



*A neighbor had said to him, "A yard sale.
Where do you find the time, Al?"*

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OR STAY ON THE LINE FOR OPERATOR ASSISTANCE

A Little Background:

Your last housemate left without paying (to you) her last month's rent. Maybe she forgot. "Maybe she thought she'd paid first and last when she moved in," you told your mother on the phone, "because that's how it's often done."

"But you didn't ask for first and last," said your mother.

"Well, she was between jobs."

"She was only with you two months" your mother said. "For God's sake, will you ever learn?"

Your new housemate is tall, thin-framed with a paunch, high forehead, long hair. He wears suspenders. He's a bartender. But really, he says, he's an artist. Funny, your last housemate had paints, brushes, canvases; and this one has nothing but a backpack and a small suitcase. What kind of artist is he? You'd interviewed a dozen people and he wasn't your first choice, not even your tenth, but he was prepared to move in right away. In fact, he moved in right away, before the interview was finished. Maybe he didn't understand the process, though you did try to explain. *Anyway, he's really nice.*

He said he didn't mind that you like to keep the kitchen sink clean because "everyone has their thing," or that you don't like loud music after midnight "because most nights I'll be out until two or three anyway." It didn't bother him that your mother would be coming to visit. He said he'd like to invite his own parents, when Mom gets out of the pen and Dad can take off his goddamn ankle bracelet. His laugh was an abrupt, sharp series of coughs and you sensed behind it something that made your heart cringe, like spotting an

open wound beneath someone's hair; but with a little tilt of your head you saw something else. You saw in him one who tries to make the best of a bad situation, one who doesn't wish to burden others with his pain, admirable traits; and when you told him so he seemed stunned, as if no one had ever complimented him before.

People have often told you what an unusually nice person you are. You probably heard it first from your fourth grade teacher when you alone among your classmates chose to sit with the new boy at lunch. The new boy was greeted like a plague and not because of the scars from a third degree burn on his neck, or because one of his ears looked like a finger,* or not for those reasons only; but because he proved very quickly to be a liar and a thief. You were the only one to call him by his real name, or listen to his fabulous stories. You even brought him to your house once for dinner. He and his family suddenly moved away to who-knows-where and he thanked you by 1) starting the rumor that you have a plastic sheet on your bed for accidents, and 2) stealing your Star Wars lunch box. *Was there ever any doubt that he took it? Only you would say so.*

You defended your mother against the tirades of your father and you defended your father against her assaults upon his character; these typically whispered to your little brother long after your father had moved away and when mother thought you were safely out of earshot. You defended your parents against the snide attacks of little brother: *losers, freaks*. Sure, he was hurt and had plenty of reasons to feel angry. We all do. But you are never angry. Life is unfair. But you are never unfair, except perhaps to yourself.

Your name is Chris.

To begin your adventure now, go to (1). To learn more about yourself, press (2). If you'd like a semi-gratuitous description of a yard sale, choose (3). If you have a rotary phone, stay on the line and someone will assist you.

(1)

Surprise. He's a really good listener. Surprise. He asks a lot of questions like he really wants to know you. After one night of meeting, sharing stories, getting familiar, you've been invited by Charles, the new housemate/bartender, to visit him at The Black Hole, a punk/goth/biker-themed bar on lower Haight Street. You know this place, not because you've ever stepped inside, but because you walk past it on the way to your bus stop and you've seen the ownership change hands five times in three years. The theme is anger. The theme is disappointment. The theme is five gallons of flat black paint, a red bulb, the handlebars of motorcycles mounted like antlers on the walls, a torn poster of Bob Marley, graffiti from a can of silver Krylon. The place is empty except for a few tables and chairs, a pool table and a skinny kid with a spiky red mohawk standing behind the bar. He is eating a slice of pizza off a paper plate.

"Hi," you say.

He wipes grease off his chin with his bare shoulder. Maybe in that was a shrug, a nod, some sort of acknowledgment.

"Excuse me," you say, "I'm looking for Charles."

"Who's Charles?"

"The bartender?"

The kid says, "In back, smoking."

"That's funny," you say, "he told me he quit."

"That's funny," the kid says flatly.

Charles appears, wiping his hands on his Hawaiian print shirt. He tucks his thumbs in his suspenders. "You made it," he says.

"You wanted to talk," you say. You wonder, was that too blunt? "I like the motif." You point to a display of rusted gas caps behind the bar.

"This place is bullshit," Charles says.

"Well, for some reason no businesses have really caught on here." You laugh. "Yet!"

Charles opens a bottle of beer and sets it on the bar.

"No thanks." You tell him about the decongestant you've taken. You tell him that over the past couple of years your allergies have gotten almost unbearable. You begin to tell him about your family's history of sinus trouble when he takes a swig from the beer and says, "Where's Riki?"

The boy with the mohawk shrugs.

"Derek?" Charles asks.

"They'll be here," the boy says. "Where the hell else they going?"

To you, Charles says, "Chris, I'm going to need you to front me the first month's rent."

Your neck suddenly feels hot. Now your cheeks. You wonder, has anyone ever blushed in The Black Hole? "I can't do that," you say.

He folds his arms and sets them on the bar, sets his forehead upon his arms, mutters, "Shit."

"I'm sorry," you say, "but . . ."

"Fuck," he hollers, and stamps his foot.

It's quiet until the boy mumbles, "Then I guess you ain't gonna pay me."

"You'll get your money," Charles says to him, and to you, he smiles, says, "You can't blame a guy for trying."

"Well," you say.

"Stick around," he says. "Watch the man operate."

"I would," you say.

"I thought of a way you could help me. And," he says, "you'd be helping yourself."

Enter one tall, one short person, both dressed from crown to sole in white Mylex. Each carries a black plastic respirator. The tall one tears off his hood. "Cuervo," he says, "and a beer."

"What the hell," says Charles, coughing out his laugh.

"Same," says the short one removing her hood. She shakes out her microbraids. She's looking at Charles as she bends her head in

your direction, as if to say, "Who's this?" As if to say, "Who the fuck is this?"

To learn more about you, choose (2). Again there's that yard sale, hit (3). To continue this adventure now, press (4). Maybe you'd like to know more about your relationship with your mother, punch (5). I wrote a letter to a Countrywide Home Loans, go to (6).

(2)

There had been another new kid in school, this time in eighth grade, a very shy girl from South Africa. She was slight, pre-pubescent, and had a high voice with a musical lilt. You liked her immediately. Your classmates studied her like jaguars. Already you'd heard a few kids mocking her unusual accent. Oh, you'd wanted so badly for her to fit in, feel accepted, feel at home. It was in Math, as everyone copied the quadratic equation off the board, you folded your hands beneath your desk and made a silent prayer. She raised her hand and asked the teacher, "May I please borrow a rubber?" Your classmates, even your teacher, were stupefied until the room exploded in laughter. Suddenly everyone was making mistakes; everyone was requesting rubbers. *Are you finished with that rubber? May I please borrow it?* You watched the girl turn crimson and shrivel. You leaned over and whispered, "We call *that* an eraser."

"Why are you telling me this?" asked your therapist.

"I thought you asked me."

"All I said was 'Good afternoon.'"

"Okay?"

"So?"

"I haven't gotten to the point yet."

"We both know what the point is."

"Oh?"

"The point is – you're a nice person."

"No."

"The point is – people don't appreciate you."

"Well."

"Why are you here?"

"Really, it wasn't my idea."

"You haven't answered my question."

"You don't have to be so . . ."

"You sound irritated."

"No."

"You're angry at me."

"No, certainly not. You're just doing your job."

He sighed. Looked at his watch. "You're angry. Tell me what it feels like."

"No, not angry. Not at all. It's my sinuses. I didn't get enough sleep."

Therapist took off his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you here?"

"I made a bad choice."

"'A bad choice' you call it?"

"I wouldn't do it again. I don't want to. It was selfish. When I think about how it hurt my mother."

"Yes?"

"Yes what?"

"What *do* you think?"

"I think I know where you're going and I'm not going there."

If you want to go there: (5).

(3)

A pair of heavily varnished 3 ft kitchen stools. Paper lamp shade. Tinted glass lamp shade, one panel missing. Two brass standing lamps, one off kilter. Civil War picture book. Children's clothing in a cardboard box—FREE. A Mr. Coffee. Copper colored Jell-O mold in the shape of a trout. Exercise bike, rusted chain. Treadmill, black and red wires dangling from start panel. Thigh Master missing one cylindrical foam pad. Series of Disney cartoon books: *The Lion King*, *Pocohantas*, *Beauty and the Beast*. One cracked Frisbee—FREE. Futon frame. Red, white and blue quilt (and purple/pink from bleeding in the wash). Paperback copy of *Cujo*, *Pet Sematery*. A half-dozen glossy covered romances. Paper copy of *Passages*. HP Printer, Deskjet. Box of blank cassette tapes. Box of cords, wires, adapters—FREE. Oven mitts shaped like crab claws. A wet suit. Dust mop. Parcheesi in a box, crayon scribbles on top side. Soccer cleats, sizes five and seven. Wreath made of plastic holly leaves, red berries. Parfait glasses, six. Toaster-oven. Racquet ball racquets, two. Salad bowl and wooden tongs. Series of pipe wrenches: small, medium, large. Ratchet set (missing 16mm). Shelf brackets. Stack of wicker baskets. Tupperware tub of Magic Markers. MiniVac. Pair of mud-flaps. Small box of coasters. Postcards, unused. Small box of castors and hardware. Home entertainment center with peeled veneer, shape of Illinois. *Real Estate for Idiots*. *King Lear* Cliff Notes. Orbital jigsaw. Set of needle-nose pliers, three, unopened. Addams Family playing cards. Rollerblades, two pair. Wooden chalice. Collection of belt buckles, Western scenes. Leather football with a bubble between the laces. Box of dog toys—FREE. Electric leaf blower. Electric hedge trimmer. Fireplace tools. A dozen chrome hood ornaments. Glass picture frame, heart-shaped. Box of VHS tapes, including all of Patrick Swayze's films. Ceramic rabbit. Inflatable life raft in box. American flag in box. Shower curtain with dolphins.

If you like Patrick Swayze films, your best bet is (4). If you wonder why the man who held the yard sale is overcome with grief on Sunday evening, (11).

(4)

The tall man in Mylex crouches, utters a sharp shrill sound and swings into a roundhouse kick. His foot passes over the short woman's head. You feel the wind of it. You step back, try to take in the full room without letting on how frightened you are.

"Cut the bullshit, Derek," says the woman.

"Flinched," says Derek.

"Did not," says the woman.

"You saw it," Derek says to Charles. "Riki flinched."

"Wasn't looking," says Charles.

"You saw it, Axe."

Boy with mohawk shrugs.

"Well, I know you saw it." Derek is looking at you. Riki is looking at you, too.

"Who wouldn't flinch?" you say. "That was a hard kick. Very impressive." Derek looks briefly at Riki, then back at you. Riki doesn't take her eyes off you.

"Are you saying I flinched?"

"I'm only saying that if you did . . ."

"Is this your friend?" Riki says to Charles. "Your friend is vague."

"Vague is hard for me," Derek says.

"I like people who say what they mean," says Riki. "When people don't say what they mean, I feel, I feel . . . what do I feel, Randy?"

"Name's Charles," Charles says. He pulls on his suspenders and tucks the front of his shirt into his pants.

Riki and Derek exchange quick meaningful looks.

"Call me Axe," says boy with mohawk, laughing.

To Riki, the man you know as Charles says, "I guess I'd say you feel pissed?"

"Apprehensive," Riki says.

You want to show you're a sport. You laugh. "That's a good one," you say.

Riki steps toward you. You're only inches apart. She puffs up such that her small body seems to fill the upper portion of her plastic coverall. She is half a foot shorter than you, but that's never made a damn bit of difference. You're not a fighter. You're looking over the head of this aggressive, apprehensive woman at Charles. He says, "Drink's up, Riki." He taps the shot glass on the surface of the bar.

"What say this one's on me?" you say. "I prefer no hard feelings." Glances fly until all eyes settle on you again, dumbfounded.

Charles slaps the surface of the bar. "Listen up," he says. "You're all probably wondering why I invited you here."

"Not really," says Axe.

"Well," he says, "I know you're all tight for money."

"You got that right," says Derek.

"Sheeit," Riki says. "Tight was three months ago."

"By the way," Axe gives you a gap-toothed smile, "you said you're buying this round?"

"This one's on the house," Charles says. He winks at you. "I think I know how we can all get out of this hole. I've got something big in the works. Big."

The others look at Charles with interest.

"Oh no, no thanks, count me out," you say, "but hey, good luck with your plan." You wink. You rub your hands together rapidly, conspiratorially.

"Wait," says Derek.

"Wait," says Charles.

In the silence that follows, you wonder 1) Why has Derek taken a pool stick off the table? 2) Why has Riki stepped between you and

the door? 3) What kind of artist your new housemate is because you've never seen him practice anything.

For more about your early trauma, (5); for that letter I wrote, (6); for more action and adventure, (7).

(5)

"Do you really think I never get angry?" you said to the therapist.

"I suspect you're angry most of the time." He put his glasses back on, took them off again.

"Why would you say that?"

"Why don't you let me ask the questions?"

"Oh, of course, I'm sorry."

"You're angry at your father for leaving when you were six years old."

"That was long ago," you said, or tried to say, but the words got stuck in your throat. You swallowed. "It wasn't his fault."

"It was your mother's fault."

"That's not exactly fair. She was hurt. She did what many . . ."

"What did you want?"

"I only wanted us to be a happy family." You said, "I'm not sure where you're headed . . ."

"Did you say what you wanted?"

"I'm sure I must've."

"Did anyone listen to what you wanted?"

"It was a confusing time. Everyone had their wants. I can't expect . . ."

"Did your mother listen?"

"It was so long ago, it's hard for me . . ."

"Your mother is not a good listener."

He seemed to be studying you when he said this. And you said nothing, because, well, if you can't say something nice . . .

"Now listen." The therapist put his glasses on, took them off, folded them, set them on his desk, set his hand on top. "Listen," he leaned forward. "Do you remember a fire?"

"No."

He waited. He'd already proven he can wait a long time.

"A fire?"

You have to admire his stillness.

"Oh, that's some story my mother likes to tell. God knows why."

"She's lying, then?"

"Aren't we being a little dramatic today?" You laughed.

"I was kidding," you said.

Through a fistful of Kleenex you said, "I remember smoke."

You're on the crux of something here. For more about your past hit (8).

(6)

Countrywide Home Loans
1299 4th Street, Suite 502
San Rafael, CA 94901

4/21/08

Dear Customer Services Representative:

Yesterday I lost an important piece of paper and my searching led me to our family's paper recycle bin—a 2'x3'x2' cardboard box. The box was full and my search took a long time, but here, let me get to the point. The box was largely filled with letters and envelopes sent by your company. You've been trying to entice me and my wife with low interest mortgages for several months now, and it seems

lately that you've stepped up your efforts. On some days my wife and I each receive mail from you, and on some days we each receive two pieces of mail from you. Thank you for your interest in us, but we do not want your services and we would prefer no further solicitations. The same goes for email.

To get back to your adventure, press (7), to read more communications with Countrywide (9).

(7)

"So," Charles claps and says, "what's with the Mylex suits, anyway?"

"Don't," says Riki, looking at Derek.

"He's cool," Derek says.

"It's not him that makes me, um, uneasy," Riki says.

"Let's just say," Derek says, "we look like painters, don't we?"

"Maybe," says Axe, "if you had some paint on you."

"Or," you say, "very neat painters!"

Charles puts his hand over his mouth and coughs, or laughs. "And did you find gainful employment?"

Riki looks at Derek. Derek shakes his head.

"Did you even get past security?" says Axe. Everyone looks at Axe, as if to say *shut the fuck up*.

Charles throws back his shoulders and paces with one hand coasting along the top of the bar. "Chris," he says to you, "we're all friends here." Again all eyes settle on you, more suspicious than friendly.

"That's something to be thankful for," you say.

"Axe is a fine young man." Charles says. "Maybe he'd benefit from a semester of finishing school."

"Fuck you," says Axe.

"Derek has a great deal of energy and he's really very agreeable, when he takes his pill."

“Fuck you,” says Derek.

“And Riki, well, she had a hell of a childhood. Trust does not come easily, but once she decides to be your friend, she’ll kill for you.”

“You’ve got to admire that kind of loyalty,” you say. “I certainly do.”

Riki steps close again. You can smell the tequila on her breath.

“You *do* want to help us, right?” Charles says.

Curiously, the sharp looks you receive from Derek and Riki are not as threatening as you first perceived them to be. There is no reason to believe they wouldn’t both enjoy hitting-kicking-biting you, but your fear has dissipated, become almost imperceptible like the heavy percussion from the stereo of the car which had been parked just outside the door and is now three blocks away.

In place of your fear comes a combination of feelings which seem unlikely as a combination, and unlikely in this context. Feelings which, historically, have arisen out of other feelings: futility, rage, despair. When have you felt this way before?

You’ll need months, years more therapy, but you can get an inkling, go directly to (8), or to continue the adventure now, go to (10).

(8)

Two times: 1) When you were seven and saw the curtain over your mother’s bed come alive, curl into a bright blue S, plumes of gray and black smoke slithering across her ceiling, and 2) Three weeks ago when you made your bad choice and then watched your blood swirl in the bathroom basin. You might call this cocktail of emotions – exhilaration, with a half jigger of sadness.

You wouldn’t have a name for these feelings at all if it hadn’t been that earlier in the day your therapist had chosen – *it is his job* –

to push your buttons. “Why don’t you tell me why your last housemate left so abruptly?” he’d said. “Talk to me about the ‘kitchen sink war’ (your mother’s phrase) or the half-dozen daily Post-Its you left in the bathroom.” He was unrelenting. “Tell me again how it was a coincidence you tried to kill yourself just five minutes before your mother’s weekly visit.” He was determined to back you into a corner, determined to dial up your rage, and when you wouldn’t give him the satisfaction he said, “You don’t want to know yourself. You’re wasting my time. You’re wasting your good mother’s money. And if I hear you mention your sinuses again, I think I’m going to slit my own wrists.”

“Shut up,” you’d said. “Shut up, you inconsiderate, self-centered—”

“Good,” he said. “Now how do you feel?”

“I’m sorry,” you’d said, “I don’t know what’s got into me,” but even as the words passed through your lips you experienced a modicum of the above-mentioned elixir. You felt exhilarated, and just a little sad. You wondered, is this why people get tattoos in such tender places? You wondered, is there a you inside you waiting to be set free?

(9)

6/30/08

Dear Customer Services Representative:

My neighbor, a dear friend, had a sudden, surprising medical emergency. In order to pay for services and keep up with other obligations, she refinanced her home. Her monthly payments now – to you – are far beyond what she can afford. Yesterday I helped her load her clothing, her son’s clothing, and a few prized possessions into the back of her minivan. Her house is now vacant. You will re-

ceive no more payments from her. She and her son are headed who knows where.

Her boy, by the way, has dyslexia and very low self-esteem and she, only recently, obtained special ed. services for him at the public school. Now they take their home on the road.

Also: the boy gets car sick.

You ought to feel ashamed.

I wrote over two months ago requesting that you take us off your list. We do not want to refinance. We do not want a new mortgage. Stop sending us mail!

More on this, (13).

(10)

Charles tells the others you're perfect. He says, "Absolutely perfect."

And only hours ago the therapist had said, *You try to be perfect, Chris. That's your problem. No one's perfect. No one can be perfect, but you try, and you stuff your feelings, and then, look out . . .*

"Chris," says Charles, "no one would ever suspect you."

You breathe. You count to three. "I think I know what kind of artist you are. You're a con artist." As you say it, you experience a rush of adrenalin.

Charles approximates a look of hurt. It doesn't suit him, though it amuses Axe.

Riki says, "We all con artists, baby. You got a problem with that?"

"Yes I do," you say. "People get hurt. People come to feel they can't trust one another."

"Sounds to me like we doing people a service," Riki says.

"Everybody wants to get over," says Derek. "Sheeit."

"Not me," you say.

"The difference is, some of us has a plan," says Riki.

“I only want what’s fair,” you say.

“That’s what I want,” says Charles. “That’s all I want.” And though your heart rate is climbing, you’re reminded why he impressed you the other night. You have to admire the way he listens and waits for just the right moment to interject. And you have to wonder now what kind of personal information he drew out of you and what he might plan to do with it. “Five way split,” he says. “You get your rent and then some.”

“Whoa cowboy,” says Riki. “Why should this greenhorn get an even take?”

“An even take?” you say. “No. No. I don’t want any part of this!”

If that’s your choice, proceed directly to (12). If you want to hear more, go to (13). And for the aftermath of the yard sale, (11).

(11)

Total value of items based on sticker prices: \$205.25. Value of actual sales: \$19.10. Time spent sorting, hauling, dusting, setting up display, pricing: 3 hours. Sitting by table on Saturday: 6 hours. Sunday: 5 hours. Putting away unsold items: 2 ½ hours.

Which brings us back to Sunday evening, the first evening of daylight savings, ironically, and for the man with the yard sale, the beginning of the horrible, inexplicable conviction that darkness has weight and volume, has moved in, has crushed or displaced everything, everything, and this unpleasant calculation: His time is worth less than: \$1.25/hr.

Ridiculous, he says. You can’t put a price on time, on experience. And so, seated in his Barcalounger with an extra pillow for his aching lower back and a full tumbler of Seven & Seven, he tries to attribute value to his time in some other way, any other way.

How does one do this? He'd spotted the redheaded woodpecker he's heard so often. A plus. He got to see Casey and the twins, held them (the twins). He'd had a reasonably relaxed phone call with his ex, some laughter about the things they'd shared, particularly the Jell-O mold. He didn't fight with his daughter, didn't spend money on gas or go to the mall, didn't drink until after 5pm! All pluses. But he'd strained his back moving the treadmill. He didn't clean his gutters. A neighbor had said to him, "A yard sale. Where do you find the time, Al?" He'd overheard another neighbor say, "What a load of crap." He dropped the box with the parfait glasses and they all broke. He sold the belt buckles with Western scenes for too little, and he'll miss them and the memories that came to him as he polished them. The feeling, as he handed over the buckles, took the bills and stuffed them in his metal cash box, it reminded of the day he was served his divorce papers (as did the phone call), which made him think of the last time he'd cried, and the time before that and the time he always thinks of when he thinks of himself crying; he was just a boy with a kite alone in a field. He'd thought then, as now, no one will miss me when I'm gone.

How does one do this? It's a dangerous pursuit, feeling the way he does. How does one attribute value to his time? He thinks, my expectations have fallen so far. He kicks off his slippers and examines one of his bare feet, or so it would seem, but really his mind is hobbling down a dark hall.

(12)

You made a good choice. You did not sell yourself short. You did not compromise your values, and so you will likely be spared hours of painful self doubt and re-evaluation. Sure, life is absurd, but it's not your problem, not yet.

“Good night Charles/Randy. Good luck with your scheme. It was a pleasure to meet you Derek, Riki, and Axe.” *Not.* And never mind your mother and never mind what your therapist said. He looked like he was having a bad day anyway. Your integrity is intact, and better still, nice is nice. What a nicer world it would be if people would only be nicer. Who can argue with that? Congratulations! No need to read any further. ☺

Chances are you’ll get a beating, though.

(13)

9/12/08

Dear Customer Services Representative:

Let’s try a thought experiment. Let’s imagine that someone lives with you in your modern, well-furnished home; a loving husband, a loving wife, a wide-eyed trusting child, a loving ailing parent with a bad hip or a nagging cough. Now imagine me coaxing your loved one with promises of candy, painkillers, kitchen appliances, a flat screen TV, whatever, out of your comfortable home, through the gates of your gated community, beyond the 25mph speed zone, across the railroad tracks and up the littered embankment to the highway. Imagine the embankment is steep, muddy and overgrown with blackberry thorns. The sky is darkening, rain blowing sideways, doubly hard when the eighteen wheelers pass. Through shivering tears your loved one says to me, “Please, I’ve made a mistake. Please, please, I only want to go home.”

“Your home is gone.” I tell her/him. “This is home. See that piece of cardboard. Pick it up.”

PS. I Do Not Want Your Services And I Do Not Want Your Solicitations!

PPS. I'LL DO IT!

To hear what the Countrywide rep. had to say, press (15)

(14)

Congratulations! You have an open mind. Let the real adventure begin.

Riki throws her arm over your shoulders. "I guess if you a friend of Charles, you a friend of mine."

She pulls you up to the bar and the others come round in a huddle.

"You a friend of mine," says Derek, "if you help us rope a sucker."

"Fuckin' amen to that." Axe slaps your back.

You know something about cons. *House of Games, The Grifters, The Sting*. Often an envelope is involved, scraps of useless paper. Cons appeal to our selfish nature. Or they appeal to our better selves, the wish to be generous and helpful. In many cases, they appeal to both. What's unusual in this circumstance is that perhaps you are being conned into being a part of a con.

Also unusual is the way you've begun to feel. Either your therapist had it all backwards, or you do. He made it seem as if being nice is not nice at all. He would have you believe that you are conning people all the time, that in fact you are full of resentment and that your show of niceness is really the most insidious form of condescension. It's no wonder you're lonely, he said. And worst of all, he said, you're conning yourself. It's no wonder that periodically you enter a black hole of depression.

Perhaps there is a you inside you waiting to be set free.

"Well," you say, "no promises, but I'm willing to listen."

At this point, a customer enters. Then another. A young man, a young woman, now another man. They look as if they may be university students. An unfamiliar voice, something from the darkest

crevice of your mind says, *easy marks*. Where the hell did that come from?

Under his breath Charles says to Axe, "Serve these punks, then get your ass in the office." With a tilt of his head he invites you and the others to the back.

The office is a cluttered desk and several chairs, each one occupied by stacks of invoices. Derek and Riki clear spaces to sit. You find a place in the corner to lean. Charles drops into a chair on wheels, spins three-sixty, and pounds the desk top. "Listen," he says, "listen carefully. When I was in North County I shared a cell with a guy who was going to be sent up for armed robbery."

"So?" says Riki.

"So, they never found his stash. I heard it's several hundred thousand."

"This is getting interesting," Derek says.

"Does this guy talk in his sleep?" says Axe.

"No," says Charles. "But he talked. He talked plenty. I heard all about it from one of the poor bastards he ratted out."

"He cut a deal?" Riki says.

Charles nods. "I saw him in the neighborhood yesterday. Told him to pop in for a free drink."

"What's he look like?" says Derek.

"Nervous. Like he knows he's being watched. I know he needs someone to help retrieve his booty."

"So why don't you do it?" says Axe.

"He wouldn't trust me. He wants somebody with good intentions, a pure heart; basically he wants someone who's clueless."

Everyone looks at you. "Our new pal, Chris?" says Axe.

You shake your head.

"Just hear me out," says Charles.

"I don't think . . ."

"It's common courtesy," Riki says, one of her hands balled in a fist.

"I certainly don't want to be rude," you say, "but, even if I decided to go along, how's this supposed to work? I go up to a stranger and ask him if I can help him retrieve his stolen money?"

It goes like this," says Charles. "We work an old-fashioned con on you. Riki's got money but someone's after her. She needs a safe place to put it. You want to help. You show her where you keep your money."

"Then," says Riki, "the old switcheroo."

"No," Charles says. "There's no need to take it that far." And with a laugh and a cough, he adds, "Besides, Chris is our pal."

There is a brief exchange of meaningful looks.

"Our pal?" says Derek.

"That's what I said," says Charles.

"I get it," says Axe. "He sees us con Chris, so . . ."

"So he thinks that he can con Chris," Charles says.

Now it's quiet. You lived up to your promise. You heard the plan and after some consideration you say, "That's not me. I don't con people. Sure, maybe he's a criminal, but I've got nothing against him personally. Sorry."

Charles puts his arm on the desk and his head on his arm. He mutters, "shit" and "fuck," but then he looks up at you and manages a thin smile. "If that's how you feel," he says.

"Tell me again," says Derek. "What's this guy look like?"

"It doesn't matter any more," says Charles.

"It matters to me." Derek says.

"You'll know him immediately. One of his ears looks like a finger."*

You can still walk away from this. ☺?

Or if you're willing to risk moral and psychological confusion, possible despair, possible growth, (16).

(15)

11/25/08

Dear Valued Customer:

We thank you for your continued interest in Countrywide Home Loans. We're now offering a 40 year home mortgage at the rate of the 30 year plan. 0% down and the lowest monthly payment yet. To see details . . .

You get the idea. Bastards. I know it's a big corporation, but one would think that somewhere within it is a mind, a heart, something resembling a nervous system, something to which one could appeal on simple human terms. Me, I don't want to be naïve, I don't want to be cynical, I'm just trying to find . . . I don't know . . .

(16)

It's been 29 years since you last saw him, but scar tissue doesn't change. The trademark finger is still on the left side of his head as you would expect. He's balding and combs his thin black hair in stripes across his pate. He wears a trench coat down to his Addidas. You're not supposed to look at him, but it's hard to resist. The rumor about your bed-wetting lasted into high school. Your Star Wars lunch box was a limited edition and would be worth a small fortune now. You tell yourself, maybe this will teach him a lesson. Maybe this will do him some good. He orders a Jack & Coke and sits alone at a table by the window.

Riki charges in, breathless and disheveled. She must've applied her lipstick in the dark. She's traded the Mylex suit for a knee-length flowered dress and a patent leather handbag. She pounces on the bar and in an accent that sounds West Indian or West African or at

times, East German, she pleads, "Someone must help me. A man chase me. He want my money. It all I have."

Charles listens with an expression of irritation, but he lets her describe her predicament, then shoos her away.

She approaches Axe. He says, "Piss off." You see her kick his boot. He says again, much louder, "Piss off."

A voice offstage (from the sidewalk) calls "T'kelah." The woman you know as Riki runs behind the bar and hides. Charles protests, threatens to call the cops. Enter Derek, also newly attired, like some '70s TV pimp. He says he's looking for a woman in a flowered dress. Charles leans on the bar, looks as if he is about to hand her over when, perfectly on cue, you say, "I haven't seen any such woman here." Derek looks at you suspiciously, menacingly; exits. He reappears briefly in the doorway, "I'll be back," he says, then runs off down the street. A moment later Riki emerges, thanks you, hugs you. You're not supposed to look, but you can't help it—the dupe is taking it all in.

Riki whispers in your ear, "Don't blow it." Then again, in character, she produces a thick envelope from her purse and in her amalgamated accent she asks for a safe place to keep it. The stipulation, as always, is that you show her where you keep your valuables.

"Wait," says your mark, rising to his feet. And, at precisely the same moment, "Wait," says the woman from the party of three, university students. *Not in the plan!* Riki drops her accents briefly to tell the woman to mind her own goddamn business. "No, just a minute," says the woman. "Something is very wrong with this picture." She asks you to talk to her outside, alone. You look at Charles. He grimaces, shrugs.

You step outside. You stand with your back against the faux brick front of the bar. The woman looks at you with all the sincerity a face can hold. "You're being conned," she says.

"Okay," you say.

"Okay?"

"I get it. Thank you."

The woman studies you, incredulous. She shakes her head and goes back inside.

You see someone moving in the shadows half way down the block. It must be Derek. You want to tell him the jig is up. Or is it? Certainly the script has run out. Now what? You try to collect your thoughts. Nothing, as far as you know, has been lost, and nothing gained, but there will be plenty to think about. *What will you call this feeling?* You'd fallen in with a bad crowd. You'd tried to ignore your conscience, and soon enough it seems, you will pay for it. You want a cookie, two ounces of the night time cold formula, your flannel pajamas and your bed. You're reminded of seasickness, like you've lost your bearings and you urgently need to lie down. You're ten dizzy paces toward home when you hear, Psst.

You keep walking.

Psst.

It's him, your dupe, your mark, your man, lighting a cigarette in front of the bar. He raises a hand to say wait and now he's coming toward you.

"I'm sorry," you say.

He's still coming.

"My sinuses are acting up and I have to . . ."

He walks with a slight limp and stops several feet away. What little light there is, is on you. He's slow to speak and when he does it comes out falteringly. His eyes, it seems, are cast down at the sidewalk. "You look like someone I know, or knew," he says. "I never remember a face," he laughs, "but yours . . ." he risks a glance up, then down again " . . . I could just tell. You're a nice person."

Over his shoulder you can see the party of three coming out of The Black Hole. "I'm not sure what I am," you say.

You can't see his eyes. Perhaps, you think, he's on the brink of telling you where he stashed his stash. In any case, you don't want to know. You speak quickly so he won't. "I try to be fair," you say. "I

try to be kind because I believe it has to begin somewhere. At least that's what I've always believed. I don't know what I think now."

"Me," he says, "I never tried. I never much cared." He turns and you both watch as Riki, Axe and Charles exit the bar. Charles locks the door. He's carrying his backpack and his suitcase, your new housemate!

Again you rush to fill the quiet. "I thought it was my sinuses. It could be adenoids. My mother and my grandfather . . ."

"Tonight," he says. "Tonight I had this feeling like maybe I ought to do the right thing for a change."

"Oh. Good. Good for you." You almost pat him on the arm, but think better of it.

"I know Phil," he says.

You shrug.

"Or Randy? Or Charles?" He laughs. "We go way back."

"Oh."

He digs into the pocket of his trench coat and hands you your wallet. "I saw the woman take it. When she was hugging you."

It's hard to speak, but you manage, "Thank you."

"Cancel all your cards," he says. "I don't know if you had money."

Your eyes fill with tears. "I don't care," you say. "Thank you," you say.

"Don't mention it." He begins to walk back in the direction of the bar.

You call out, "Maybe what goes around really does come around."

"Maybe," he pauses. "I hope not." He begins walking again. "Well," he says, turning, "maybe if some of it comes around, sometimes."

"But not all of it," you say, "not all the time." ■