

WANNA-BE'S

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Acknowledgments

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INSIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Winfield Payton awoke to a mother's voice. Not his mother—but someone's mother. It was the commanding yet compassionate voice mothers develop, stern but apprehensive. It was a voice rarely heard in Downer Estates, a brick apartment complex housing the usual collection of upscale "singles" who live within Frisbee range of urban universities, attend jazz concerts in the park, practice safe sex, drive alphabet cars (BMW's, SUV's, VW's), cybersex on company laptops, faithfully recycle Perrier bottles, and sip low-cal cappuccino in Starbucks while checking the fates of their mutual funds.

It was a suburban voice, a beach voice, a picnic voice. The voice of a concerned mother directing her brood. "Now, look, Brandy, I told you before. Mommy will be home in just a little while. You can have cereal. Where is Heather? OK, tell Heather to give you some raisin bran. Take your vitamin. And don't go near the pool until I get back. Do you understand? Don't go swimming until Mommy comes home."

As yet Win had not opened his eyes; he was too exhausted. Confronting daylight would be painful. Feeling the sun warm his naked back, he buried his face in the pillows. For a moment he imagined he was at Bradford Beach, snoozing while mommies and kiddies trooped over him, sprinkling his blanket with sand and popsicle drippings.

But no, he was in bed. His bed. His fingers felt the familiar smooth lacquered headboard. The pillow bore the scent of Old Spice, his cologne—mundane but reliable.

Home. He turned his aching neck. This simple movement triggered intracranial alarms. Now everything hurt. His head throbbed. His neck tightened. His back ached. Streaks of raw flesh burned across his chest and thighs.

Oh! His body bore the imprint of what his clouded mind failed to recall. Opening an eye to the sun, he saw a gleaming bottle of Absolut on the bedside table. The bottle was nearly empty. Oh! A ceramic ashtray held the twisted remains of weedy joints. Oh! Two broken poppers lay on the carpet. Oh! Leaning over, he saw—amid the tangled debris of his clothes—three lipstick-stained balls of Kleenex, each containing a spent condom. Oh!

Rolling over, Win groaned, feeling like a crash victim. The female voice in the other room called out to him. No longer the mommy voice, it was the supportive, deferential, eager-to-please voice of a Sixties sitcom wife. Mary Tyler Moore exuding "Oh, Rob!" compassion. "Do you want Motrin?" she asked, "I'm making coffee." He heard the sounds of housewife bustling in his bachelor kitchen.

"Motrin," he croaked, like a wounded GI begging for morphine. Motrin, hell. He needed intensive care. IV's. Oxygen. And Band-Aids. Sitting up, blinking in the sunlight, Win noted the thin, blood-lined scratches and nicks across his chest and thighs. Steve McQueen tangled by barbed wire in *The Great Escape*.

"Here, baby."

The woman standing in the doorway bore no relation to the voice flowing with flight attendant charm. Despite the black eye makeup, false eyelashes, and hooker-red lipstick, she was clearly pretty. Her sensibly short blonde hair was cutely, boyishly cut. It complemented the husband-bought Mother's Day earrings. No doubt she had been trying to look like Debra Harry since fifth grade.

Below the chin she was decidedly dissimilar. Her neck was gripped by a two-inch leather choker studded with steel points. Metal chains led to a leather corset which maximized her cleavage and girdled her waist with tight belts and more chains. Handcuffs dangled over a thigh encased in torn fishnet. Her wrists and ankles sported matching leather cuffs.

Instinctively, Win drew back. Only her soft voice reminded him that he was not in mortal danger.

"Oh, baby, look at those scratches. I'm so sorry! I forget about these nails." She wiggled the fingers of her right hand, their dagger-like points flashing blood-red in the sunlight. Her left palm cupped three red caplets.

He took the pills, then, reaching for a water glass accidentally gulped three and half ounces of Absolut. God!

"Oh, honey!"

Sitting up, Win rubbed his eyes and brushed his unruly hair. The woman sat on the edge of the bed and began unbuckling her cuffs, dropping them into a black leather shoulder bag.

"Mind if I take a quick shower? I have to get home to the kids."

"Go ahead, Barbie." Barbie. Gratefully her name came back to him. She disappeared into the guest bath. The architects of Downer Estates had thoughtfully equipped each two-bedroom apartment with two full baths. Single tenants and their partners of choice could shower at the same time, going through their customary after-sex hygienic rituals in private. Alone in the main bath, Win gargled with Scope, doused his sore member with hydrogen peroxide, then drew a bath.

Sitting in the steaming water, he felt his muscles unwind. Since his thirty-seventh birthday, a loosening morning bath had become a necessity before he could take a shower and actually wash. Rubbing his neck, Win heard water running in the next room. The grip of alcohol fading, the night's events played over in his mind.

Win had naively assumed that one had to call an escort service, troll BDSM dating sites, or stalk FetLife profiles to locate someone like Barbie Monreal. It seemed highly unlikely to run into a woman with her tastes at a real estate seminar.

Normally, Win avoided attractive professional women with wedding rings—unless he met them in a singles bar. A real estate seminar held in the student union of his own college was an improbable place to get lucky. Money rather than lust was on his mind that afternoon. He accepted Barbie's Century 21 card gracefully enough and was prepared to move onto the next booth when she suggested a rendezvous at Henri's for drinks.

Barbie Monreal reminded him of Doris Day in *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*. Attractive. Cute. But too domesticated to arouse any libidinous interests—until her third white wine spritzer, when, suitably lubricated, she calmly announced her motives.

"Now that the kids are older, and I have some time, I'd like to get back into psychodrama."

"Acting?" Win asked naively.

"In a way," she smiled, giving him a patronizing nod. "Role play. Fantasy. I like the tension, the intimacy. I like power. Both asserting and receiving. Strength and submission. It's like sexual I Ching. Give. Take. Dominate. Submit. But nothing violent, you understand. I play it safe, sane, and consensual," she said as if repeating radio jingle. "Nothing too perverse."

"Nothing too perverse?"

"Consider it a hard massage. I like it both ways, but nothing painful."

"Nothing painful," Win repeated, recalling his dentist's reassuring lie about the ease of root canal.

“Not at all. I mostly like the costumes. It’s like adult Halloween.”

“Halloween?”

“Sure. Like playing dress up. Gives you a chance to let your mind go, explore the dark side. It’s the ultimate safe sex. You can’t even consider it cheating. Not really. I never do straight. Well, maybe oral,” she added quietly, sounding like a dieter surrendering to a Weight Watcher sundae.

“I have the rest of the afternoon off,” she said, fixing her eyes on him with Nancy Reagan admiration.

Thus began the first of many encounters, most of which Win could only perform or endure under the influence of alcohol.

Lying in the tub, Win rubbed his temples, then forced himself out of the warm embryonic water to shower and, more tentatively, shave.

Clad in a bathrobe, Barbie was making his bed when he returned. She fluffed the pillows, smoothed the comforter, then collected the accouterments of modern romance—body oil, vibrator, adult DVDs, and five-inch spike heels.

“Honey, you really shouldn’t drink so much.” She smiled, offering him coffee.

He nodded, taking burning gulps of Eight O’Clock French Roast.

As Winfield dressed, he watched Barbie slip into white pantyhose, cream skirt, white blouse, sensible heels, and gold Century 21 blazer.

“I’ve got to buzz home to check on the kids,” she said, consulting her smart phone. “I’ve got appointments the rest of the day. Do you want to get together Thursday? Around two?”

“Sure,” Win agreed, feeling like a casual user sliding into addiction.

The July morning was cool. He walked Barbie to her car. “You know, I lived in New York right after college,” she said. “West Seventy-Second. I love that town. Went to Hellfire once. Didn’t like it.” She wrinkled her nose as if recalling a disappointing dessert at Le Cirque.

Still the neophyte, Win volunteered an apology, “I hope I didn’t hurt your wrist.”

“Oh, this?” She pulled back her sleeve, revealing a circle of darkened flesh. “My bruises fade. I tell Jerry they come from aerobics.”

They reached her car, a dark blue Volvo bearing a “Have You Hugged Your Kids Today?” bumper sticker. She opened the trunk and dropped in the black shoulder bag with a heavy thud.

Donning sunglasses, she smiled at Win. “Until Thursday. If something comes up, text me.”

Win nodded, the fresh air reviving his headache.

“Look, Win, I’ve just gotten to know you. I realize I shouldn’t make any judgments or tell you how to live your life, but I am beginning to care about you. As a special friend.” She paused, grating the steel tip of her heel against the curb. “Win, I think you should seriously consider going condo.”

THE COLOR OF LIBERATION

“And the best thing about it, Win—you look black.” Turning from the controls of the Lear jet, Brooks Adams adjusted his Foster Grants and broke an Eddie Murphy grin, “I mean on paper. Think about it! *Win-field Pay-ton*. That could be a black guy’s name, right?”

“Thank God my parents didn’t name me Sean,” Winfield said, self-consciously brushing his blond hair. Win had come to regard his Eurocentric complexion as a handicap for an instructor in an urban community college. He was, his Hispanic dean ceaselessly reminded him, the lone white male English instructor hired in a decade.

“You see,” Brooks explained, “some people on the board gave me heat last summer when I brought on Carlos and Bijan. They see a foreign-looking name on our letter-head and go ballistic. They want to know why I didn’t hire a brother—meaning, of course, their deadbeat brother-in-law. But I’m running a savings and loan, not a charity. We’re not some community based non-profit that can run to the mayor every time we can’t pay the light bill. If folks want jobs, they have to bring something to the table.

“The board doesn’t understand that a black business can’t afford to be insulated. I try telling them that if we don’t maintain a little diversity of our own, we risk isolating ourselves. But they’re old school. Ministers. Funeral directors. You know that kind of black folk. Conservative. Old-fashioned. Their vision is limited. They want us to be some kind of colored George Bailey Building and Loan outfit. Help a Negro buy a ranch house. Right out of *Raisin in the Sun*. It’s a noble idea, but it ain’t 1960 anymore. We have to move on. Remember the old days? When all we did were tavern loans and duplex mortgages?”

Winfield nodded. He had first tasted the fruits of capitalism in the damp basement of Frederick Douglass Savings and Loan, helping his college roommate xerox car loan flyers. Brooks’ father, a retired Air Force colonel, had staked his pension on a storefront S&L. Cash poor in the summer of ’99, he paid his sons and Win in repoed cars. For his services, Winfield was rewarded with a distressed Dodge Dynasty with bullet holes and bad tires. But the effort to bring a Clintonian form of Reaganomics to the inner city paid off, and four years later, Frederick Douglass Savings and Loan moved into a 1910 neo-classic temple that once housed Badger Life and Annuity.

“We have to branch out,” Brooks insisted, tapping the controls. “Half the minority loans these days are going to Asians and Hispanics. But if I put out an ad in Spanish, folks on the board jump all over me. They want to keep the S&L a ‘black thang.’ Talk about growth, the Internet, networking, the global economy, and their eyes glaze over. I wanted to put two hundred thousand into a hotel complex in Scotland. A sure safe sixteen percent return! But the board went wild. Why should black money go to Scotland? Why don’t we buy up some houses in the ghetto and fix them up for poor people? I try to explain the profit motive, and they look at me like I’m selling them the road to Hell.

“That’s why I started Frederick Douglass Investments. FDI will have its own board. I got the S&L directors to give us seed capital. OK, we have to report to them, but they won’t have to sign off on every

deal we make. Anything under a half a mil is beyond their reach. We have to put it in the quarterly report, but we won't have to do a song and dance every time we want to move some money offshore. But they still have to approve key personnel. I managed to squeak Carlos and Bijan through. Well, Winfield C. Payton, Ph.D. won't sound any alarms."

"Tell them I went to Dillard," Winfield said, recalling a distant New Orleans July in the pre-Katrina era. Jungle humidity, four showers a day, wash suits, and lots of chicory coffee and Motrin to face two hours of summer school and ten hours of drinking. And now Bourbon Street was less than thirty minutes away. Nostalgia tugged at him. Boozy, bosomy memories of dancers named Brandy, Star, and Ginger came to mind. Alas, now they would all be past their prime, no doubt living on alimonies or running hair salons in Metairie or Gretna. Winfield was far too discreet, too mature to hang out in topless bars at home, but in the Big Easy visiting a strip joint was almost mandatory, like dropping a roll of quarters into a Vegas slot machine. Maybe, if things went well, they could celebrate at the Sho-Bar before heading home.

"Take this business," Brooks continued. "I gave up trying to explain it to the board. It's simple and profitable. Larry and I fly in the Reserves. So we set up a company delivering aircraft sold at government auctions. We service and deliver. It's all cash, and we get in plenty of flight hours. This baby," he said patting the instrument panel, "was seized by the IRS. Cat in New Orleans bought it. Normally, we fly the bird in and have to deadhead home. But today we have a plane to take to Chicago. So I can afford to bring everyone down to make the presentation. Show off the whole team. That's why I want you to join FDI officially. I can't pay much. A thousand a month plus an office.

"When the real estate firm on the second floor pulled out, I saw our chance to grow. Instead of renting out the space, I decided to put together a network of entrepreneurs, people who already have steady jobs and benefits. Why hire one executive full-time, when I can pick up four or five people—attorneys, PhD's, all with solid credentials. People who already have a stable base with a pension and benefits but want more, want to do something on their own. People who aren't satisfied with the usual tradeoff. Why should you have to compromise these days? Keisha's got a safe job in her Dad's law firm but wants to take a stab at investments without risking her trust fund. Like you, Bijan works out of a two-by-four faculty cubicle. He can't meet clients there, even if his dean is impressed with the good will and free publicity his consulting gives the department. I see all of us working together. You work part-time for FDI and do your own thing on the side and share what you bring you in. It's a win-win situation. Plus, we can feed each other clients. You can run a public relations agency out of the office. All I ask is a one-third split up to ten thousand a month to cover expenses. Less your thousand. You get that every month, whether you make money on your own or not. Just help out when I want you to and be a phone call away when we need all hands on deck for something special. So what do you think of becoming Dr. Winfield Payton, Communications Director? How's that sound?"

"Sounds like home." Looking at the clouds, Winfield smiled. A thousand a month. An extra six-fifty after taxes would just about cover his credit card payments, which ballooned to national debt proportions each summer.

"I thought MITI was home."

"Sure. A hundred and thirty-five a year plus benefits, but there it stops. I can stay there until death and only see a three to five percent annual growth. I need something more." Pushing forty, Winfield had grown dissatisfied with teaching. It was a lifetime job with as much security as a slot on the Supreme Court, but he felt pinched by its limitations. College pals and ex-girlfriends had made fortunes in real estate and junk bonds, building second and third homes in Phoenix and Key West. Brooks, too, was getting impatient. The big 4-0 was on the horizon, and his chances of being a black Donald Trump or ebony Ted Turner were running out. He lived on the edge, hungering for national recognition. Nothing delighted him more than a Fed-Ex from San Diego or an email from Kuwait.

"Too bad the screenplay didn't turn out," Brooks mused. "Yes," Winfield sighed, regretting the thousands he'd spent on reading fees for *AM/FM*. Sadly the script reviewers in Japanese-owned studios

were uniformly unimpressed by his taut drama about a fired shock jock turned homeless advocate. Someone who knew someone who knew Nipsey Russell's nephew had managed to get it read by an independent producer who promised to discuss Win's project with his partners. But Winfield's chance at making the Hollywood D-list had evidently fizzled out over a three martini lunch in the no smoking section of an outdoor Valley restaurant. His script was returned, crumpled, stained, and burned—evidently having served as an illicit ashtray. And it would have been the perfect resurrection vehicle for Pauly Shore.

"Well, keep plugging. You'll make it yet. Meanwhile there's no reason why you can't make a little money. You always wanted to be Jack Kerouac in a clean shirt."

"This sure beats flying standby," Winfield said, eager to change the topic. He shifted in the contoured seat, his arms still aching from last night's session with Barbie. A stressful closing and a tense PTA meeting had made her especially submissive.

"Enjoy it, the flight back won't be so snug. We're taking back a DC-3 cargo ship. No bar on that bird and no seats—that's why I brought along blankets and sleeping bags."

"Still beats flying commercial."

"Frankly, I couldn't afford to fly the full team anywhere. We've taken on a lot of new expenses. But we have to spend to grow. Bringing on new folks ought to improve our cash flow."

"Well, I opened a savings account and bought a Douglass CD."

Brooks smiled. "Don't forget a car loan, a mortgage, and hell, buy a tavern through us as well. Seriously, adding people expands our network. Bijan has solid ties with the Iranian exile community. His grandfather was a minister in the Shah's government. His family is worth ten to twenty million, and their relatives in California can give us some solid leads on investors. Carlos is tight with the Miami Cubans. And your Dad's outfit—Fitzgerald, Payton, and Ryan . . ."

"Can tap us right into the EU if we need to . . ."

"Hey, does your Dad still have Emerald Isle Investments?"

"You mean Erin-Go-Broke? Sure, it's only part of my grandfather's empire that survived the Crash. Pays about half a percent. Generates ten or twenty grand in commissions a year." Though of dubious investment value, the green gilt-edged certificates, embossed with Gaelic script and festooned with castles and shamrocks, made wonderful St. Patrick's Day gifts.

"Play the Irish card whenever you can. You have to max your opportunities where you find them. Hell, as a Republican, I ought to bash Affirmative Action—but who can turn it down? Tell me if you would? The problem is you have to know how to use it. All those minority quotas just open the door. They let you in to compete, but you have to bring something new to the mix to become a player. That's what most black outfits don't understand. They think all we have to do is show up and do the job just as well as everyone else, maybe a little better to prove ourselves. Well, hell, take away Affirmative Action, and white folks could do that for themselves. We have to provide seven figure names Goldman Sachs never heard of, fresh markets, new prospects, links to investors, and deals they can't touch. Then we become a real asset, not just a social obligation.

"And there is another reason I want you on board. You get along with Lionel, not everyone does. Black folks can be a little intolerant about him. He embarrasses me sometimes, but he's my kid brother. Everyone else, except Keisha, is afraid it will rub off on them. Plus, having a white face in the room keeps us focused. Shel Wertheim says he always wants a goy at the table to keep his people honest. See, it's too easy for minorities to get paranoid, develop the 'us against them' mindset. Everybody's got a horror story to tell, and pretty soon you limit your options and start assuming every white's a bigot. All it takes to diffuse that is one guy in the room to be the token, the exception. I've been there. Been the only niggah in the room and watched people bite their tongues. God knows what they said about spooks when I left to take a leak."

"I'll do my whitest."

“More than that, we need a chiclet—a white guy—to be our public face from time to time. The moment I walk in the door, and people see we’re a black outfit, they have us pegged. For good or ill, we get pigeonholed and never get the full story. See, bigots don’t bother me. I can spot them in a heartbeat. They don’t waste your time. They won’t do business with you, no matter what, and you can feel it. It’s the whi-whi’s—the white whiners—the liberals who give me grief. They’re suspicious of black capitalists. We’re supposed to be victims, poor oppressed people who only rise through their benevolence. Rich niggers who know the stock market give them the shakes. You could get past that. White folks will be honest with you. See, if I walk in and do a presentation, white folks pitch me softball questions, so I won’t feel offended. I leave the room, and they throw the book at a white guy, and he gets the contract because they got a chance to sound him out. I get smiles and a second latté, but he gets vetted. We need a white face, someone to be suitably invisible. You can blend in and test the waters for us. That way our presentations get a full review.

“And you’re one of the few white guys I can trust. See, you’re used to working with us. You won’t get offended if someone vents and says something racist. Black folks need to blow off steam once in a while. You won’t hit the ceiling when one of us gets frustrated and rants about the fays.

“And we’re going to need your help to pull off Brewer’s Court. It’s going to be our chance to be major players.” He pointed to the brochure on Winfield’s lap. “The text you came up is first rate.”

“Thanks,” Winfield nodded. He had devoted late nights to writing and rewriting glowing descriptions of the proposed renovation of a nineteenth-century brewery. Soon, if enough investors could be attracted, the old brick malt silos and Gothic stone bottling plant would house upscale condos, offices, and exclusive retail outlets. The mayor mentioned the project in his re-election campaign. Investors in New York and San Francisco had expressed interest. Winfield had decided to invest twenty or thirty thousand and, with Barbie’s urging, hoped to purchase a condo.

“Frederick Douglass stands a chance to go national with this project. If we can finance twenty percent of it—hell, I want to do at least thirty-five—we’ll have credibility on the Coasts. It means working with US Bank, Chase, Northwestern. There will be major investors, pension managers from Illinois and Texas. We build solid relations with the major teachers’ retirement funds, and we’re in like Flynn. Nothing like a few black faces on their websites to make a pension board look socially responsible.”

“Where does Singh Veraswami fit in?”

“I caught him on Tony Brown a few years ago. He teaches at Tulane, but he’s coming to Marquette for a year. If we can bring him on board, even in an advisory role, it will get us international attention. Plus, he has some key contacts in Africa. He knows people who want to invest in the American market. That would make us unique, blending African-American and African investments in urban re-development. I’ve talked to Veraswami, and he’s interested. He sees what we are trying to do; he understands what I’m trying to explain to our board. Going global to work local. Have you read his book?”

“Some of it,” Winfield said, feeling like a fifth grader hit with a pop quiz. He had, in fact, only skimmed the dust jacket and scanned the preface. From the self-congratulatory bio on the fly leaf of *Liberation Capitalism*, Winfield gleaned that Dr. Singh Veraswami saw himself as a combination Malcolm X and Dale Carnegie, extolling black empowerment through the magic of compound interest and leverage buyouts.

Winfield pulled a copy from his briefcase. Leafing through the pages, as if seeking a favorite passage, he asked, “You think this guy will work with us if he finds out about Moses and Shed Harris?”

“I already told him we have community opposition. Today I’m going to lay it all out. He’s accustomed to controversy. I think he thrives on being booted offstage at Columbia and Howard. That why he goes back. Drives the whi-whi’s and gimme’s crazy. But he gets respect from the black business community. He’s got YouTube videos that get a lot of buzz. I see the links on a lot of corporate web-sites.”

Brooks glanced at his Rolex and motioned to Winfield, "We should be there in ten minutes. Why don't you go back and tell the others to check their presentations one more time? And send Bijan up here. I need to go over some figures with him. As soon as we land, Tommy Steinman will take delivery of the plane. We sign a few forms, get our check, and grab a limo. We're supposed to meet Veraswami at the Trade Mart at five."

"Sure thing." Winfield unsnapped his seat belt and edged past Brooks to enter the passenger cabin. Whoever had defaulted on the IRS had megalomaniac tastes. The navy blue carpeting was bordered with gold stars and bore an eagle logo that gave the jet the look of a baby Air Force One. Bijan was checking stock tips in an investor newsletter. Winfield tapped him on the shoulder and motioned him forward. Hunched over laptops and calculators, Lionel, Keisha, Ted Kaleem, and Carlos muttered to themselves like law students cramming for the bar exam. From time to time they sipped Diet Coke or Perrier. The six pack of Horicon Springs Mineral Water, a gift from a bottler seeking venture capital, remained untouched. Winfield bravely took a bottle and strapped himself in to review his notes. The mineral water tasted faintly of Listerine. Chewing sticks of Carefree to kill the flavor, he gazed out the window. Through the clouds, he caught a glimpse of Lake Pontchartrain. Arriving in New Orleans in a Lear jet to take a limo to the International Trade Mart, Winfield felt a world away from car loan flyers and the basement Xerox machine.

The Top of the Mart dazzled with light. Seated at an immense table, Singh Veraswami, dressed in Saville Row pinstripes, waved to Brooks and Win as they got off the elevator.

Shielding his eyes from the sunbeams, Winfield watched Veraswami rise in greeting, his small, lean body silhouetted against the blazing gold afternoon sun. Walking across the red-carpeted bar, Brooks whispered to Winfield, "This is it. Let's hope we can swing it."

"I see you found me," Veraswami smiled broadly, his gold crowns gleaming. "I always choose this place for business meetings. The location is unmistakable, and the view of the city makes up for dull conversation. Please, please, sit down. The drinks are on me. When I come to Milwaukee, you can treat me at the Pfister. I love places with a view." Sweeping his hands like a symphony conductor, he gestured the group to circle round the table. A waitress in her forties, statuesque and blonde enough to have danced at the Sho-Bar in Win's youth, took their orders.

Clearing his throat, Brooks orchestrated the introductions. "Dr. Veraswami, I'm glad you have the opportunity to meet our whole team. I think you'll find Frederick Douglass shares a lot of the philosophies you outline in your book. First, there's my brother Lionel who is home taking care of business. He got his CPA two years ago and handles finance. This is Keisha Jackson. She's an attorney who specializes in real estate. Her father runs a civil law firm that's strong in class action and medical malpractice. Ted Kaleem has a BA from Cornell. He was a linebacker there, that's football. He has an MBA and was with the FBI for ten years. He's our expert in security and computer fraud. Bijan Naboti has a business degree from Teheran University and a Ph.D. from Wisconsin. He specializes in offshore investments, international law, and foreign trade. Carlos Sanchez has a doctorate in economics and does research on small business development."

As he listened, Veraswami's smile widened. Shaking hands, he held each person's gaze like a vaudeville mind reader as Brooks ran down their credentials. "This is Winfield Payton. He has a Ph.D. in English and has just agreed to be our Director of Communications."

Veraswami gently pumped Winfield's hand and winked. "Payton. Strange. When I saw your name, I assumed you would be black."

Brooks laughed, then leaned inward to speak more softly. "Winfield brings another asset to our team. He can be our chiclet."

"Chiclet?" Veraswami asked, cocking his head in curiosity.

“Our token white. He can go undercover for us, be our team’s inconspicuous white face, our *Fortune* 500 front if you will.”

“An important asset for a minority firm,” Veraswami smiled. “Well, pleeze, let us all sit down.”

Taking his chair, Winfield could not resist looking toward the French Quarter, mentally counting up half a dozen blocks to locate Bourbon Street. Under those shabby green roofs bosomy blondes were gyrating, spinning tassels with the fury of speedboat propellers. Sipping his drink, he recalled that long lost July. Perhaps he could return on spring break with enough money to take a suite at the Royal Orleans and treat a dancer or two to steaks at the Rib Room.

“Well, Dr. Veraswami,” Brooks began, “we have all read your book about liberation capitalism and think a lot of your ideas match what we are attempting to do at FDI, the investment arm of Frederick Douglass Savings and Loan. We’re small, but we have a strong team. We build on your concept of marshaling human resources. Everyone here, except me, of course, has a regular but flexible job. They have a base salary, benefits, a pension. That means we have a top team with little overhead. We can afford to compete with the big firms, undercut their prices, and deliver the same quality. Probably better. We’re hungry, but not desperate. The profits added to their existing salaries gives our team a Fortune 500 income without the risk. You see, it’s right out your book. The chapter called ‘False Dilemmas.’”

“That it is,” Veraswami smiled. “The black man . . .,” he paused, nodding to Keisha, “. . . and the black woman have long been presented with false dilemmas. Either you get a job and assimilate to vanish into the melting pot, or you maintain your authenticity through embracing ignorance, defiance, and poverty. Either you sell out to IBM and enrich yourself, or you forgo wealth and work in some community based non-profit, no-progress agency to help your people. As you suggest, there is no reason why we can’t achieve both ends.

“You see, only capitalism can liberate us—but only if we free ourselves to embrace the opportunity. Islam teaches that it is the accumulation of wealth that separates man from the animal. True, Jesus likened the rich man’s chances of getting into heaven to the camel’s ability to pass through the eye of a needle. But Jesus spoke in the pre-capitalist era, at a time when rich men merely acquired and amassed wealth in the form of coin and treasure. But how Christian it is to invest! Think of the poverty, the disease, the distress one evaporates by achieving capital and investing it, allowing that wealth to create jobs, finance research in new technologies, and produce an income that is suitably taxed to support the poor. Only when Israel abandoned Zionist-socialism for techno-capitalism could it afford to absorb a million Russian immigrants. Promise them homes, jobs, a future. The Palestinians can throw stones in jealous anger or realize that cyberspace is more valuable than geography. It is duty of the liberal man and woman of conscience to become rich! In enriching ourselves, think of those we help!”

Veraswami spread his small smooth palms over the circle of whiskey glasses like a conjurer, “You see there are billions of dollars floating through the air. Billions. Money moves about us like hordes of migratory birds seeking a safe place to light. Billions every minute are transferred from one investor to another, moving from one nation to another,” he continued, sounding like Carl Sagan counting stars. “Switzerland is a landlocked country with few natural resources. Yet it is prosperous by just banking other people’s money. It is simply a trusted funnel. A safe storehouse. One needs only a small processing fee, a handling charge, to make millions from massive investments. But our young people walk about listening to rap music, the tribal grunts of the disaffected. They should be listening to the music of the spheres, the music of money. Instead of downloading tunes, they should be checking the markets. They are consumers only, embracing only one side of the equation. They see themselves as victims. They seek recognition through mere consumption. In New Orleans a minister organized protests outside a Nike store. ‘Businessmen who sell shoes to our children for two hundred dollars a pair should put something back into the community,’ he said to the media. He was serious, quite serious about that statement. I called him and told him, they already have put something back. Shoes! He was non-plussed. Unable to conceive! In his mind mere consuming must be rewarded. I asked him why he wasn’t teaching these

children to produce, to serve, to create, to sell. Design and sell their own shoes! Sell them online nationwide, worldwide. If he channeled the energy of his protesters into a platoon of salesmen or telemarketers, think of the money they could have generated!

“I encounter such limited imaginations every day! No concept of the army of opportunities available to us. In the past our leaders have seen progress in terms of factories, of material construction. But all we need is to become a funnel, a temporary parking spot offering security and a slightly higher return than the corner bank. We do that through diversification and profit sharing. Your firm is a perfect model. We eliminate the overhead of executive payrolls and benefits and work simply for profits. We share the wins and losses, investing time, insight, energy, as well as capital.”

The waitress returned, and Winfield ordered a double. The table had rotated toward the Mississippi, which gleamed in the late afternoon sun. Blinking, Winfield reached for his drink, noting how the sunbeams transformed the ice cubes into gold nuggets.

“You see the problem with the black man is that he has always sought salvation from white men with beards. Think of it—Jesus, Mohammed, Marx, Freud, Lenin, your Lincoln, even more recently Castro and Che. Instead of seeking direction from within, he seeks approval from without.”

Winfield sensed the lounge’s rotation picking up speed. Hurricane-battered, the bar moved creakily. He sipped his whiskey as Veraswami spun on. “The problem with our leaders is they have no concept of what a job is. Al Sharpton argues for jobs as if they can be handed out like blocks of surplus cheese. They have no understanding that a job is not given, it is earned. One is not a recipient of a job—one must give, not take.

“Last year at one of my seminars I met a businessman from the Bronx. An admirable fellow. He hires as many young blacks as he can. But even the gifted students recommended to him by teachers and clergymen appall him by their ignorance of the market. For instance, at interviews he hands applicants a piece of paper and tells them to write down the salary they want. Whatever they want. Ten dollars an hour or a million a year. He then asks them to multiply that number by three. ‘I can pay you the first number,’ he says, ‘provided you can produce the second. Go home and figure out how you can bring that much into our firm to earn your salary.’ All he asks is that they generate more than they consume. You must create wealth before you can claim any right to it. But these gifted young people look back at him stumped, blank-faced, unable to conceive!

“They only know the right of consumption, the right of need. I need, therefore I deserve. It should be I produce, therefore I deserve. Teach our community that, and you can end poverty in a generation. We command the means. The reins are in our hands every day. African-Americans command the tenth largest economy in the world—yet how many buy from a black business or invest in a black bank? They decry the white man, yet as soon as they get a check, they rush off to white shopping malls to spend their money. If only it could be channeled!”

Veraswami leaned over the table, tapping its polished surface for emphasis, “We have abandoned our children to the secular left with its philosophy of zero-sum economics. We have reduced our children to aggrieved recipients who learn to justify themselves by their deficits, not their energy or imagination. Think of it, we tell them that to get a scholarship, to get benefits, to get a loan, they must demonstrate their poverty, not their talent, not their wealth. The harder off they are, the better. We tell society give us because we need, not because we can contribute.”

Winfield sipped his drink. Having not eaten, it did not take much alcohol to make his head spin. The slight motion of the restaurant enhanced his disorientation. Veraswami’s soft accent was seductive and addictive. No wonder his videos were popular.

“The color of liberation is green. The future challenges us to expand wealth while saving our environment. At present eight percent of the world’s population owns cars. In America it is fifty-six percent. Where shall we be when the rest of the world catches up? A billion more cars! The need for environmental devices, for new fuels, for reprocessing junked vehicles will increase. Think of the need for

parking in China and Russia! Think of India! In a few years its population will be greater than China's. Already its middle class is larger than the entire population of the United States. Consider their hunger for automobiles. One can become rich by simply building parking structures in Mumbai. But do we teach our children these opportunities, the opportunities in their own neighborhoods? Only recently in Harlem I talked with a young entrepreneur who was in the business of removing graffiti. At first, he and his friends went to shopkeepers and offered to clean and repaint their buildings for a fee. Then he got the idea of selling the space to local merchants, to ad agencies, city departments. Now he hires the youngsters who used to spray obscenities to paint murals for black merchants, for the NBA, for warnings about AIDS and drugs. This young man is remarkable, but he is eighteen and leaving for college. Think if we could motivate ten others who could motivate ten more!"

Brooks leaned forward. "Dr. Veraswami, we feel we have to be totally frank about one thing. We've sent you our mission statement, our financials, our personal and corporate profiles. But we do face opposition from some people in the community. Principally from two sources."

He swallowed hard, then continued. "Because Brewer's Court is considered part of the central city, it falls under the purview of the Inner City Redevelopment Commission. Now this is a purely non-governmental agency, a social organization only, but it does receive county and city funding and is politically influential. The director is a minister, but he is not the real problem. Shed Harris is. . ."

"Shed?" Veraswami asked, slightly amused by the name.

Ted Kaleem smiled grimly. "They say it stands for Shit Happens Every Day. He's a real Demi-More. You know, Democrats who only know word, 'More!'"

Veraswami shook his head, chuckling.

"Sadly, the name fits," Brooks continued. "He is a rabble-rouser. He is an old time liberal, a socialist. He is against this project because he's paranoid about gentrification. He condemns white flight, but when whites move back to the city, he calls them invaders. To be honest, we're personal enemies. He has a column in the community newspaper and denounces us every week for not being black enough, for selling out, for serving too many white interests."

Veraswami nodded. "I know the type."

"Well, he sits on the commission. You can count on him raising questions, organizing protests, and staging demonstrations. But he is almost benign next to Father Moses—he's our real worry. He's an innercity alderman who sits on the commission and has the political clout to block everything from zoning to tax rebates."

"I've seen his website," Veraswami sighed. "Shameful."

Brooks twisted his glass on its gold coaster. "I tell you all this so you can be prepared. I think you should be aware of the downside, so that you're not taken unawares. In fact, I can understand why you might wish to decline our offer."

Veraswami waved his hand, rising in his chair. "These personalities are the blight of our times. Every city has its local crop of race tyrants. Ideological clowns! Race is the last refuge of the manicdepressive. These are people who cannot succeed in the mainstream, could never be elected to an office by promising to lower taxes or improve services. Instead, they shake their dreadlocks and flaunt tribal regalia and achieve status by defying the white man. Children."

"But they can sabotage our efforts," Brooks said. "They can scare off investors and political support. And we are going to have to ask the city for major tax breaks."

"Of course, that's just what Moses wants," Keisha argued. "If he can eliminate minority participation, then he can attack Brewer's Court for being lily white. Dr. Veraswami, you can't imagine how personal his attacks can be. He has been especially vicious toward Brook's brother Lionel."

Brooks lowered his head.

Veraswami nodded. “I was forced to leave Nigeria. My opponents accused me of everything from incest to infanticide. I was accused of sodomy and selling African children to the CIA for AIDS experiments. These people can only throw mud.

“You see progress is their enemy. They derive power from the impotent and the angry. They tell their followers they can achieve nothing without their leadership. Black men and women like yourselves threaten them; you present alternatives people like Moses fear. We must counter them at every point. But we must understand why people turn to them. They are afraid. They are ignorant. The race tyrant tells them that they can never make progress, and if they do, they are denounced as traitors.

“The argument of assimilation or separatism is specious. There will always be black neighborhoods in our cities, yet why must they be hostile camps? Think of Chinatown in San Francisco! We could walk down Grant Avenue—all of us strangers. All around us people would be speaking a language we could not understand. We would be surrounded by signs we could not read, strange sights, different smells! Yet, would we be afraid? Would we be shunned? Tourists flock by the thousands to walk that street every day. Think of the jobs that generates. Whole generations have lived there, separate but prosperous. Can we say the same of South Central or Harlem? And why not? Why can’t our neighborhoods welcome tourists of all races! Think of the shops, the food, the fabrics, the music! Instead of seeing whites as enemies, we should see them as clients, customers, tourists.

“Capitalism is our salvation. Call it greed if you must, but at least greed makes you a creator, a builder, a seller. Need reduces you to begging. Our children are natural entrepreneurs. Hence the appeal of the gangs and dealers. We need only embrace them and light the path. So many others have faced what we face, the Italians, the Jews, the Irish,” he said, glancing at Win.

Winfield took his cue. “When my great-grandfather came to this country, the only job he could get was sweeping the street. Back then the want ads, the sign-up sheets, the notices in the labor halls all said No Irish Need Apply. They often just abbreviated it to N. I. N. A. Those notices made him so mad he vowed that someday he would make a million dollars and name his daughter Nina. Well, he made three million and named his three daughters Nina—they had to go by their middle names. Nina Maureen Payton, Nina Bridget Payton, Nina Kathleen Payton.”

Veraswami smiled warmly, leaning over to tap Win’s shoulder. “You see,” he said, turning to the others, “even our Irish chicket has a lesson for us. Opportunities abound. We must only have the courage to embrace them. *Slainte!*”

Winfield sipped his Jameson. Embrace was an important verb in Veraswami’s world. He had the table captivated. His gold cufflinks dazzling in the sunlight, Veraswami resembled a charming leprechaun, a guru banker encouraging everyone to have faith in the money wheel, the ebb and flow of capital. He spoke of stocks, bonds, and debentures the way a cardinal might invoke papal doctrines. In Winfield’s mind the stock exchange began to assume the religious significance of the Vatican, a modern Mecca where all races were welcome to worship and prosper. His head spinning, he sipped more whiskey, the gold nuggets kissing his lips.

As promised, the flight back was not comfortable. The repoped DC-3 had all the amenities of a distressed school bus. There was a narrow steel bench with seatbelts. But after takeoff, everyone moved to the deck, bundling themselves in blankets and sleeping bags. The heat vents were no larger than those on a ‘68 Volkswagen. A string of glaring light bulbs swung back and forth, casting shadows. Rotating above New Orleans an hour before, the team from Frederick Douglass Investments looked like high flyers. Now, huddled in a rusting metal tube, shivering in surplus parkas, they resembled trapped coal miners awaiting rescue.

Winfield tried to sleep, but it was too chilly. He rummaged through his briefcase for something to read and encountered a folder of ungraded themes. Damn! He’d forgotten all about the thirty-odd papers he

promised to evaluate for the Hillside Community Center. Brooks, eager to prove his staff's social commitment, asked everyone to volunteer. Win offered to tutor GED students.

The week before he had given the class a take-home assignment:

Today many people are concerned about their health. Write a paragraph describing what people can do to stay healthy.

Winfield took one of the essays at random and began to read, his fingers stiffening with cold:

The best thing you can do to stay healthy is have no friends. Because fiends can get you killed. Like if you have a friend and he in a gang. You be walking down the street and someone see you and think you in the gang and shoot you. My brother went out to the store after school to get some stuff. My mother give him money to get some shredded wheet and milk. My brother he had a freind who brother in a gang. So they see him coming form the store and they shoot him in the head.

My brother he was twelve years old.

GIMME SHELTER

“I’ve ordered two more cases of Asti,” Lionel announced, consulting his leather-bound executive planner. “That should be enough. Twelve jugs of Chablis. Six Rhine. Ten rosé. Ten red. Miller’s giving us five cases of Lite and three cases of Sharp’s. Win, you ordered the water, right?”

“The distributor donated ten cases.”

“Ten cases!” Lionel shook his head. “We don’t want to drown anybody.”

“Probably the only product they’ll move in Milwaukee this year,” Ted Kaleem muttered. “That was not the best venture capital scheme. Horicon Springs Mineral Water. Christ! Horicon Marsh is a waterfowl sanctuary. How can you call a mineral water Horicon? Makes everybody in Wisconsin think of swamp water and goose shit.”

“It tastes as good as Perrier,” Lionel insisted. “And they’re coming up with a new label. One without a bird on it.”

“It’s selling in California,” Keisha added hopefully.

“OK,” Brooks said, “We’ve got the beverages lined up. Kresson is donating the buffet. He promised Leo will be doing the supervising. No more screw-ups like the Urban League dinner. I told him I gotta have some brothers doing more than slicing prime rib and stacking napkins. And we’ll have a vegetarian line. Organic and gluten-free.”

Ted flipped through his notepad. “Security is as tight as we can get it. I don’t expect any problems. Parking lot surveillance is top priority. Can’t afford to have any investors carjacked.”

Brooks nodded. All the dot matrix boxes on his planning sheet were checked off three times—once in pencil and twice in ink, blue and red. Frederick Douglass Savings and Loan was set. In two weeks, the one-hundred-and-eighty-two-million-dollar Brewer’s Court project would be announced to investors.

Bijan raised his hand. “I just wonder if we can expect any trouble from our good friends on the Inner City Redevelopment Commission. A demonstration? Picketing?”

Brooks pursed his lips, nodding, “Ted, any word on the street?”

“Right now those gimme’s are too busy hustling the mayor for next year’s budget. Word is they are late on their grant proposal. Hector Marquez is leaving to be treasurer of the Minority Chamber of Commerce. Cesar says most of the Hispanics are going to follow. That gives Shed some problems. He’s gotta make more squeaks to get the grease. He might pull something just to get attention—to show folks he’s still a player.”

Brooks tapped his chin with the cap of his fountain pen. “OK, OK, it wouldn’t hurt to create a low level diversion for the twenty-first. The school board meets that night. Maybe we can deflect some attention that way.”

Ted smiled. “I’ll sound out Leotha. She can put something on the minority teachers’ website.”

“Some parents are concerned about the university pulling out of the Bridge to Success program,” Winfield added. “I read about that yesterday. Could be an issue.”

“Right. Let me get Leotha on this. I don’t think we should be involved. She can make a few calls. We don’t want anything too big or too loud, just a few pickets to keep the gimme’s and Demi-More’s out of our hair. If we get them pumped to picket the school board meeting, they might just forget about us.” Ted leaned back smiling, “You can’t be in two places at once.”

Lionel twisted his bow tie and leaned over the oak conference table, “What about Moses?”

“Oh, Christ,” Ted moaned.

“Would he try anything?” Win asked softly. Moses was not a man to be trifled with. Eager for publicity, Alderman Moses recently took to brandishing a Zulu war shield at campaign rallies, giving press conferences in maladroit Swahili, and sponsoring a petition to have his district secede from the City of Milwaukee to become New Kemet, the first independent African nation in urban America. He claimed to have approached Ghana for diplomatic recognition. Whether clad in an assortment of tribal costumes no African had worn in a century or a forbidding Papa Doc black suit and Amish hat, bearded Moses was made for television. He had earned a national reputation, and the local media covered his every move, hoping their shots and sound bites might be picked up by FOX.

“God knows what he will come up this time,” Ted sighed. “Maybe a mock lynching. Ever since he made *PrimeTime* by blowing whistles at Jimmy Carter rehabbing houses in the ghetto, he sees himself as a mover. Face it, Moses wants the gimme’s to understand one thing—‘yo down a hole, and I gots the only ladder in town.’”

“Let’s not forget the Muslim angle,” Winfield said. “I think Singh’s presence may dampen some of the protest. After all, he’s no Donald Trump. How can anyone object to having African investors?”

“That’s true,” Ted said, his brow furrowing with displeasure. “But we’re going for maximum press coverage. We’ve got national black press coming. That’s enough to make Moses rut.”

“Win, what about local TV?” Brooks asked.

“Channels Twelve and Six are on board for sure,” Winfield said. “Let’s just hope a Russian coup or a plane crash doesn’t bump us off the air. Sedlov has promised a big spread in the Sunday business section with pictures. BET may send a crew; they’re taping in Chicago the day before and promised to come if they can. I offered to send a limo to pick them up and have them stay at County Galway. The hotel rooms are on me. O’Brien owes me a favor. He’s got two rooms for the twenty-first. And I have a film student shooting video we can package for cable distribution or cut up for podcasts.”

Brooks’ Mount Blanc scratched off the last dot matrix box a fourth time for emphasis.

“Well, guys, I don’t think we can do anymore until Wednesday night. We pull this off, and we’re on our way. National players. No more tavern loans and duplex mortgages. We’ll have a base of investors to leverage.” He raised both hands and crossed his fingers. “It’s after six, let’s break for dinner. We all have a long day tomorrow. Win, how about joining Lionel and me? We’re heading to the Casbah.”

Winfield nodded, his stomach clenching at the thought. Another meal at a client’s. He wondered why so many pseudo-North African restaurants had opened in Milwaukee. Operated by the Diaspora of Palestine and the South Bronx, these converted discos and renovated daycare centers featured Moorish arches, ceiling fans, blazing New Wave neon, and sickly palm trees in brass pots. And all the food was black—black bean soup, blackened salmon, blackened steak, pepper-encrusted lamb, and black rice drenched in charcoal-flavored teriyaki sauce.

“The Casbah has a salad bar, doesn’t it?” Win asked.

“Sure thing,” Lionel said, “but the blackened chicken is the best. Get the special with bitter-chocolate and almond sauce and the caramelized yams.”

Caramelized yams! Winfield thought of Dr. Tanner, the Victorian lecturer who espoused total fasting. He claimed to have a patient who had not touched food in fourteen years. He must have seen a Casbah menu.

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