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A Real Bargain

Experience had taught Rob Hawkins that anyone with both the desire and capital to open a five-star restaurant was usually arrogant, often unrealistic, and always bent in some particular fashion. He tried to pick his clients carefully. If they were confident, they'd built up their own money and sought designers who were mirror images of themselves. They were fun to work with because they knew how to make things happen. Those who'd inherited their bankroll mostly wanted someone to tell them how to spend it. You worked *for* people like that; clients like the goddamned Irwins, who were happy to pay premium rates so they'd have someone to blame if it all crashed and burned.

Hawkins was fond of saying he'd come *this* close to being a professional chef, illustrating with his thumb and forefinger a millimeter apart. Rob had always believed that if it hadn't been for poor Joey screaming like an animal when his arm went into the french fryer up to the elbow, Rob would have spent the last few years underpaid, bored, sweating in some airless, fluorescent-flooded kitchen. For the first time in his career, he found himself wondering if he was really any better off.

Rob's father Mike had always said to anyone who'd listen that if you didn't trust your instincts you were a fool. It was on the strength of that famous litany that Rob had wordlessly withdrawn as they slammed the ambulance doors closed on moaning Joey and his bandaged arm. Climbing into his car without a conscious thought, Rob simply drove away from three years' work and training, still wearing his apron. Mike Hawkins sarcastically referred to that singular act as "blind courage". The old man would have been further dismayed to know Rob never thought of it as anything but following an obscure logic about instincts never intended by his father.

Rob had watched his dad sacrifice home and family, building up the company so he could retire in style, but when that fabled day finally materialized, it found Mike Hawkins suffering from ulcers, corns and lung disease. Rob was determined to seize his retirement early, and as fast as he could create it. Even before he drove away from poor Joey's ill-advised encounter with the french fryer he knew what he wanted to do: work as an independent designer, specializing in upscale restaurants.

Despite Mike's cutting laugh as he roared, "Lofty dreams...the boy has lofty dreams!" followed by dire warnings about jumping out of a tree before you pick a place to touch down, Rob landed that all-important first break: designing a mom-and-pop Mexican restaurant for a fee that was little more than gas money and good, home-made Mexican food for life. But that led to the remodel of a classic, but dated family steakhouse which got Rob's foot in the door at the Ambassador hotel. His projects had grown in scope and sophistication and he'd worked happily, but with one goal in mind: To work as little as possible.

Perversely, Rob's very reluctance to work too much raised his desirability and exclusiveness in the languid eyes of those familiar with the taste of a silver spoon from an early age. They identified with anyone who worked as little as possible, even if it was for enormously different reasons. Rob's reward, besides the inflated fee, was to be able to hold the reins on a project. The price was often having to cope with short attention spans, interest levels waxing and waning like a child's, and an unrestrained compulsion to focus on the "fun" jobs. No dirty hands here. Those rich enough to play with businesses like so many toys require people like Rob so the train stays on the tracks, no matter how many meetings were missed because they "...ran long with the therapist. But we made real progress today!"

Yet he couldn't deny the strange attractor of Elliot and Sandy Irwin's combined energy. He'd been spellbound by it three months earlier; at the first meeting when he and Elliot had circled cautiously as felines, speaking almost lazily of crucial things; how many locations Elliott wanted to open, what expenses and percentages he'd pay, how long Rob should plan on living there. A tall, bearish man with carelessly cropped, silver-tipped hair and an easy smile, Elliot wore a threadbare, bleach-splotted sweatshirt over a high-collared Italian silk shirt. He eschewed socks, sporting a weathered pair of expensive loafers beneath faded jeans with a hole in one knee. This focused, casual style mirrored a forced, folksy manner. Rob had seen the type before; a rich man wanting the little people to think of him as one of them.

Sandy wasn't the wealthy man's trophy wife though; neither voluptuous nor gorgeous, yet her large dark eyes, lean body and oddly childlike manner cradled a potent magnetism. She was a curious and interesting contrast to Elliot, and broke the

broad tension of that initial negotiation with her provocative smile and an epic story of their meeting.

“There I was holding down the bar in the old Clancy’s, though it was more like the bar was holding me *up* if you know what I mean. But I wasn’t too drunk to sense something in the air, and I’m not talking about Tarot cards or past lives or any of that crap.”

Elliott eagerly added, “At that same moment, I was a mile away and running like a banshee in my old red Jimmy truck. Out of the corner of my eye, I was watching my pal Willy clutching the armrest, stealing looks in the mirror at the empty double-wheel trailer bouncing behind us.”

Sandy picked it up with the smoothness of family oral history. “As he came roaring down that steep hill to Clancy’s intersection, the hair on the back of my neck stood on end and I turned to look out that big plate glass window...”

“And what did she see?” Elliot asked. “I’ll tell you what *I* saw. I looked over to my left and there went one of my trailer wheels, bounding on down the road past me, the speedometer pushing sixty! I watched it take a couple of odd bounces, like it was aiming itself...” He paused stagily, looking at his wife with an expectant smile creasing his tanned face. Sandy’s short-cropped blonde hair framed an elfin face, glowing and alive with the pleasure and excitement of strong, significant memories. Her unexpectedly low voice rose a step as she laughed, slapping the table with her palm.

“Right at me in Clancy’s! I’ll never forget just standing there while people all around me were diving over tables and chairs to get away from this *thing* flying dead at

us like it had a tiny mind in there aiming it *exactly* at the center of the window. But I couldn't move a muscle, because then Elliot and I were seeing the exact same thing, weren't we hon?" She patted him solidly and with tender affection on the inside of his upper thigh.

Elliott's face was fully Cheshire as he grinned at Rob. "I got so wrapped up watching that stray wheel that I almost braked too late. As it was, Willy, who'd turned into a statue when I first pointed out the wheel passing us, started punching me in the arm, screaming to hit the binders. I stood on the pedal and the clouds of dust we churned up moved slowly, with this great majesty. I remember the Jimmy's hood ornament vibrating like a tuning fork, and how the sun was casting long, deep shadows on the street. I glanced to the right and took in the truck's own black shadow, and it was like a cartoon, impossibly angled down and forward as I rode the brake.

"We went into a sideways slide and time shifted in that funny way it has when adrenalin floods you. I remember in chemistry class one day, watching this kid pour one clear liquid into another beaker of clear liquid and just before it blew up in his hand, it turned solid blue. Everything just *changed*. Same in the cab of that truck. We went into a spin as the runaway wheel from the trailer hit the curb in a slow motion bounce, gaining about four feet vertical in less than a second. That's how fast things were moving and they got faster, still."

Sandy whispered, "But time moved slower and slower, both of us watching the wheel in mid-air, and our eyes met. I knew Elliot was trying to stop the truck, that the whole damn thing could come plowing through and I'd just be a little spot up against

the bar, but I couldn't look away, or move even my little finger, and through it all, the only thing I saw was his eyes locked onto mine. I watched the truck spin, slamming sideways into the curbing and it took this funny hop up in the air just as the loose wheel *exploded* through that beautiful old piece of plate glass, shattering our contact. Later, Willie said the last thing he saw before he closed his eyes was me gaping out as the window starred, the glass buckling. Months later, I suddenly remembered that from where I stood, it was like lying on your back beneath a rain of icicles."

Elliot chuckled. "When I asked Willie why he didn't watch, he said two marriages had exempted him from having to witness any more beheadings...though I always thought his injuries along those lines were in a more nether region, if you know what I mean.

"Seriously, I'll tell you this; I climbed out of the truck and my knees were shaking so bad I thought I'd go down right there, but we were just drawn to each other. All I could see was this skinny little chick in a blue halter top and eyes so dilated it was impossible to tell what color they were. She didn't have a scratch on her, though we found glass slivers all around and behind her like some knife thrower's act had gone berserk in there. I stepped right through the window frame without realizing it. Her color was up and I took her in my arms and we kissed like we were the only two people on the planet."

Then they'd both sat back beaming, and to Rob, the silence around them seemed cut of the same cloth as that vivid instant in their past, everyone in that distant, shattered bar frozen in the aftermath, dully watching these two locked in embrace.

Sandy lit a cigarette and her face grew suddenly serious, her dark eyes grave as she said, "You know how few people are lucky enough to actually *see* Fate bring them together?"

Elliot took a slow, stagy sip of scotch, adjusted his silk shirt cuff and shot a devilish smile at Rob.

"So you see...we have luck and timing on our side, a pile of money in the bank and more where that came from. This won't be an under-funded business, you'll have carte blanche, a lot of fun, and where you going to find better weather?"

Elliot's expansive wave had effortlessly dismissed Rob's underlying misgivings about them, encompassing instead the warm Arizona night, the artfully restored, twenty-five year-old Oldsmobile convertible that would be Rob's "company vehicle" and the fresh, pungent sense of change in the air. Fatally then, Rob's mind had darted to his depleting bank account. He'd been swayed in the end, he knew, by the old joke about Hemingway telling and Fitzgerald that the rich *are* just like the rest of us, they only have more money. Rob held a conviction that these people were just like him: Things happened *for* them. The realization that he was wrong about that, if subtly but critically so, had been slow in coming.

Much later, Rob Hawkins would remember with a sense of melancholy the night he'd called home from Phoenix in desperate frustration, as if just hearing his old man's gruff voice would dispel not only his first irritating misgivings about the Irwins, but what they had mushroomed into. No matter that Rob's mother carefully plotted his

timetables and destinations on the kitchen calendar in red magic marker, Mike always came on the phone growling, "Well, where the *hell* you calling from now?"

In the background he could hear his mother yelling, "Phoenix. He's in Phoenix. You know that. You've see it every time you open the fridge."

The weather back home was always better than where Rob was, even if there was a foot of snow outside his dad's window. As if Mike sensed his son on the verge of complaint or confession, he shifted the conversation earlier than usual to a sermon Rob had long ago memorized.

"I just don't know how you can live like this, following the sun. A man needs stability. Living out of suitcases and in hotels, what kind of life is that? One of these days you're going to wish you'd put something aside for your retirement, Robby. Take a lesson from your old man." Rob always hung up wishing he could say that's exactly what he was doing.

So when his father nervously amended his speech with, "Everything alright there?" Rob's concerns froze before reaching his lips. Not only would Mike Hawkins have never understood the drama that was the Irwins, he'd probably hear his son out only to dryly reply, "Waste of time, complaining. You think I couldn't complain? But who would listen?" Rob realized he shouldn't have bothered to call, not if he was looking for anything remotely resembling sympathy, and he let them drift into their usual uncomfortable pleasantries before finally hanging up.

Rob usually made it a rule not to socialize with clients, or not too much at any rate, but it was something you had to do in the first stages of a project, like a navigator

checking his instruments frequently at the start of a long voyage. In Phoenix less than a month and still getting his feet under him, when the Irwin's invited him to the circus, it had sounded different enough and also a place where it would be difficult to talk about business, so he'd agreed. Rob had always liked the tigers.

Elliot picked Rob up, driving an elegantly looming Buick convertible from the mid-60's. When they rumbled into the driveway to pick up, "my bundles of estrogen." as Elliot described his family with a grin, Sandy rushed out wearing a sheepish smile and a bathrobe over blue jeans, her hair in curlers, waving them inside. Elliot barked, "Jesus Christ, that woman will be late for her own damn funeral. Wait here. I'll get this show on the road."

Then he was out of the car, slamming the door in a way that a man who had restored the car himself instead of hiring it out never would have. The muffled call and response of raised voices slipped out the screen door and a minute later, one of the small windows on the front of the house exploded outward. Amidst the shards of glinting glass, Rob spied the heavy pewter base that had held what Elliot referred to as his "pride and joy", a baseball autographed by Lou Gehrig. The pewter glinted dully as it tumbled across the lawn before thudding to a dead stop, the ball rolling on a bit farther. Minutes later, Elliot hustled Sandy out the door with two crying little girls in tow. He ignored the baseball.

The sad trio climbed in the backseat, none of them meeting Rob's eyes. As Sandy moved behind Rob to sit down, a pink hair curler pebbled with miniature plastic spikes dropped in his lap. Elliot laid rubber in the driveway pulling out, pitching them all back

in their seats. Lips whitely clenched, hands ivory-knuckled on the big red steering wheel, driving silently and determinedly, he accelerated nearly flat out up the freeway onramp, not even looking for oncoming traffic. In the blink of an eye, Rob's passenger mirror filled with a glinting, tooth-like grille bearing down on them. He opened his mouth to shout a warning when Elliot put his foot in it the rest of the way, and they were all pressed back firmly by the big V8 and unleashed turbo-charger. Rob's eyes darted back and forth between the steadily climbing speedometer dial and the lanes of traffic that Elliot weaved through, snaking his way to the left.

The tires squealed as Elliot executed a berserk swerve around a bus whose large brake lights suddenly flashed at them in warning. The wind brushed away the little girls' cries, made Sandy's protesting voice thin as paper and slapped the top of Rob's head even though his window was up. He looked over at Elliot, the man's face heavily flushed, almost crimson. The speedometer was shakily but persistently climbing towards 100.

They passed cars like they were standing still. When the fast lane slowed and the middle lane was blocked too, Elliot swept left onto the sandy, debris-littered inner concrete shoulder, letting out a great, wild war whoop of a yell as he riveted the driver's door inches from the highway divider. Slowing to 70 to cross all four lanes in one swoop for his exit, at the last moment he was cut off by a mustard-yellow panel truck with black splotches dotting the sign on the back that read, "Roof's Roofing. Roof's our *first* name." For a moment Rob thought the last thing he'd see in this life was the squat black vat of steaming tar on tow behind Roof's van. Elliot cursed wildly as he

braked and swerved back into the slow lane. They sailed past the exit, and he accelerated despite more dense traffic ahead. Rob was shocked to hear the dry mildness in his own voice when he asked, "Trying to see if we can miss the next exit as well?"

"I don't need your shit, too," Elliot spat as he deftly threaded the needle between two cars to the next exit, the tires genuinely protesting at 50 in defiance of the yellow sign depicting the sweep of the curve with the number 30 emblazoned beneath the icon.

No one spoke a word when they shakily climbed out of the car. Rob felt certain their very presence cast a pall on the festive atmosphere in the parking lot, alive with an almost visible cloud of anticipation and hope drifting over the bobbing heads of eager children dressed in bright colors, tugging the hands of adults to hurry, hurry. Rob's hand hurt and he looked down to see tiny pinpricks of blood dotting his palm where he'd unknowingly clenched the hair curler. He wasn't as surprised at how shaky his legs were as much as that he could stand at all. The two little girls looked positively green.

Elliot gruffly asked Sandy, "You got the blue bag?" She nodded, placing her purse on the hood of the car and handing him a small zippered bag. Elliot hurriedly unzipped it, fumbled around for a moment, extracting one amber-tinted prescription bottle after another, finally dumping the contents out onto the hood. Bottles rolled everywhere and in the scramble to gather them back up off the pavement, Rob glimpsed drug names in square-lettered computer script: Xanax, Prozac, Haldol, Halcyon, thinking they sounded like the names of new cars or distant planets. Elliot popped two pills, looked at Sandy and said, "You want?" She nodded, and as she dry swallowed a pill, Elliot spun

on his heel, leaving her to pack the bottles back up and all of them to hurry after him.

Elliot bulled across the lot as if into battle, showily shelling out for box seats. Rob took his ticket, saying he'd make a bathroom stop and meet them inside. He couldn't get away from them fast enough. Only ten feet from Elliot and he felt better, as if he'd just escaped a claustrophobic space or discovered sunshine beyond the reach of a foreboding cloud. He bought a flavored ice cone, enjoying the gem-like shade of gleaming purple the sweet liquid leant the ice. Rob set off on a blissfully private stroll around the circumference of the building. At the sound of a fanfare, he darted in one of the entryways and just leaned against a post, soaking up the gaily strung lights, the brassy music, the intermingled scents of buttery popcorn, charged air and musky animals. He remained there, feeling more and more himself, purged of the flaring emotions that had held him prisoner as much as the very speed of the car. Only when the spotlights fastened on the tiger arena did he head for their seats.

Rob stopped dead in his tracks one row behind Elliot's family. The two little girls were beaming, each clutching a cotton candy stick in one hand, a tub of popcorn in the other. Sandy was leaning over, talking close in Elliot's ear and they both laughed heartily. Rob slipped into his seat and Elliot turned with a rich, pleasant grin warming his face. His transformation was total, mercurial.

"Well, where the hell you been? You're missing *everything!*" Elliot was more like a kid in that instant than either of his two daughters, eyes agleam, his smile vast, eyes darting everywhere. Excitement flooded his face as he gestured towards the lean blonde man in a puffy white shirt and form-fitting black trousers who stood planted, staunchly

commanding in the caged ring amidst a circle of brawny, plush, roaring beasts. Elliot leaned back in his seat, threw his arm around his wife and Sandy nestled up against him, casting a carefree glance at Rob, saying, "Can you think of anything more fun than this?" The only thing that came to Rob's mind was maybe being in the tiger cage.

Yet the next day, a workman in white overalls was already at the house, whistling to himself as he repaired the broken window. Elliot was all business and Sandy greeted Rob with a broad smile as if it had all been a dream, a figment of the imagination. That ironically brilliant morning moment, with the glazier cheerily whistling "Nowhere Man", would come back to haunt Rob over the next couple of months as he passed his days and nights combating Elliot's chronic lack of organization, his whims and capricious lack of focus, all framed by an annoying predilection to sudden and grouchy boredom. But there were no more outbursts, which made suffering the rest easier and not unlike working for other fragile, petulant clients. Things settled down and they made progress in fits and starts.

Until Rob was jolted awake with the clock mockingly shining five o'clock and Elliot's voice, smartly gruff on the phone.

"Pack a bag. We're going to Philadelphia today." Rob shook off his sleepiness fast at that.

"Elliot. We've got a meeting with the realtor at the location in Tempe, appointments at two different contractors and interviews with two chefs. Or maybe all that slipped your mind."

Rob could hear what sounded like *four* little girls screaming their heads off in the

background. "To hell with all that, Rob. I woke up this morning, still bugged that we're missing something in the overall feel of the place. You've just got to experience that restaurant in Philly for yourself."

Rob suppressed a sigh. "The one where you walked in drunk as a skunk and when the idea of owning a place like that hit you, you sobered up immediately?"

"Exactly." Not a trace of self-consciousness. The man was as oblivious to Rob's thoughts as he was to his sarcasm. Rob closed his eyes wearily, a grim, humorless smile creasing his lips as Elliot rattled on.

"I'm remembering all these details about the place I didn't tell you. The only thing is for you to see it...*experience* it firsthand. Otherwise we're just jacking off here. This is *exactly* what I want. With my own stamp on it, of course. I don't want a carbon copy."

Rob dryly interjected, "Then you might as well just buy a franchise.

"You are *so* damn right. Who wants that? After you soak this place up, *you* might want to go back to square one. We might not *want* the Tempe location. The more I think about this, the more I'm thinking Scottsdale. That's not all that might change; I'm talking menus, ambience, down to the goddamned candle holders. I've already got Sandy on canceling all that shit we ordered.

"We'll be back in forty-eight hours. Today to get there and get settled in our hotel, tomorrow to have a couple of meals at this place and check out the city. As far as today's schedule, we just pay the chefs to lounge around Phoenix and shoot some golf for a couple of days. Believe me, the realtor and the contractors will still be there with their hands out when we get back...wait a minute, will 'ya...Sandy! Hey Sandy! Can you keep it down out there, I'm trying to do some business here. So what do you want me

to do about it? Give her a warm washcloth to suck on and call the dentist. And don't forget, you've got those calls to make for me too, or we're going to have twenty cases of salt and pepper shakers to take to the dump. Aw, c'mon. You know I've got a plane to catch. And I'm trying to get off the phone with Rob...hey Rob, I'll pick you up in an hour."

Shivering under the first jets of the shower, all Rob could think was three month's work, down the tubes. Just because the guy wants to get away from his wife and kids. Yet he calmed himself by repeating one of his slogans, a chestnut worthy of Mike Hawkins himself: that the closest thing to getting paid for working at something you enjoy, is to get paid for not working at all. Rob was certain that would describe the final results of this hasty trip. Elliott rumbled to a stop out front in a forty-year old Corvette Rob hadn't seen before, and he grinned in spite of himself. The car looked as if it had just rolled out of the showroom doors. Heading out the door, Rob softly hummed his old man's favorite Doris Day song, "Que Sera, Sera".

As they pulled out, Elliot enthusiastically announced a goal of, "...brainstorming all the way to the East coast." Rob flatly replied, "I thought that's what we'd been doing for the last three months."

After that, they rode to the airport in uneasy silence which Rob didn't break until they had tickets in hand and bags checked.

"Elliot, I need something to read on the plane." It was surprisingly easy to drag a man he'd never seen reading anything but newspapers or Sports Illustrated into the airport bookstore, amused at the lingering look of confusion on Elliott's face, as if the idea of *reading* for four straight hours was inconceivable, something people only did in

books. Rob casually cast his eyes over the stacks, and after a few minutes of exaggerated boredom alternating with theatrically sighing impatience, Elliot strolled away. He came bouncing back with a book in hand, enthusiastically asking, "What do you think about motivational stuff? Would this help me get in the right mind set?"

A naive enthusiasm suffused his face. Rob caught a glimpse of the jacket blurb, something about finding the child in yourself and success would follow. He flatly replied, "Who wants advice from somebody who's own idea of success is publishing a book like that?" and continued his browsing. After takeoff, Rob looked down and sadly wasn't surprised when he saw a corner of the book sticking out of Elliot's bag pocket. And his father thought retail was bad.

Elliott was wired at takeoff, chattering about the shapes of salt shakers and ashtrays in this place in Philly, though right after his lunch and two glasses of wine, he fell asleep as if he'd been hit with a bag of hammers. Rob's relief at the resulting silence was short-lived when he found himself engaged in futile attempts at discouraging conversation with a florid-faced man in an unpressed suit who heartily said to just call him Al. His apparent means of passing air travel hours was to generously share his secrets of seduction.

Just as the stewardess came by, Al clapped Rob on the arm across the first class aisle, loudly advising with a touch of pride, as if he'd discovered a vaccine, that nothing worked better than spilling a little Wild Turkey on oxford cloth. They just went nuts to get that shirt off your back and under some cold water. He actually winked at the stewardess before withdrawing his companionable arm to let her by. With the diligence of an instructor still teaching after the bell has rung, Al added that the trump card was

to run porno movies with the sound off and Julio Iglesias CD's on in the background.

After that, Rob hadn't wanted to sleep for fear of what his dreams might be like, but he'd finally dozed off somewhere over Oklahoma while pretending that he was really sleeping. He awoke to a shift in the dull roar of the engines and the Avon chimes of the seat belt bells as they came into Memphis for their connecting flight. Perversely, Al was also bound for Philly and the journey north found Elliott and Rob united in a bid to shut out the annoying man. This forced them into a companionable mood that expanded as Elliott, with no one to impress, fell into a more easygoing, natural role, telling Rob the story of his fortune.

"My old man...there was a guy. A monster for business, let me tell you. He was in drugstores in Minneapolis after the war, the *wholesale* drug business." His emphasis on the word "wholesale" clearly indicated anything else was for suckers.

"He put the money back into the business and the town. Though my Mom's in Portland now and I'm in the desert, we still own *outright* three big apartment buildings in downtown St. Paul. Dad set up the inheritance and the corporation so that Mom and I alternate years as CEO. Since we moved out west after he died, she's invested in land from San Diego all the way up the coast to Seattle. We buy it out in the boonies for peanuts, sit on it for four or five years and build to suit for convenience stores and gas stations. We've got eight Circle K's and nine, or maybe it's ten 7-11's that lease their land and the buildings from us.

"Shoot. I always had everything I wanted. There's people who say I shouldn't have all this because I didn't earn it, but that doesn't keep me from enjoying it, you know? You get to try on a lot of hats, kind of like being an actor, I've always thought.

Mom jokes about how wise my old man was making us alternate years as CEO, always pointing to the money we lost when I was ranching cattle out here or when I had the video stores in Portland, but this time it's different. I know I'll not only have fun, but turn a quick buck in the restaurant business. It just feels right, you know?"

Unfortunately, the Philadelphia restaurant felt anything but right to Rob, who thought the place barely capable of inspiring even a drunk. Classic touches like an authentic tin-stamped ceiling and dark ebony tables clashed bizarrely with neon trim strips while half-slices of real surfboards and motorcycles extruded from the walls in sad imitation of Planet Hollywood restaurants, an operation that Rob felt was little more than a blight on the restaurant landscape. The back of the menu featured self-conscious copy about a Hawaiian surfer who'd emigrated to the East coast to start a chain of innovative restaurants featuring sushi and contemporized New England cooking.

All three chefs sported pathetically trendy miniature ponytails, the waiters were drilled to the point of dullness, insisting on being chummy even though the service was slow and the drinks weak. Silverware was spotted, the background music too loud. When their meals finally arrived, the vegetables were steamed within an inch of their lives, the rice clumpy and dense, the dryness of the chicken futilely masked by a dense and salty tamarind sauce. Rob struggled to be reserved and observing throughout the evening. Elliot's constant chatter flowed around and through him, and he felt like an old man married forty years who's heard it all before. Rob knew there'd be plenty of time back at the hotel to burst Elliot's bubble. No matter how much a client was paying, Rob regularly had to tell them what they didn't want to hear, but he'd decided long ago that it wasn't any harder to try and let them down easy.

Predictably though, Elliot was sullen the next morning, wounded by what he'd spent half the night calling Rob's "betrayal", complaining bitterly about his hangover as if Rob had personally forced all those scotches down Elliott's throat. Rob in turn exacted a final revenge by dragging the sulking man to the Rodin museum on their way out of town. Elliot whined in the cab ride all the way to the museum. "I just don't see why you'd want to go look at a bunch of statues. There's lots better ways to kill a couple hours in this town, you know."

Rob spoke patiently, as to a small child. "These are more than just statues Elliot, trust me."

Rob entered the gallery eagerly, forgetting both Elliot and his own late-night resolution to get out from under this project. He paused at the first exhibit, a deceptively simple execution in white marble of a pair of hands captured for all time as they folded to a position of prayer. A small brass plate read "The Cathedral". Elliot tagged close to his side, clearly ill at ease in the awesome quiet of the high-ceiling room. He snorted derisively, gesturing at the delicate sculpture.

"Hands. Great. I could see that on the shelves in Sandy's ceramic class."

Rob looked Elliot square in the eye, his voice contemptuous. "Listen. As far as I can see, you've wasted two whole days of my time. The least you can do is give me an hour or so. If you want to wait outside or go get a beer, I'll join you. Christ. You should really *look* at these hands, Elliot. What makes them special is they *weren't* made from a mold. They were cut and chiseled from a solid block of stone and yet they're as goddamned real as your own."

He turned on his heel angrily, walking away a little more stiffly than he'd meant

to. The art was exactly the tonic he needed though, his annoyance slowly fading, until Rob lost all track of time, peacefully wandering from one piece to the next, soaking in the sheer presence of the work. Surprisingly, he came around a corner to find Elliot gazing with real wonder in his eyes at a life-size statue of a naked, bearded man in the flush of strength and youth. Just as at the circus, Elliot was transformed. Gone were the slumped shoulders, the furrowed brow, the bored cast to the eyes. His voice was soft, colored with amazement.

“This thing is...unbelievable. You expect him to turn and start talking to you.”

Rob smiled, remembering the first time he'd seen a Rodin statue; at the Los Angeles museum's sculpture garden, and the entire afternoon he'd lost and gained there, both unwilling and unable to tear himself away until the guard gently told him the museum was closing. Now he was surprised, and glad, envying Elliot that first flush of wonderment at the sculptor's masterful hand. Rob's voice was rich with the pleasure of sharing.

“This was the work that really launched Rodin. It was a big commission, from the Belgian government. Realism broke all the rules of the time. The critics savaged it and he was accused of plaster casting it from a real body. The French picked it up for the price of the bronze casting. It was his big break, though. The controversy it generated suddenly made him in demand. People can usually be counted on to want what's hot, not necessarily what's good. Happily, in Rodin's case, he was both.”

They moved gently through the exhibit rooms then, Rob pointing out other instances where the sculptor had been ahead of his time. Elliot rested a hand on Rob's arm, asking, “So how do you know all this stuff? Are you a sculptor when you're not

opening restaurants?"

"No. I wish. I knew Rodin's name from classes in high school, you know, just another famous guy in the art books. But a couple years ago I saw his work firsthand, like you are now. There's a bunch of his pieces in the museum in L.A. I'd never seen anything like that, and they just...transported me, I guess you'd say. For days afterwards, it was like a fever in me. I got every book I could find on Rodin, and after seeing the work in person, even the photographs in the books moved me. The guy was so incredible that people constantly refused to believe he was really sculpting. It got so bad that he did a human figure half again as big as life-size, just to prove his eye and sense of proportion were true. They've got the one piece I've always wanted to see here. It's in the big room around the corner. C'mon. You won't believe this."

The green-tinged bronze casting stood alone in the museum's largest room, and still somehow filled it. Six figures dragged slowly, linked eternally in the stone by universal expressions of tragedy and an unbelievably detailed, perfectly drooping and rising coiled rope that flowed from neck to miserable neck. Hauntingly accurate to the last detail, even the chiseled clothes draped on their stooped bodies appeared frayed; mere rags.

Their faces encompassed the narrow range of human responses to defeat. The leading statue's face was flooded with a resolute, condemning wisdom. Behind him, a beaten man hunched, eyes focused disconsolately at the ground. Another stared out dully, seemingly already withdrawn from life and his tormentors. The last man in the line clasped his hands to his head in abject, unremitting desolation. Rob heard a sharp intake of breath behind him and then Elliott reverentially whispered, "This is what

church is supposed to feel like.”

Rob smiled, pointing to the brass plaque. “The Burghers of Calais. It’s from a story about an English King in the 1300’s, who agreed to spare the lives of the people of Calais if the six most notable men of the town came to him bareheaded, barefoot, a rope around their necks, to deliver the keys to the city. It took Rodin ten years to finish this. Of course, it was absolutely dumped on by the critics. It was too sad, too real, lacked grandeur and elegance, as if there’s anything grand or elegant about kow-towing to some distant king. Here’s the best part; three years before Rodin died, he charged the English government a fortune for a casting to be placed in Parliament Gardens.”

They passed an unmeasurable stretch of time with the burghers, just treading round and round the statue, looking at it from every possible angle. Rob had read that Rodin fought to have the work displayed as it was here, right on the ground at eye level, instead of raised up on the traditional plinth, so the observer trudged right along with the poor burghers, one with them in their pathetic misery, instead of being a separated spectator. That physical difference impacted Rob so strongly that he momentarily felt as if across the centuries, Rodin’s mind and the way it worked had physically touched him. It wasn’t until a guard came up to tell them the museum was closing that they looked at each other and with disbelief filling his voice, Elliot said, “Christ, man. We missed our plane.”

Rob took great satisfaction in Elliot’s captivation, but felt a little sad watching him in the gift shop on the way out, scrambling to buy everything in sight before they kicked them out. Even without a flight home, Elliot insisted that they head for the airport, though he gladly lingered by the massive form of “The Thinker” out front

while they waited for their cab. They found a different flight with only a minimal delay, and Elliot only said, "See? Didn't I tell you so?" two or three times. Once on the plane, he was like a kid with new toys, unpacking his books, calendars and even a miniature of "The Cathedral", trying to pore over everything at once. It was all Elliot could talk about, eagerly reading aloud small facts to Rob, and everyone else in first class, all the way home.

Rob was bemused. It was like the day after the circus. All was forgotten, forgiven. He thought of an attorney he knew who'd flown into a tiny bush town in Alaska to defend a man. At one point they fell into a deep argument, the client's mother screaming inches from his face that the attorney was a liar. Yet the next day, it was as if nothing had happened, and she was hugging him and saying next time he came to town he would have to come out with them on the boat. The attorney's conclusion was that in such a small town, the only way to survive is to swiftly put anger or conflicts behind you. Rob felt like he was living in the smallest of hamlets with the Irwins.

Their plane was forced to circle Phoenix for twenty minutes, waiting for a thunderstorm to clear the airport and as Elliot sat feverishly absorbing Rodin, no doubt imagining salt and pepper shakers in the shape of folded hands, Rob stared out his window, transfixed by the sudden lightning flashes illuminating the cloud banks, stretching out sharp white tendrils to the sandy expanse below. He could already imagine the rich flowery explosion of the desert after the rain passed and wished he was down there. With no check-through baggage, they whisked through the airport and Elliot dropped him off at home with a quick, "Take the morning off and we'll have lunch, see where we're at. I'll call you."

He was eager as a kid to get home and show off his treasures to Sandy. Rob just pitched his bag inside, grabbed his keys and headed the purring Oldsmobile out of the parking lot, putting the top down as he rolled to the driveway, already smelling the sweet tang of the desert after the rare thunderstorm.

Watching the glow of Phoenix recede in his rear view mirror, Rob Hawkins glumly admitted that whatever steps he might take, Elliot was surely doomed to yet another financial failure. Rob was saddened most by Elliot's careless, chronically idle waste of cash, resources and other people's time, in stark comparison to how his own father had scabbled for money all his life. Rob decided to write his letter of resignation as soon as he got back to the apartment, and if it cost him some contract fees to walk away quickly, so be it. Maybe he was getting too damn old for this kind of crap after all.

Elliot's child-like captivation with Rodin notwithstanding, Rob imagined that in the light of day, his client would most likely put up a fuss. He could almost hear Elliott whining that he'd paid an awful lot of money just to be introduced to Rodin.

But Rob thought it was cheap at twice the price. He smiled then, wondering what would make his old man happiest; that Rob had actually contemplated, if only for a flickering moment, the idea of settling down, or simply how much like Mike Hawkins he'd just sounded.