the group. Sometimes he uses a motorized scooter to get around, but that doesn't stop him from thinking that he's the building's answer to Don Juan. He blows kisses and winks at the female residents in the lobby, in the hallways, and during Bingo.

To complicate matters, he likes being a jokester. He avoids giving straight answers at all costs, especially to his more serious friend Louie. Greeting George with, "How are you?" produces a cryptic reply like, "That's a tough question. I'll have to get back to you." He tricks children into bringing him whatever he wants by simply saying, "I'd get it myself but I have a bone in my leg." A serious conversation with George happens once in a blue moon.

Something Louie said to his friends got Bob's attention that morning. "Have you ever wondered what happens to people when they leave here? For all we know they might be dead. How about that old biddy that Simon took to the airport? Is that really where she went? Or did she lose her memory, lose her way, and end up somewhere in an unmarked grave?"

George gave his standard puzzling reply, "Is it an invasion

of privacy to wonder about people who might not want to be wondered about?"

Louie ignored this remark. "Doesn't it seem odd that we never get to say goodbye to people who leave? They never answer their door or their phone, and there's never time for a sendoff. We should look into whether these people really arrive at their destinations."

"Arriving is certainly the best way to reach your destination," nodded George with a slight grin. He seemed to enjoy having Louie as a straight man.

"I'm serious. We ought to investigate where these people have actually gone. Something doesn't seem right."

George pretended to adopt a more serious tone. "Yes, we will look in the bushes. We will look in the streets. We will look in the restaurant dumpsters. And history will remember this as our finest hour."

Shaking his head, Louie replied, "Can't you ever be serious?"

Mrs. Ashburn whacked George in the shin with her cane and made only one comment. "I don't trust that Dan fella'. Or Simon. Remind me of a couple of weasels. Wouldn't be surprised if they both have records."

"Well, that settles it," concluded Louie with a nod. George was already onto other subjects, like making eyes at the arriving visiting nurses.

After a fruitless search for a secluded phone booth, Bob nervously drove back to the grocery store parking lot. As the residents lined up to hand him their plastic bags, they made a point of asking him why he was late, which gave Bob something else to worry about. All the while, he had to listen to instructions about how to handle the bags, being careful with the eggs, and not placing one resident's bag too close to another. Bob could think only about finding Simon and

relaying what he'd heard in the lobby.

Bob could have found Simon easily, since he was in my office complaining. Seems that the exterminator wasn't only annoying the residents; he was complicating Simon's plans. When he had a likely candidate for his latest caper, he was unable to proceed with his inventory of the victim's jewelry, cash and checking account, pension and other payments. No matter how carefully Simon was, the regular exterminator visits hampered his activity.

Maggie, who was one of the first to board the bus, began to take a seat near Bob. This caused a chorus of complaints from the other residents. "You can't sit there! You have to sit in the same seat you had before!" Silently, Maggie headed toward her original seat.

When everyone was seated correctly, the bus headed for home, and the residents followed their standard routine of complaining about the cost of food. Then one lady asked, "Did anyone win at Bingo last night?"

Another voice replied, "I could have, but that lecher George kept winking and blowing kisses at me. I couldn't concentrate on my board."

Another added, "I know. I turned around to glance at the clock and he winked and threw me a kiss. I was so flustered that I didn't hear some of the numbers called."

Upon hearing George's name, Bob nervously swerved around a turn, causing a fresh howl of complaints. When the ladies settled themselves, the conversation continued.

Another woman offered a suggestion, "We should begin a petition to evict that man. He's a disgrace." Her friend took it a step further, suggesting that the facility get rid of all male residents.

At that, Maggie chimed in. "Oh no dear, we don't want to get rid of the men, now do we?"

Before the conversation could progress any further, Bob

pulled into the Excelsior lot. “Ladies,” he announced, “you’re home.” For the next twenty minutes, the hallways and elevators were clogged with scooters, as well as the other slow traffic with their walkers and canes.

Bob, who wanted desperately to search for Simon, found himself cornered by Maggie and sweet-talked into carrying her groceries. Once he placed them in her tiny kitchen, he saw that she had closed the door. As she fixed him with another high-wattage smile, he heard the lock click into place.

Shuffleboard, checkers, and doctors.

Those were the three things that I immediately thought of whenever someone mentioned senior citizens or retirement. Working here has drastically changed that opinion.

I'm still surprised at how much romancing goes on in our own little community. Some residents may even have quite a few frequent-flyer miles with Cupid.

I certainly never would have thought that I'd find romance here. But that's what happened.

Betty is different from the other residents. When she moved in, the movers said that it didn't take her long to get her things organized. While she knew where she wanted the furniture, they said that she gave instructions very courteously. She even gave them a generous tip.

Betty recalled spending her first night at the Excelsior sitting in her favorite chair enjoying a cup of tea. While she was happy to be living somewhere new, she was feeling a bit lonely because she didn't know anybody. Many of her friends had married long ago, had families, and moved away, so she was on her own. Betty, who was an only child, never met a man she wanted as a life-long partner.

Not someone to sit around feeling sorry for herself, Betty decided it might not be too late to give love another try. Closing the apartment door behind her, she headed toward the computer room she remembered seeing. As she walked the deserted halls, she could hear TVs blaring in other apartments and noticed that both the activity room and the coffee lounge were empty. It was no surprise that the computer room was also dark.

Betty had her own laptop, but since the building has no wireless connection, she couldn't use it to get on the Internet. She started a computer and found a popular dating site, all the while encouraging herself that she didn't have to lower her standards just to be with someone. Experience – even bad experience – had been a good teacher.

Writing her description took a while. Then she waited patiently as the site produced a list of potential suitors. Combing the list, she quickly dismissed many of them. Bill, who lived nearby, seemed to be looking for a cook and a nursemaid to replace his recently deceased wife. Dave, who sounded somewhat more intelligent, was close to twenty years her senior. There was even a scary sounding lecher named George, who lived right there in the same building. The only one that stood out was a younger sounding man – somebody named Dan. After some consideration, Betty decided to seize the opportunity and send him an email.

A few days later, Betty received a return message. Reading about what he was looking for in a female companion, she felt the spark of possibility. The email exchange continued. Even though Betty knew that she was only seeing letters on a screen, she felt herself growing comfortable with this new friend. She also felt herself being pulled in two directions. The hurts of the past warned her against moving too quickly, so she only provided her first name. Yet her romantic tendencies kept her from hesitating when her pen pal suggested they take the next step: meeting at a local restaurant – which ironically was called The Rendezvous.

The night that Betty came into The Rendezvous, I was sitting at a table in the corner waiting for my date. I'd also met

her online, but lost the piece of paper with her name on it. For the life of me, I couldn't remember it. I only knew that she was a bit late and was feeling like I was about to be stood up again. Just as I was about to order a round to drown my sorrows, Betty walked up to my table. With a big smile on her face, she said, "Dan?" I looked up at those beautiful blue eyes and was immediately smitten.

During dinner the conversation flowed. It was like we'd known each other for years. She still didn't tell me her last name and I didn't push it. I know a good thing when I see it – ponies aside, of course. When I asked if she wanted to meet at The Rendezvous a few nights later, she gave another big beautiful smile and said that she'd love to. She got a cab home and I had no idea where she lived. Over the next few days, I couldn't stop thinking about her. Even Mr. Carson commented that I looked like someone in love.

Fate managed to throw Betty a few curves early in our relationship. She says that she was just as crazy about me as I was about her (and who can blame her?). Somehow, she remembered the Excelsior being mentioned during our conversation, although I don't remember it. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we both lived in the same place," she thought. It didn't take Betty long to find out that there were two Dans in the facility. She was certain that this meant we were meant to be.

Her neighbor, a real busybody, confirmed that there were indeed two Dans in the building. One was in his 80s; the other seemed to fit the description of her new boyfriend. Now Betty wanted to knock on this other Dan's apartment, but she didn't want to seem like a stalker.

Our next date was just as much fun as the first. We went for a walk down by the water and talked for hours. This time, I remember mentioning the Excelsior. Somehow, Betty heard what she wanted – I guess her romantic side took over – and she thought that we both lived there. Still, she didn't tell me her last name or exactly where she lived. She thought she'd surprise me.

A few days passed and she couldn't contain herself any

longer. She went over to the other Dan's apartment, ready for the surprise. When the door opened, her face fell and she dashed back to her room, barely able to hold back the tears.

When I called, it was like Frigidaire central. Not only was she not happy to hear from me, she accused me of leading her on, told me that I was like all the other jerks, and then hung up on me. I hadn't done anything, so I kept calling back until she answered. I got enough information and figured out what happened. I told her that I didn't live at the Excelsior; I worked there. She got a bit embarrassed, but I thought it was kind of cute. Everything went swimmingly between us after that.

I've never been especially relaxed around women. I don't know why, but being alone with a female gets me nervous. Betty is special; she makes me feel like I can always be myself. I've even told her when I've lost dough at the track. I've never been this talkative around a woman. Like I said, she's different.

Last time we went out, things got a bit weird for me. We went to dinner and then to a movie. Afterwards, we parked down by the water. When I got her to the front door of the building, she looked at me with those big blue eyes and asked if I'd like to walk her to her door. My heart was pounding so hard I thought she would hear it.

At the same time, I was debating with the loud-mouthed angel on my shoulder that was giving me tons of reasons why I shouldn't walk her upstairs. "What if it affects my job?" I'll get a new one. "Suppose someone sees us?" Everyone in the building went to sleep hours ago. "What will people think if they find out?" Stop worrying; they won't remember a thing.

Despite this great debate, I got into the elevator with Betty, who was looking more delectable by the moment. I hit the Up button and tried to get the elevator to move faster using sheer willpower. When the door finally slid open, I was greeted with the shock of my life. There was Simon pushing a body down the hallway in a wheelchair.