

THE PART-TIME PEOPLE  
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## CHAPTER ONE

DeBarrie's needed help again. The part time people never lasted very long. The most recent had seemed okay at first. His name was Martin and he played the flute. He was fluent in German, and he liked to watch reality television. Joe DeBarrie scanned Martin's old application one more time before consigning it to the trash bin. It didn't tell him much. His own remarks were limited to "clean, plain, straight-forward". Now, only two months later, he marveled at how wrong he'd been. Maybe it's me, he thought, I really know how to pick them.

Aside from the part time people problem, DeBarrie's Stationery ran like a well inked machine. Joe and his brother Mike ran the place. They were the third generation of DeBarrie's to do so. Joe had the management job. He took care of all the buying, hiring, and paperwork. Mike took care of all the sales activity on the floor. This was the time-honored division of labor established by their father, Mike Senior, the patriarch.

They were an unlikely pair. Joe was tall and thin, had lousy eyesight and started going bald when he was twenty one. He was quiet, slow, methodical, and never made a movement that he didn't seem to have carefully considered first. Mike was short and bulky, dark haired, energetic, active, the spitting image of the old man. He was always in motion, always doing something. He was extremely quick when it came to things about the store, but impenetrably slow on other matters.

Mike was loud and cheerful, always ready with a positive thought, always thinking the best of everything and everyone. It wasn't that he was dumb, because he wasn't, but because he felt it was the happiest way to live, and he was right.

Debarrie's had one other full time employee, Gwen Carter. She usually worked the register, and also helped Mike with sales. Gwen had started out as a part-timer herself a few years earlier

Joe wished they could do without the extra help. The trouble was that no one wanted to work six shifts a week. They needed someone to help on Mondays, Saturdays, and Thursday evening. The business couldn't afford being closed on Saturday, and there were regular customers who depended on the Thursday evening hours. This all meant that a part time person was unavoidable. If only they weren't such a pain, he thought. Well, as long as we don't get another Martin, Joe told himself, it will be okay, but still he felt that somehow it was all his fault. Oh well, he thought, chalk it all up to experience. He stuffed the application in the folder and slammed the file drawer shut. He picked up the "Help Wanted" sign from behind the cabinet, and ventured out into the store to put it on the window. I'll have to make another sign soon, he thought, this one's already falling apart.

Mike glanced at the sign as he walked in. "Martin?" He asked

"Yeah, I guess he really isn't coming back, We've given it as much time as we can. At least Gwen's happy. She always thought he was creepy." Joe said.

"Don't worry Joe, we'll find someone we can live with soon enough." Mike went over to the safe to get the money for the register.

Joe waited for Mike to count the money before he unlocked the doors, "Open for business" He said. And that was about all the work Joe had to do in the shop that day. Sometimes he felt like a part time person himself. Not that he didn't belong, that he wasn't essential and important to the business, but just that he was extra. He couldn't explain it to himself. His work was almost entirely behind the scenes, and he often felt out of touch with the everyday operations of the place. I should work on Saturdays and Thursday evenings, he thought. I should be out here on the floor more often, and then we could forget about the part time people altogether. But that would never work, and he knew it. He hated selling things. He simply couldn't deal with it.

Joe had never shown the interest or the aptitude for sales. He had resented having to work in the store when he was younger, unlike Mike who loved coming to Debarrie's with their father. Not wanting to work at Debarrie's was the main reason Joe left home as soon as he was old enough. He'd gone off to college intending to become a teacher. He even got his teaching degree. A few months in front of classrooms full of students, all expecting so much from him and it was over. He couldn't take the pressure. He wasn't cut out for it, he'd told himself. A teacher couldn't be invisible or quiet. So he came home, and went to work in the store.

Mike didn't resent his return at all. In fact he was happy that Joe was there to do the necessary office work. Mike had the sales floor to himself. He was the master of the world out there. And he was very good at it.

Mike and Joe both felt, and often said to one another, that if they could find the perfect part time person, it would put to rest the only problem that they had. And it was ridiculous that such a little thing could go on and mar their happiness month after month, year after year.

Every time Joe lost another part time person he went through this same cycle of reasoning, and every time his decision turned out the same. There would have to be another one again. Later that day, Joe came out from hiding in his office, rushing past the customers so they wouldn't have a chance to stop him and ask him questions. At the front he gathered the morning's harvest of applications. There was only one.

"How's business?" he asked Gwen.

"Pretty slow today", she said. Joe didn't mind. He knew the store was in good shape. They had a good lease, steady customers, and no competition for miles in any direction. It was an easy life, too easy, he often thought.

Years ago, the part time problem was considered to be just a bit of bad luck. But Over time, Debarrie's had gone through many part-timers and the problem had assumed an absurd dimension.. It became thought of as the family curse. Every time they lost another part-timer it meant extra shifts, cancelled plans, interrupted weekends. The part time people always left or just disappeared at the most

inconvenient times, as if deliberately trying to upset their quiet and routine lives.

Of course, it really wasn't like that at all. The part time people didn't dislike Joe or Mike, they didn't always dislike their jobs,, and there was no supernatural reason for their departures. They simply had their own lives and their own concerns. There was no connection among them that anybody was aware of, and yet there had been something subtly wrong about each and every one of them. Mike didn't think too much about it. It was just bad luck as far as he was concerned, bad luck that just went on too long. Joe, on the other hand, was more disturbed by the trend.

Joe took the application back with him and went directly to the office, closing the door behind him. He sat down at his desk, and looked over it. The name on the application was David C. Melenik. He was twenty-four years old. He lived on NW 7th Street. He had gone to elementary school, high school, college for a year. Then he had worked in retail - a shoe store for a year, and several other jobs in quick succession afterwards, none lasting for more than seven months. It was not a good sign. He listed no hobbies and no special interests. He had no references. There was no one to contact in case of an emergency. Under "Health and related problems that we ought to know about" he'd written, "There's a man who follows me around and ruins everything I do." And that was all the information on the form.

"Great!" Joe exclaimed and tossed the application back into his inbox. Why don't we ever get a normal person, he thought, just a normal human being who needs a job? Why are they always strange? His immediate decision was to trash the application, and wait to see what else turned up. But nothing did, and he had to work both Thursday night and Saturday all day, and he hated every minute that he had to be out there, serving customers.

I'm just not cut out for this, he repeated to himself every time a new customer walked in, and by repetition convinced himself that it was true. It's not that I don't like them, Joe decided, it's just that I don't like it when we're in these weird relations. I like people when I'm with them on an equal basis, just people, one on one, and it is never that way on the sales floor.

Joe never understood how, his brother, as well as his father, had managed to enjoy living out there on the sales floor so much. They seemed to get along just fine with everyone they dealt with. There was never any arrogance or condescension between them and their customers. They treated every customer equally, and every customer left the store satisfied. I just don't have the knack for it, Joe thought. He felt stupid whenever he was out there on the floor, as if he was just doing it all wrong, as if he'd never learn. And so he avoided contact with the customers. He kept to the back, in the office, and did the work that needed to be done back there.

By Monday morning, Debarrie's hadn't yet received another application. Joe couldn't face another long work-week full of customers. He called up David Melenik and made an appointment to see him later that afternoon. He didn't tell Mike about it. Mike didn't bother about that stuff. He let Joe take care of the hiring. Mike just

did his best to get along with the part-timers.

With family and friends Joe's communication skills were okay. He was mostly calm, mostly quiet, but comfortable and easy. Strangers made him nervous, and whenever he got nervous he got strange ideas running through his head. He would ask the strangest questions, and the interviews quickly turned weird. Interviews never failed to bring on his nervousness, there was just something about the whole setup. He would feel forced to ask questions and his questions were never of the standard interview kind.

The office intercom buzzed. It was Gwen. "There's a guy named David Melanik here. He says you're supposed to talk to him."

"It's okay, send him back." said Joe.

oe stood up and paced while waiting for the applicant to reach the office door and knock. He kept clenching and unclenching his hands. The knock came soon enough. And Joe let David in, then asked him to sit down in the large swivel chair. Joe sat down, behind his desk, and picked up David's application. He pretended to read it, but he was actually trying to think of what to say. He never knew how to begin these interviews. He considered a lot of openings, but none of them seemed right. Finally he just blurted out,

"What is all this here about a man who follows you around? What does all that mean?"

It was a mistake, David thought, I should never have come in here. But he was there and he'd just been asked a question, so he had to let it go on, or else get up and run away. But he told himself I will not run away. I'm not running anymore.

"It's like it says." David said. "He tracks me everywhere I go. I can't get rid of him."

"Who is he?" Joe inquired.

"I don't know who he is." David said.

"Why is he following you?" Joe looked puzzled.

"I don't know." David said. "I think that he just picked me out of a crowd one day, but I don't really know." David could not look up. His eyes were focused on his shoes, the laces were a little loose. He felt he couldn't go through with this, not again. They never understand, he thought. I don't blame them, really. How could they know what it's like?

"When did all this start?" Joe asked.

"About three years ago."

Joe studied the application for a moment,

"When you were at the shoe store?" he asked.

"Yes." David said, without looking up from his shoes, "He ruined that for me."

"How? What did he do?"

David shrugged. "Everything went bad." he quietly said, "I couldn't stay there anymore, he ruined it. He ruins everything I do."

"Who is he?" Joe pressed on.

"I don't know." David said, "I don't think I've ever seen him. Well, I might have, I might have seen him but I can't be sure that it was him. He changes. And he's different every time."

Joe was nervous behind the desk, a few drops of sweat formed under his arm and slid down to his waist. He didn't know what to say. I don't want to be here, Joe thought. It's all wrong, it's all going wrong. How do I get out of this? But all he could say was, "I don't understand."

David looked up and bit his lip.

"I can't tell you any more about it." he said, "Except it's true. You probably think I'm crazy, everybody does."

Joe started fidgeting and wondered what else he could say.

"How come you didn't fill this out?" Joe asked, while pointing at the "notify in case of emergency" space on the form.

"I don't have any names to put in there." David said.

"It's very strange", Joe muttered, and then David suddenly stood up and shouted, "I'm sorry, I can't help it, that's just the way it is with me right now, okay?"

Joe had stiffened in his chair and now spoke uneasily,

"Okay, I'm sorry." Joe said. He clenched his hands again.

Joe said, "Can you work the cash register?"

"Yes." David replied, "I've done a lot of that."

"The job is only twenty hours a week." Joe said, "Saturday and Monday from nine to six, and Thursday four to ten. The pay is ten an hour. Is that okay with you?"

"That's all right." David said. He had really wanted full time and more money but he didn't have much choice. The change he got panhandling was barely enough for a quick meal. The shelter was threatening to kick him out. He had no place else to go. But David didn't believe this man was giving him a job. He's probably just leading me along. He'll kick me out of here at any minute and then have a nice laugh later, tell everyone how stupid and pathetic I am.

Joe couldn't clearly see the panic in David's expression, because his own eyes were darting around the room, and he kept running his hands through his hair. He had no control over his actions now. The same old pattern, the same old helplessness had taken over. He couldn't help himself, and Debarrie's was going to be stuck with David Melenik.

"Can you start tomorrow?" Joe asked.

"Yes, I can." David replied, but he was still waiting to be fooled.

“Well then, come in at four and Gwen will show you around, okay?”

“I'll be here.” David said. Both of them just sat there, still and quiet, neither one looking at the other, and then Joe said,

“Do you have a place to stay?”

“I'm okay. You don't have to worry about me. I'll do my best. ” David extended his hand slightly then pulled it back.

“That's all anyone could ask.” Joe said, and then he smiled. He felt relieved. He had made it through another interview. David flashed a weak smile, and then Joe stood up and David followed. They stood at the office door silently for a minute. “Just leave” ran through both of their thoughts. David nodded and then walked out. Joe was still shaking, but he knew that it was over. He could relax. Soon everything would be all right again.

## CHAPTER TWO

David was wary of a trick. Too many times in recent years he'd been set up, let down. And if it wasn't a trap, if they didn't intend to greet him with "what are you doing here, get lost", then it would happen anyway, in an hour or two, a week, a month at most, and he'd be right back here again, sitting on this bench in this little square of city park, with no idea of when it was all going to end for good, if indeed it ever would. There was no rational explanation for what was happening to him, and that left only the irrational to consider. He knew that he was not imagining things. I don't even have an imagination, he thought, and he felt that it was true. Even as a child he'd shown no creativity at all. He could copy a square from a book, but he could never draw one on his own. He'd have no idea what size to make it, or where to put it on the page.

But he didn't need an imagination to survive. He'd always known that he could simply plod along like millions of others seemed to do. He needed no talent, no special training to do what he intended to do, get a simple job, earn a basic living, go for long walks in the sun on sunny days, stay at home and read adventure novels when it rained. He had never asked for much, had never asked for anything at all, except, perhaps, to just be left alone. And when he'd finally realized who he was and what he wanted out of life, he'd looked around and found the right position, in the shoe store, fitting people's feet. It was suitably obscure, exactly what he wanted.

If there had been signs or indications of what was soon to happen, he hadn't noticed them. The occasional nuts who came into the shoe store were harmless and forgettable. The weirdoes on the streets and on the nightly news were not a part of his life either. He had, like everybody else, taken these things for granted. Smart people go insane, he'd always thought, and then they bother no one but themselves, except every now and then they tended to go berserk and assassinate their mother or the pope and then they're put away for life, but that was none of his concern. David had never been a particularly violent man.

It didn't occur to him at first that all his problems stemmed from some psycho who had picked him out of all the people in the world to pester and to persecute. No, it was only after many months, after much consideration of the facts, that he had come to this conclusion. Still he wasn't completely sure, but it was the only theory that seemed to fit. He had no personal enemies. It was impossible that anyone he ever knew or anyone he'd ever met could be doing all these things to him. He had run down the list, and eliminated everybody on it. He couldn't think of anything he'd ever done to anyone that might have led to this.

He put down only the truth on the application forms. He thought that it was something his employers ought to know about right from the start. They were bound to find out sooner or later in any case, so he might as well tell them about it up front. He considered himself an honest sort. Why did they laugh behind his back



as soon as they had read it? Why did they look away? Even this man who'd offered, or pretended to have offered him this job had acted strangely. If I were in his place, he thought, I would have said okay and thanks for letting me know, and nothing else besides. It didn't seem so weird. He'd put on his best clothes and even shined his shoes and brushed his teeth. And then he had gone out to the city park to wait.

I'm just too sensitive, he thought. I let things get to me. I shouldn't have let him push me around like this. If I never ran away, if I didn't react, he would have given up by now. This time I won't run, no matter how badly I want to, no matter how bad it gets. He had made this resolution many times before, always determined to stick to it. He never did. As soon as the signs appeared, he'd start to lose his nerve. And then the whole routine would follow as it always did, every step of the way the same every time.

"But this time I won't let it get to me." he said, loud. A few passersby stared at him for a moment then walked on. He'd been in the park since six am, he watched the early joggers run by in the dark. The great mass flowed through around eight and then nothing until noon, when everyone suddenly appeared again, drawn out into the open by their stomachs. It was half past three by the time he left. During that time he'd run through the litany a hundred times, explaining and preparing himself. I'm ready now, he told himself repeatedly, time to go to work.

David got up and looked carefully in every direction. Everything's okay, he thought, it's going to be all right. He walked slowly towards the stationery store, breathing deeply, trying not to think too much. All I have to do is be alert and act normal. He felt he could pull it off, if they weren't planning to trick him like the others had done before. Before he knew it he was there, inside the door and standing by the counter where Gwen was taking money from a customer.

She glanced up and recognized him, "Hi David, Joe is in the back." Gwen waved a few bills in the direction of Joe's office. David didn't know if he should go back there or if Gwen was expecting him to do something else. He didn't have a comfortable feeling about her at first. She seemed brusque and cold, but he knew he shouldn't make these rash judgments, they could ruin everything. So he stood there for a moment.

Gwen looked up again and said "Well? aren't you going to check in?"

"Oh, right," he said. "I have to let him know I'm here." David walked towards the back. Joe was peeking out his door and had witnessed the exchange. When Joe saw David turn he went out to meet him.

"Hello." Joe said. And offered his hand.

"Hi." David responded and they shook hands slightly.

There was a moment of silence. Joe didn't want to be out there, didn't know why he was, and suddenly he just wanted to go back to his desk and do something back there, do anything, so he said,

"Why don't you go up front and ask Gwen to show you around up there, where the

prices are, the keys, all that.”

“Okay” David said. He already felt like he was being bounced around. They don't want me here, he thought. And despite his earlier resolutions in the park, he started getting nervous.

Joe walked back into his office and shut the door. David felt abandoned on the sales floor, and the thought of asking Gwen for help made him even more nervous. They're playing games with me, he thought. He should've gone up there with me and told her what he wanted her to do with me. A customer bumped into him and said “Excuse me sir.” But David couldn't respond. He felt like he was already in the way. The day wasn't starting out too well.

David took a deep breath and went back up to Gwen.

“Joe said you can show me around the register first thing.” He didn't like the way he sounded, was he too forceful? He wondered if she'd even understood a word he said.

“Oh?” She replied, “Well, okay, if that's what he wants. Why don't you come back here and just watch how I do it for awhile.”

For the next half an hour or so David just stood behind her and concentrated on the register keys. Each key could correspond to three items, depending on the key you pressed before, either no key, shift, or double shift. This was a little confusing at first, but Gwen told him he'd get it eventually. Whenever Gwen rung up a sale the register chimed pleasantly. David was beginning to relax again, and even started getting used to the blunt and scrambled way Gwen spoke.

“It's pretty clear you know, you don't have to be no genius or something, okay?” She laughed. “I mean like you have done this stuff before right? Joe said that you did so you won't have any trouble with it I'm sure. Mostly the part time people stay up here so I can get the other stuff done so once you got it down it won't be any problem.”

David simply nodded and occasionally said “okay,” “right,” and “it was fine.” Gwen even let him ring up a few sales by himself. He was pretty nervous and gave out the wrong change a couple of times which made him frustrated, but Gwen told him he was doing fine. The customers were pleasant, more so than at the shoe store. He even smiled at a few of them, said thank you every time and on the advice of Gwen, carefully placed their change in their outstretched palms, and counted it back, piece by piece.

Mike came over and said hello, David had no idea who he was but he liked him right away. It seemed to him that Mike was how a normal guy should be. David wanted to watch him more and learn, but he was pretty busy all day at the register, and didn't have much time to watch Mike. He didn't see Joe either until six o'clock, when he came out of the office, ready to go home.

Joe made a beeline towards the front door, he nodded and said goodbye to no one in particular as he left the store. Mike started going through his nightly routine, checking over his numbers, straightening up. He chatted with Gwen about the

weather and traffic.. It seemed to David that they all thought of themselves as family. David hoped they would soon think of him in this way, but he also knew he had to be careful. And be positive that they weren't playing tricks on him. Things weren't always how they seemed, and he had to give it some time so he could be sure. Mike finished up and left, and soon there was only Gwen and himself alone in the store. David told himself that everything was going to be okay. It was only two more hours until closing.

He didn't really want to talk, and hoped she didn't either. It was good enough to be there, working. There would be money coming in again and he could afford a room at a hotel, hopefully where no one would bother him.

"It's a good place here." Gwen said.

"Yes, I'm sure it is." If she has to talk, he thought, I'm going to say as little as I can. Talking can be dangerous. It gets weird, especially when you don't know who they are and what they think of things.

Gwen didn't know about him either. She thought, well, so far he's okay, I guess. Quiet, not too bright, a little bit nervous but that's okay. She had been that way herself, on her first day at the store. Before then, she'd done her share of drifting, of feeling out of place, of things never being quite right. Those were times she wasn't proud of. She was not the same person now, no, not at all, and she didn't like to think about those days. Her mind had happily fuzzed all of those memories into oblivion. It's his first day after all, she told herself. She wasn't too curious about him, but when you have to work with someone, you want to get to know them just a little bit, at least.

"So, you new in town or something?" She asked him.

He said, "Yeah, I've been here for awhile." He didn't want to give out any details, not just yet. You should tell the boss, he thought, but no one else really has to know about you if you don't want them to, and he didn't want her to. He didn't really want to know about her either.

"Where you from originally?" Gwen asked.

"Oh, around."

She got the hint and said, "Oh, so you don't wanna talk."

David just shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, that's okay." she said, "Sometimes I don't feel like talking either." It wasn't true. She always liked to talk, especially on these boring Thursday nights when no one ever came to shop. It was just a family tradition, not good business sense, that kept them open late that night. They barely made enough on Thursday nights to pay the part time people's wages, let alone her own. But Mike and Joe insisted, like their father had, like his dad before him too. Gwen was used to it, and didn't really mind. She liked sleeping in late on Thursday's. And if it wasn't for the part time people, it would have been the best day of the week.

They were always strange. She'd been through maybe five or six of them over the

last two years, and she hadn't really gotten along with any one of them. She used to think that maybe it was all her fault. No one else had complained about them. That made her think that maybe she was the one, maybe she was weird, not them, but later on Mike's wife Bobby had come to her support and told her she felt the same way about the part-timers. There was no longer any doubt. It isn't me. It's them all right, Gwen thought. And boy, could she tell stories about those guys! It all began when Joe came back, just after his father died. Gwen had been there for a year already at the time.

Before Joe came back, his father had worked the extra shifts himself, and there had been no part time people. Just the family folks and her. But Joe didn't want to work the extra hours. He didn't belong there, really, she thought, but who was she to say? He was the oldest, after all. In any case, he sure knew how to hire people.

Every time it was another weirdo. The first one, Rick, just seemed happy to be a jerk at first, a stupid happy jerk who couldn't learn a thing. He never figured out the difference between a twenty and a ten. That was bad for business and his drawer was always short or over, never right, she could live with that though. It was the way he turned out later, after about two months, when he started commenting on what the customers were purchasing.

He'd come to think that you could tell a person's personality from the office supplies they bought. She thought that he was joking, maybe he was making fun of everyone, but he was deadly serious. And from there it was a short step to analysis and counseling on how to change themselves by changing carbon paper brands, and finally to fortune telling through the medium of paper clips. He had three special ones, gold plated, which he would rattle in his hand and toss out on the counter, then proceed to tell the customer's future. This he only did on Thursday nights, when Mike was not around. And Mike did not believe her when she told him all about it. That's the stupidest thing I ever heard, he said, and she had said, well, he's just about the stupidest person I ever met!

Most customers didn't mind a quick fortune at the end of their transaction, they thought it was amusing. But Rick finally flipped out and started seeing the apocalypse whenever he threw his clips. Customers started complaining and they had to let him go. He still showed up every now and then, and purchased supplies occasionally. He seemed different though, his goofy grin was gone, replaced by an unkempt beard.

After him was George, the creep who couldn't keep his hands off anything. He flirted with all the customers, women and men. He was unbelievable. Gwen used to stand there and just gape at him as he delivered his lines. They actually worked a few times and he would suddenly tell Gwen he was leaving early, then walk out with his catch. No one could get over him. He was like a magic trick you couldn't figure out, an obscene, ridiculous creature someone pulled out of a hat. He was loud, too, as if he had a built-in microphone. You could hear him clear across the store like he was standing next to you, and he was one of those people who had no sense of personal space. George was magnetic, not like charismatic people whom others are drawn to, but in the opposite way. He was drawn to everyone else, and

they could not easily disengage from him. He even glommed onto Joe at times, though for some reason he steered clear of Mike. When Mike was around, George was more subdued and kept himself within reasonable bounds. With that cat away, however, George was everywhere, pulling himself into everybody's business, helping those who would more happily be helping themselves, and taking his high-volume patter on a continual tour around the shop. He'd pop back into the office and draw near Joe when he was there, asking questions and making suggestions and telling stories and basically driving the boss crazy. Joe would sit there shaking with frustration and rage, unable to rid himself of the creature or even think straight while the fellow was in there with him.

Eventually George would move along, heading back out to the floor to find another potential victim, leaving Joe with a sense of urgency to do something, anything, to put an end to that scourge of constant communication. He realized that something had to be done. So far the part time people had left on their own whenever they'd become too much of a problem, and Joe had always been able to wait them out. He wasn't sure he could do that this time. He asked Gwen if she thought that George would soon be leaving and she only sighed and shook her head and said "if only". She didn't believe he would ever leave. George had told her he absolutely loved the job.

"The people you meet", he exclaimed. "Who would have thought? A stationery store?" It just goes to show you, you never can tell".

Still, Joe tried to hang on and endure the pestering. It all became too much though, one day when George decided to become a little too curious about Joe's personal life, asking him really inappropriate questions and making light of Joe's refusal to answer them. Joe was furious and decided right then and there that enough was enough. George didn't show up for work the next day. Gwen was so relieved she almost cried, but this was not the end of the part time people problem.

Then there was Ron. Ron who couldn't be fired. Ron who could not be talked to. Ron who was simply too remote from this world to be reached in any way at all. The only person who could ever talk with him was God almighty himself. Then Ron might possibly listen, but only if he happened to feel like it that day. He was always muttering beneath his breath, so soft you couldn't make out the words, but you knew you didn't want to anyway. Ron was just too much. David couldn't possibly be any worse than him. And he couldn't be worse than Martin. Gwen hadn't yet gotten over Martin either. Because Martin hadn't gotten over her. He had taken to stalking her ever since he stopped showing up for work at Debarrie's a few weeks previously. She had tried calling the cops, but Martin hadn't yet crossed the line, they told her. Every Thursday she saw him, waiting at her subway stop. He just watched her get on and ride away. She didn't want to know what was going on inside his head, but she knew it couldn't be good. She just prayed he would go away.

She couldn't help but think about these things throughout the rest of the evening. David didn't try to initiate any conversation, and she got tired of having him just stand around up there, so she told him that he should just look around the store

and get to know where everything was. And if he had any questions he should ask now since it was slow. David busied himself with this for a little while, he went around the store a couple of times, but he ended up just staring at the shelves and spacing out.

David was glad she didn't insist on talking, and he noticed how almost no one came in the store, but he figured it was just a slow night and it wasn't usually like that. He didn't ask about it, he'd find out soon enough in any case, after a few more weeks. It was good to be thinking in terms of weeks, but when he noticed he was thinking in that way he made his mind shut up. I can't let myself get carried away, he thought.

Gwen read a magazine and pretended to ignore him, but she was watching all the time. He would move to an area of the store and just stand there for a few minutes, obviously not looking around and learning the stock, then he'd move to another spot in the store. Well, maybe he's just bored, she thought, I know I am. She was determined to give him the benefit of the doubt. So far he doesn't seem so bad, she told herself. Maybe it will be okay this time. I'd rather have a total bore than a total lunatic.

When it was time to close, they quickly said good night to each other, then he left. She put the money away, turned off the lights, and locked up for the night. That wasn't too bad, she thought as she stepped out the door. She was glad to be outside, the night was warm and still. It was just beginning to get dark. She walked over to the subway entrance, and glanced around quickly. Martin was nowhere in sight. She breathed in relief and started thinking about dinner and what she was going to watch on television that night.

## CHAPTER THREE

On Monday morning, Joe was late to work. He had sat around the house he shared with his brother's family while Mike got ready to go. Coming? Mike had asked, and Joe had said, not yet, I think I'll just wake up a bit. But he was already awake.

On Monday morning, Joe sat around the house and drank his way through an entire pot of coffee.

He was reluctant to depart. There was no reason why he should go in anyway. There was really nothing on his desk that couldn't wait. There were many days like this, but he knew he would feel guilty if he didn't show up, even though he didn't have anything to do. His father had always gone to work, always on time, and never missed a day.

His father had lived for Debarrie's. After his wife had died, there was nothing else for him. I don't have to live like that. Joe thought, I could do something else entirely, but memories of his short teaching career flooded into his mind. No, he thought I can't do anything else.

When Joe came back to the store, after his abrupt departure from the university he'd locked himself into a pattern that he couldn't seem to break. Every weekday morning he got up to go to work. And then he'd be there and he'd have to sit around all day, taking as much time as he could to do the simplest things. He was bored with life, and yet he wasn't sad. It was just the way it was. And he did get some kind of enjoyment out of it, occasionally. Sometimes he felt good doing things that needed to be done, making himself useful, helping Mike. Mike could not do everything, he told himself, so I am glad to lend a hand. That was his excuse. Actually, it didn't matter to him at all, whether the things got done or not.

Joe had a special reason why he didn't want to go to work today. He was afraid to find out how things were with David. He figured that if Mike went first, maybe he would deal with any problems there might be, and then he wouldn't have to. Not that there should be any problem he told himself. David will be fine, he's just a nervous kid who's probably had some bad luck in the past, that's why he gets so tense, that's why he was so jittery. Joe could understand. Maybe the kid just hasn't figured out where he's going, Joe thought. Maybe all he needs is an easy place to be, a place where no one hassles him, where he can have some time to get himself together.

Joe was sure he was right, and he would have wanted somebody to do the same for him back then, back when he was teaching. He figured that's what the part time job should be for, people who needed a chance to help themselves. It was too ridiculous a job for someone who already had things straight. And so he tried to help them out. I do my best, he thought. Everybody needs a place to be. Eventually the notion that he should be at the store got through to him, and he got up and left the house.

Mike was busy as always, checking in the morning delivery, studying the invoice and carefully counting all the merchandise received. David was up front at the register. He looked comfortable with the machine. Joe smiled and said good morning. David smiled back. Joe went over to Mike and asked him how the day was getting on.

Mike said "Great, everything is fine."

"And David?" Joe inquired.

"The kid's all right." Mike said. "He's got the register down already. I talked to Gwen this morning on the phone, and she says he was fine on Saturday. This could be the one."

"I hope you're right, Mike, It's about time."

Mike nodded and went back to work. Joe went into his office.

David noticed them talking and he knew their conversation was about himself. He wondered what they said. He didn't think it would be anything bad, because he'd been doing his job without any problems so far. He was doing the best he could, just like he'd said he would.

Gwen didn't talk too much, and she didn't make him feel uncomfortable anymore. Also he had not seen any crazy people since about a week, and that was good. He was being extra careful now. When he walked around the streets, sometimes he didn't even look around. He knew that if he didn't see them, he wouldn't get any ideas. But usually he had to look, just in case it might be him. You never know he thought. It could be any one of them.

Gwen greeted Joe as he walked in,

"Morning Joe, are you awake yet? Mike and David stepped out for some coffee, I told them to bring you back a cup."

Joe smiled.

"I drank an entire pot this morning. I'm pretty wired."

"Well you probably don't need any more then, I could sure use some though." Gwen said. "I was up all night worrying about Martin."

"Did you see him again?" Joe asked.

"Yes, last Saturday. He was waiting in the subway. He knew when I was going to be there, like I always am, you know?"

"Did he say anything to you?" Joe sounded concerned.

"No, he just kind of smirked the way he always does, like he was saying, 'I know where you are and I can find you anytime I want.' I swear I don't know what to do."

"You should call the cops again. He's not supposed to do that."

Gwen sighed, "They can't do anything. It's a free country, remember what he said? 'I can go anywhere I god damned please and there ain't anything that anyone can



do about it' and he's right. The cops can't do a thing."

"What about David?" Joe asked, "How is he?"

"Okay so far." Gwen said, "I mean he hardly says a thing and he looks like he's scared to death of everything, but maybe he's just shy, you know, he's just a kid. But I will tell you, Joe, if he turns out to be another Martin, I am going to quit this job, and you won't be able to stop me this time."

"I don't think I'd try." Joe said, "You have every right to want to quit. Imagine that guy following you around like that. I wish I'd never laid my eyes on him."

"I wish you'd had never hired him." Gwen said. "That's the problem from the start. You shouldn't hire these lunatics." "Sometimes I think Debarrie's is a magnet for them, I can't control who decides to turn in an application." Joe sounded upset.

David made it through the day all right, but he had the next few off and he wanted to stay out of sight. Joe had given him an advance and David found a room in a small hotel near the city park. He had a window view but he always kept his blinds shut. He had bought a couple of mystery books and enough food to let him stay inside his room until Thursday afternoon. Things were going too well, and he didn't want to mess it up in any way. He knew that if he went outside and took a long walk in the sun, he'd look around too much, he'd see too much, and he wanted to keep his balance intact. He knew himself too well. He knew how he would act in every circumstance. If anyone came up to him and asked him any question, he'd begin to stutter and he wouldn't be able to stop.

He felt better when he was inside. It hadn't always been like this for him. Over the past few years he had changed in many ways. But it wasn't his fault, he was always watching out for him. Someday he hoped that it would end, and he figured that he would slowly turn back into who he was before. He was counting on that happening, but he was having trouble remembering what he used to feel like. If it didn't end, he thought, he would just have to make it through. It's just a matter of learning what to do and where to go, and what to avoid. Adaptation is the key, he thought, survival of the fittest. It was only a matter of practice, learning, and remembering.

He stayed inside his room and passed the days. His books were surprising, and he didn't get too lonely. His solitude was only briefly interrupted by the occupants of the room next door. That was better than he'd expected. Usually there were people and machines everywhere making noise all the time. Wherever he was staying, wherever he went, whatever he did. Total silence was essential, David thought, at least for several hours a day. He avoided any activity and every place where noise was likely to occur. It was Thursday almost all too soon. He had gotten very comfortable in the room, and he didn't want to leave. But he knew that he could only pay for it by going to work, and so he had no choice.

He put it off as long as possible, it wasn't until three forty five that he left the room and went outside. He was confronted immediately with the world in all its motion, all its sound. The last few days of contentment were erased. David tensed up

quickly, and had to shout his thoughts to make them heard.

"It's okay," he told himself, "It's going to be all right. It only takes a little time to readjust. As soon as I get to the store I know that I'll be ready." He tried to walk as calmly as he could, breathing deeply as he did, reciting his litany to himself.

"Ugghh, ugghh" A little old man was vomiting into the sewer across the street from David. He was wearing a thick overcoat even though it was ninety two degrees outside. The man looked up, and stared right at David. He seemed to be scowling too.

It could be him, David thought, but he shook his head. No, not today, he told himself, it's just too soon, too soon. Why doesn't he leave me alone for just a little while. It probably isn't him, he thought, of course it's not. I've never seen that man before. He's just a wino, that's all he is, he isn't really one of them. But even though the man walked off the other way and was soon out of sight, David held onto the image of the man in his thick trench coat. He started to compare him to all the others he had seen. It can't be him, he thought, he's not the one. David lost himself in his thoughts. He forgot to say hello when he walked into work, and Gwen thought that was strange, because although he never said too much, he always said hello. It was the only word he seemed to know.

David blinked and seemed to realize where he was. He knew that he should just relax, breathe, and go to work. He stood by the counter and stared through the glass at the expensive pens. Mike came up behind him and said,

"Howdy Dave, how's it going."

That was enough to break the spell.

David turned around and even smiled. "Hi Mike, never better." And then he was almost okay.

The old man was forgotten, the job was still there after all. A few times in his room alone, he thought the job had been a dream. The store, the room he was in, his own fabrication. He was just making it up as he went along. To avoid him. But the job was real all right, and just the thing he needed most.

He took over for Gwen on the register and worked as well as he had ever done. He didn't make any mistakes, and he wasn't nervous. He was courteous and pleasant to everyone who came up to him. He didn't mind their questions, and if he didn't know the answer, he didn't hesitate to call for Mike or Gwen. It was like a brand new day he thought. Usually when he got to feeling exuberant like that he checked himself, told himself to take it easy, and not get carried away, but this time he couldn't help himself, because it felt so good. I don't see why it can't go on like this, he thought. This is just the way it ought to be. Maybe it's all over and I didn't even know it.

Even Joe noticed, when he came out from the office, preparing to go home, that something had changed in David. He said to Gwen later that night that didn't it seem like David was going to be all right, even though maybe his application had been weird, and maybe he did seem strange at first. Gwen had to agree that David

seemed more normal that day than any of the other part time people they had ever had. And Mike said like I told you Joe, the kid's okay, and he's going to work out fine. When Mike said that, there was no question anymore. Joe's mind was made up. Joe felt good, I finally made the right decision after all, he thought. He thought he might never have to hire another person again. Oh God, if only this keeps up, he thought, it would be so good.

David had been fine all right, all the way till seven, just as chipper as a man could be. He'd even talked to Gwen a bit about himself. He said he was from Michigan, but he didn't remember it at all. He said he'd had a lot of jobs before, but none so good as this. He told Gwen all about the room he had, how quiet it was, how much he liked to be there. She didn't urge him on. In fact she didn't want to hear all that. She was relieved a bit to find that he was actually someone with a voice, a life, a past, but she was still too much aware of Martin, and the other part-timers.

Things got bad when an old nut walked into the store. He was a usual, had been coming around for years. He just went up and down the block on a regular rotation, stopped in once a month or so to yell out, 'Where's the light, has anybody seen the light?' and then he'd laugh like he was going to burst before he went on to the next part of his act. Gwen even had a name for him. She called him Santa Claus, but David had never seen him before, and she had never seen someone react the way David did to poor old drunken Santa. First he turned all white. Then he froze, as if his limbs were locked in place. After Santa left, David never recovered. He stuttered whenever he began to talk, and soon he gave up talking all together.

Gwen tried to cheer him up. "Oh, that's just old Santa Claus. He's harmless, just a drunk, he comes in all the time, been coming around for years. Everybody knows him. Sometimes I even give him a buck or two." But all her talk did nothing to change the dead expression on David's face. He didn't say goodbye when it was time to leave. She watched him walk out like a corpse. Oh Christ, she thought, he is another one after all. Well, maybe there's a logical explanation. Maybe I'll get it out of him on Monday. She didn't want to have to worry about him now. Martin was still around. She had enough to deal with already.

Later on, after she'd locked up and was about to leave, she made her mind up that she'd give him one more week. If he was weird again next Thursday, she would definitely do something about it. God damn." she said, "What is it with these part time people anyway?"

## CHAPTER FOUR

David had only one day to recover after Thursday night. It was not enough time. He walked back to the hotel as fast as possible, intending to stay there until Saturday. But he'd forgotten, in his haste, to get prepared. He had no food to eat, no book to read, nothing to do. Thursday night that didn't seem like a problem, His nerves kept him going. I have to get myself together, he thought, that's the most important thing. He didn't know if the man Gwen called Santa Claus was a sign of trouble or not. It had happened before.

Six months ago, at the liquor store, one of them came in to buy some rum. The bastard didn't have any money, so he told his awful jokes and hoped to make a friend of him. And if David was his friend, the guy must have thought, maybe he'd give him something off the shelf for free. David had just stood there, shaking the whole time, and listened to those stories the man told about the girls. The ones around the corner, how he was friends with them and if you needed any introduction well just ask that's all you have to do, and he went on to describe a few of them, what they liked, what they were good for, how much they usually charged but you don't have to worry about that, not with my connections. Then the old man laughed deeply, which caused him to erupt into a nasty coughing fit. He knew he should have thrown the guy out right there, but he couldn't move. And when Jerry, his boss came out of the stockroom he looked over at David in the strangest way, and then said,

"Come on now Ivan, time to go." And the drunk had left without a fuss. "So what's the matter with you?" Jerry said, "It's only Ivan. Next time you tell him go right off, he'll go, the man's a lush, he's easy."

David nodded but didn't say anything.

Only later it dawned on him that Ivan was the sign, and he should have known that it was time to go. But I stayed, he thought, because I told myself I wouldn't run away again.

"I can't have someone who just gives my money away." Jerry's words resonated inside David's head, from the night of the robbery. David had done the only thing he could But the man didn't come for money, no, David knew that he'd been sent, that he was out to get him, David was relieved he'd made it through alive. Now this Santa Claus might be another sign. I should stay away from there, he thought. He knows where I am now. He always finds out soon enough.

He woke up hungry on Friday but the thought of going out barely entered David's mind. He was too busy thinking about Santa, maybe he was just a drunk. It was a possibility. David lay in bed and told himself that everything was going to be all right as he watched the light fade from behind the blinds.

On Saturday his stomach forced him out of bed early and he went to a diner next to the hotel. He sat at the bar, and ordered two plates, for takeout. The waitress

looked at him a little funny. David ignored her. He ate his two breakfasts on his bench in the park. He started to feel better. He walked to work, enjoying the warm morning sun, and got there much too early. He had to wait around out front for Gwen to show, and when she finally did he could tell right off that she wasn't glad to see him. He was cheerful though.

"Good morning" he said, "how are you?"

"Hi." Gwen walked right by him, opened the door and went inside. He followed her into the store and waited by the front while she got the money and the lights.

"Listen," she said, "I've got some work to do, so I'm just going to leave you here up front, okay?"

"No problem," David said, and he sincerely meant it.

After awhile David figured out that Gwen was weird about the other night, because of how he changed when Santa Claus came in. He felt he really should explain the situation to her. They'd been getting along so well. He'd even begun to talk about himself, and was going to ask about her too if this job lasted long enough. He still felt that it could work out fine as long as he was left alone by drunks and crazy people.

Every time Gwen came up to the register or just passed by David started to talk to her. But she ignored and went off without a pause, without a word in reply. Finally she couldn't avoid him anymore, because she had to cover for his lunch hour, which meant she had to go up there and tell him he could go. But he wasn't hungry yet. He wanted to talk, not eat.

He had been debating whether or not to tell her, he thought Gwen would think the explanation for his previous behavior would be even weirder than himself. But he just had to explain,

"You know, about the other night, with Santa Claus, and after? I can explain. It's really nothing to worry about."

"Who said I was worried." Gwen replied, and she really didn't care. I don't want to hear his story, she told herself, but he was going on with it.

"It's just that sometimes when I see a drunk like that, well, it's kind of like a warning, It has to do with things that happened in the past." David said.

Great, she thought, now it's confession time, oh boy.

"So what?" she said, "Your father was a drunk or something?"

"Not my father, David said, not him. The others. I don't even know them. You see, there's this problem that I have..." He stopped and turned to stare at the wall. He didn't quite know how he should say it, whether to go ahead and spill it out or dress it up a little bit.

Gwen didn't want to hear about his problem. She was about to say, look, if you don't want to go to lunch, then I will, okay? But she didn't get the chance to because he started in again.

"There's this man," he said, "He talks to all the crazies and the drunks, and he's one of them, so it's easy for him to talk to them, he knows them all. Even in a new town it doesn't take him very long to get to know them all, and that's why moving doesn't work. It doesn't help. I know. I've tried. But anyway, he talks to them and they tell him where they've been and who they've seen and where, and I think he must like finding out these things, like he's playing spy, and he finds things out and then he goes around and looks for the people he was told about, you know?"

Gwen just shook her head slightly and allowed David to continue.

"Well, what happens is he does these things to them, to the people that he finds that way. He follows them around and he does things so he ruins what they have, you know, their jobs, their homes, their girlfriends and all, he does these sneaky little things and you never see him doing them, you never see him at all. You wonder why things are going wrong. You think that maybe you're going nuts, or else it's just incredible bad luck, this cloud that follows you around, but later on it's just too much, and you figure out what's really going on is this guy doing these things to you. It's the only explanation. So what happens is that I have been observing all the patterns since it started and I noticed that as soon as there's a drunk who talks to me, he must go tell him afterwards that he's found out where I am, and then he starts again, ruining everything the way he does. So that's why when I saw the drunk I got that way. You see? It's really very simple." David stopped, and he hoped Gwen understood what he had just said.

"You're out of your mind," Gwen said. "You're just another nut. I knew it. I knew it the moment I saw you coming in the door last week."

"Christ! No, I'm not," he said, "I know it sounds like maybe I could be, but I'm telling you the truth, I really am. I don't want you to think that."

Gwen lost all her patience with him, she just turned around and started in with "You don't want me to think that, huh? You weirdo! You think I can't tell? You think that I have no experience with people like you? Well, let me tell you, David, you're just another in a long line of absolutely psycho loons I've had to deal with in this store. If you weren't nuts, you think Joe would have hired you? Huh? What do you know? He only hires sickos! Every single of them. You're just the new freak on the block."

"I don't understand." David said, and Gwen just laughed.

"Oh, you don't understand. I get it. You're just a total innocent and some strange man just decided he would come and ruin everything for you, Right! You think I have never heard that kind of shit before? You don't know anything, do you? Not a thing. Well, just listen, all right? Every part-timer is a sicko here. But you know what else? They all start out just like you, a little quiet, a little shy. Maybe just a little nervous too but that's only natural, we always think, on anybody's first day at work. But soon enough, out come the sicko stories, the crazy little fantasies. I know what's coming next. I know all about you people."

David was astonished. It was too much information all at once, too much was going

on here that he didn't know about, and he didn't know what to say. He stood there looking stupid and confused, and then Gwen said,

“Every time Joe drags that stupid sign out it attracts the crazies.” She stared right into his eyes. “The last guy in here, Martin, you want to know his story?”

David didn't really want to know, but Gwen was going to tell him anyway.

“That creep,” she said, “That piece of shit still follows me around, he makes phone calls in the middle of the night, he sends nasty letters in the mail, he hangs out by the subway stop. We called the cops on him, but they won't do a damn thing about him. He's still out there. I've got enough to deal with without your crazy story. So I don't want to hear about it. I don't even want you here. You could do me a favor. Just get lost. Just go away. Right now.”

She got so worked up she started crying and before he could say a word or lift a hand to comfort her she had fled back to the office, and she didn't come out again for hours. David just stood there at the counter, absent-mindedly selling things to people. He tried to put their entire conversation out of his mind.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Gwen decided to put the whole Debarrie's scene behind her. David was just the last in a long string of insanity. She decided to talk to Mike before she left though, and when he came in to work that morning she went right to it. There was nothing Mike could say to change her mind. Even Bobby, who'd always been there for Gwen, was helpless this time. She was out of there before David even returned to work again. When he did find out, he knew that he was partly to blame, but the more he thought about it, the less he felt responsible. What did he really know about her anyway?

What if she was crazy? How could he know if she was telling him the truth about this Martin person? And wasn't she saying the same thing about Martin that he was saying, that there was some crazy man who followed her around and tried to ruin her life? Why couldn't she see that it was just the same for him? Only he didn't know his follower, and she did know hers. That was the only difference, as far as he could see. If it was even true. She sure seemed normal, though, but maybe that's because she hadn't been living with it long enough. We'll see what happens to her after this Martin guy's been bothering her for a few years, following her all around the country, everywhere she goes, we'll see what she's like then. She'll end up just like me, he thought. She'll be nervous all the time.

The signs were clear. First there was the old man puking in the street. And then Santa Claus, just a few hours later. And then on Saturday he'd seen a woman pushing a supermarket cart around, piled high with stinking rags and plastic cans. She had no teeth, and she was muttering fiercely about something, he couldn't hear what it was because she was outside on the sidewalk and he was in the store behind the counter. But she'd looked at him. She'd looked straight at him and then she started to yell and shake her fist. She said, 'you're the one, god damn you. He's going to send you all to hell!' It was the clearest sign that there could be. It had really freaked him out. It took him all of Sunday to calm down again, and he didn't know why he bothered any more. He was tempted to just give up and run away while there was still time.

He did go back, though, And he was stunned when Joe asked him if he wanted to go on full time.

"Now that Gwen's gone, we really need someone to work her shift. It'll mean a raise too. And you've done all right so far. I guess you've got it down." Joe was almost mumbling. This was a reality. David was there, he was doing okay, and they needed him full time.

Joe knew that David needed the money, needed the job. He didn't like having to talk through with all the details. Just say yes, Joe thought, and David did say yes and that was that. There was only one more thing to do. Joe went over to the cabinet and picked up the sign.



“One more thing David, could you put this sign up in the window, please?”

David took the sign and went up front. As he bent to tape it to the window he looked up and saw, across the street, an old man climbing into a taxi cab. He saw a woman waiting for her dog to finish pissing on a wall. He saw a city bus go by. He saw the traffic light turn from red to green. He saw nothing unusual at all. He couldn't get over it. This isn't what I thought would happen today, he thought. A fulltime job. A raise. And here I am putting up the same sign in the window that first got me here. He smiled and felt relieved.

“How's it going, Dave?” Mike said from somewhere off behind.

“Just great,” David said.

“Good,” said Mike. “I hear you're taking Gwen's old place. Too bad she's gone. She was really great. Well, after Martin, you probably know about all that. Can't really blame the girl. That kind of thing can really get to you.”

“I guess so,” David said. And suddenly it occurred to him that now he was going to get a chance to really work with Mike, and not just stand at the register while Mike was helping customers. This is really good, he thought, and he felt that Mike could teach him how to get along more than anybody ever could. All I need is someone who can show me how, he thought, how to be normal. It's been a long time since I really had a friend, and he felt that Mike could be the best one he could have. Things are going to work out fine, he told himself. And he went to work. Later, as he priced stacks of legal pads, he felt like he had been full time his whole life, and those part time episodes had never really happened.

The next day Joe picked up the stack of applications they had received. There were four of them. He took them back into the office and slowly looked them over. He decided that this time he was going to go about it differently. One was from a teenage girl who needed a summer job, but it was almost August already and she'd be going back to school before too long. Another was from a guy who made twenty bucks an hour at the bank and wanted 'a change of pace'. He also wanted fifteen bucks an hour. The third was from a woman who plainly stated that she had an offer for another job but it didn't start until October and she needed something in the meantime. Joe could understand that, and he was also tempted to call her because she was so honest about her situation. But then he thought we really need someone who's going to stick around. He wanted his next part-timer to be the last.

That left only one more application, It seemed straightforward enough. A man named Jim, He was in his early thirties, and had been in the army several years ago. Since then he'd worked as a veteran's counselor, but now, he wrote, he was tired of the war, and he wanted a totally different atmosphere. He'd always wanted to work in a little shop like this, he wrote, because it seems so ordinary, normal, and sane. All he wanted, he wrote, was an honest job for honest pay. Joe thought he sounded promising. And, he was curious about the man. He wondered what it would be like to be a counselor. Surely that was more rewarding than a little retail job. He wanted to ask about it. He wanted to know this man. So he called him up and made an appointment to see him in the morning. Joe hoped it would be the

last interview he ever had to do

## CHAPTER SIX

Joe told Mike about the man and the interview, and asked if he could help Joe with the interview, and Mike agreed. Mike wasn't thrilled. He didn't like those situations any more than Joe did, but since his brother had asked, he couldn't refuse. Then, when he took a look at Jim's application, he felt that maybe it wasn't going to be so bad after all. The army usually weeds out the crazies. And when the man arrived, he was actually impressed with him. Jim was tall and rather handsome, though his face showed traces of old bruises he assumed he'd gotten in the war. They weren't enough to ruin his appearance, but gave him a sort of rugged look. His hair was dark and thick, his eyes were brown and set back deep. He had an air of confidence about him. Mike always liked that in a man. It showed he knew his mind, and he was never comfortable with people who seemed unsure about themselves.

Jim was polite, and took the offered swivel chair. Joe sat back behind the desk and as usual, did not know how to start. He looked over the application once again, but didn't speak for a minute or two. He didn't feel as nervous as he'd been before, with David and the others. Mike smiled at Jim. He smiled back.

"So," Jim said, "You've got a nice place here. I like it."

"Why thank you," Mike said, "So do we. It's been in this family for more than eighty years."

"Is that a fact?" He marveled. "I didn't know there were places like that anymore. Are you the present owner?" he asked.

"We are," he said, "My brother and me. Our grandfather is the one that started this place off."

"Eighty years," Jim said, and then he looked at Joe and said, "So, you guys must have spent an awful lot of time in here over the years. Been working here since you were a kid?"

"Oh, well, sort of," Joe spoke up. "Mike's the one that really, the one who does, the one who's always.."

"Yes, I see," said Jim, and turned to Mike. "You're the one who takes after the old man, right?"

"Everybody says so," said Mike, chuckling. "Me and the old man, like peas in a pod, you know."

"Well, there's one in every bunch, said Jim, that's how the genes keep getting through."

Mike laughed, but Joe did not. He was marveling at how easily this man had taken over the interview, right from the start.

“So where do you fit in?” Jim asked him.

“Well, I do my share.” Joe said, we're partners, really. Mike does all the work out there, and I do all the stuff in here.” Joe felt he hadn't said enough, but then thought, why should I be answering him at all? He's supposed to be answering my questions. So why don't I ask him any? He couldn't find the words.

Mike took over, “Your application is really interesting. I think it's cool there are people out there helping others like you do, but I can't understand why you're here right now, why you wrote all that about an honest job? Don't you like what you're doing?”

Jim settled back and put his hands behind his head. He would have put his feet up on the desk if he wasn't sitting too far away from it.

“Well Mike,” he said, “I'll tell you how it is. You ever heard of burnout? That's exactly what I have. I mean, I was in the war, I went through all that stuff myself, and ever since I came back here it's like I never left. I'm still dealing with it every day. Now, I got over the whole thing long ago. I mean, a war's a war and its bound to leave some scars, but there have been so many wars and so many people have gone through them and you just have to get past the thing, get over it, you know? I can understand these other guys, the ones I'm working with. I know it isn't easy, but after awhile it just started getting to me, you know? I just don't want to hear about it anymore. I want to put the whole thing behind me now, just get away from it for good.”

“But what about some other kind of counseling?” Mike asked, “I mean, you have the training and I see you have degrees and all. Don't you want to find some other area where you can still help people but with different problems? I mean, there's all kinds of people with all kinds of problems out there, and they all need some kind of help. But then I'm not you so I can't really say, but with your background and all that it just seems to me that you could do a lot of good. It doesn't have to be just veterans you could help, you know?”

“Well, there's a lot of truth in what you say,” he said, and then he paused as if considering his next words carefully. “But you know,” he finally said, “It isn't required of anybody in this life that they devote themselves to helping other people. It's just like when you read the paper, everybody's got an opinion about everything, and there's no one who ever said that it's required of everyone to have an opinion. It's not, and it's not required that any one do this or that or anything. So I don't feel obligated to continue with the kind of work I've done. If I want to change, well, why shouldn't I change? And anyway, all I know is death. People who don't have any problems with death, well, I can't really help them.” Jim laughed, and said,

“I mean, if they're worrying about losing weight or something, what the hell do I care? It's none of my business. And if they're worried that their girlfriend doesn't love them anymore, that's none of my business either. If they think they're going nuts because of all the changes in the interest rates, there's nothing I can do for them. I just know soldiers' problems, killing and being killed, waking up in the

middle of the night stuck in mud up to your head, bombs are going off and all your buddies' bones are stacking up beside you. I can deal with that. But I don't want to any more. You know what it is?" He laughed again, "It's just morbid. I don't know how I ever got myself into all that stuff."

Mike was nodding the whole time he spoke, and Joe was chewing on a pencil, listening intently but not knowing what to make of all of this. It was what he wanted, to hear about all this stuff, that's why he'd called him in. What am I supposed to say? he asked himself, tell him about the hours? After all of that? Well, war and death and bombs is very nice, but can you work from four to eight on Thursdays? It seemed ridiculous. What is this man doing here? he asked himself. What's going on? He was trying to find the words to phrase his question, when Jim asked him,

"How come I see that sign out there so often?"

"What sign?" Joe asked.

"That Help Wanted sign. I walk by this store every day, and I could swear I've seen that sign out there at least half a dozen times in the past two years. What's the story? No one sticks around?"

It was Mike who answered, "We've had some trouble in the past getting part time help. It just seems that everyone we get turns out to be some kind of a flake or worse."

"You ought to be more careful who you hire," Jim said. "There's a lot of nuts out there. I know. I have to deal with them all the time."

Mike shrugged, and Jim went on. "Well, I know how it is, he said. There's a kind of fascination with the strange, you know? Sometimes I've fallen into it myself. You see them all around and you just wonder, what are they really like? You want to get up closer, get a better view."

"It's not like that," Joe blurted out. He was getting angry now, and he didn't know why. "It just happened. They seemed all right to me. They needed a job and they seemed all right and so I hired them. They only got weird later."

Jim nodded, and said, "It's nothing to be embarrassed about. It's like I said. Sometimes you want to watch them, see what they're about. It makes you feel more normal," Jim went on, if you've got some lunatics around."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Joe said, "And anyway, all this has nothing to do with the job and why you're here."

"Oh, right, the job," Jim laughed, "I forgot all about it. I just got carried away, you know, sitting around, shooting the breeze, it's nice. I like it here."

Mike said, "I still don't get it. There's got to be a place for a guy like you, somewhere you can use your training and your skills."

"I'm sure there is," he laughed, "But I don't want to use them anymore. I want to just get out of it completely. You know, this helping business ain't all it's cracked

up to be." And he laughed again.

No one said a word for several moments, and it seemed that the interview was over,

Joe told Jim he could start on Monday if he liked, and Jim said that would be just great. He went on to say how glad he was about it, and how nice it was to meet them. Jim waved goodbye to David as he reached the door and went outside. David waved back even though he hadn't met him, and then went back to counting the money.

Mike walked up behind him, "Good morning Dave, did you meet Jim? He's going to be our new part timer."

David nodded, "He seemed friendly."

"Yeah he did, look Dave, now that Gwen is gone you're going to have to take on some more responsibilities around here. Are you going to be okay with that?" Mike asked.

"Of course, Mike." David smiled. No one had ever given him more responsibilities before, his previous employers tended to take them away.

"That's great Dave. Usually in the morning the first thing that you want to do is make sure everything looks nice. I know we straighten up each night, but just in case we missed a thing or two you go around and make sure everything looks nice, okay?"

"Okay," David said.

"We get deliveries in the morning and they have to be checked in. I'll show you where the papers go and everything. We do the work up here. No sense in lugging all those boxes down into the stockroom, right? just the extra stuff that doesn't fit on the shelves gets put down there. The rest is customer service, and I can't emphasize how important that is. We're the ones that deal with the public. When you're just doing it part time, well, you do mostly counter work, but now that you're full time, you're almost like a partner. It's your business too."

David nodded again. He really understood what Mike was telling him. He liked the way Mike talked, the way he treated people. This guy really knows how to put someone at ease, he thought. He makes you feel like you're his friend, even if you hardly know him. It would be nice to be like that, he thought, and he was eager to learn how. This full time thing is going to work out fine, he thought. He hadn't felt so good in years.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

"Since we're going to be working together," Jim said, "Why don't we have a little chat. Get to know each other, that sort of thing."

"I have to finish this first." David said, and he started to feel uncomfortable around the man. For one thing, Jim was standing much too close, and he talked too loud.

"Oh come on." Jim said, "We can do that later. Look, there's no one here. What's the hurry, anyway?"

"I told Mike I would get it done." he said. David had no intention of letting Mike down in any way. He promised he would do the job, and he meant to do it right and finish it.

Jim said, "I wouldn't worry about Mike. He's a pushover, I can tell."

"No he's not." said David, defending his friend. "He's a very good man."

"Oh sure," Jim said, "I didn't mean he wasn't. I'm sure that he's the best guy in the whole wide world, but still, he is a pushover." Jim winked. "Know what I mean?"

Jim continued, "These Debarrie's are nice enough people, but what an easy life they've got! No wonder they've gone soft! Stay in a place like this too long and you won't have a backbone left. It's not for me. I won't be staying around. Then what am I doing here, you ask? I'll tell you. It's a change of pace. That's all. Just a little change of pace. Everybody needs one now and then. Otherwise you just get stuck. You get into a rut and you can't get out again. I hate to see it when people do that to themselves. It's better to be free. Like I am. Free as a bird."

Jim laughed, and David felt his nervousness start to come back.

"I'm freer than a bird because I have a natural habitat. The birds don't have much of that anymore. Everything's been stripped away, the trees, the grass, it's all turned into office space now. Never seen a happy bird locked up in office space, have you? I'll bet you haven't. It's no good being cooped up, locked up, locked in. I know. I used to be in a rut. But that was long ago. You know what it's like in a rut? I'll bet you do. Yes, I can tell you know exactly what it's like. You probably even wanted to be in one, a guy like you. I would never let that happen. It makes me want to do something. Shake things up. Get things moving again."

Jim paused to ring up a sale, and as soon as the customer was out the door he started up again.

"Look out there, he gestured to the window, tell me what you see. David looked, and he saw an old man stooping by the curb, picking up a piece of soggy paper. He saw a bus roar by, the traffic light, a secretary walking to the subway stop.

"It's just the city." David said, "I don't see anything unusual."

"Then you're not looking very hard," Jim said. "What about the signs? Everything's

a sign, you just have to know how to read them. Take that old man there, picking up that rag. What do you think he wants that for?

"He's just an old man." David said.

"No." Jim shook his head, "He's not just that. He's mad. I've seen him around a lot."

David looked again, but the man was gone, he'd vanished. Did I miss it? David asked himself. How could I have missed it? I used to know what they were like. How could I not tell.

Jim laughed again. "You can read a whole life in a face, a gesture, if you know how to look. I've seen that old man doing that same thing before, always bending down, picking up some old and dirty thing. He's looking for something out there, something he lost a long, long time ago. He probably doesn't even remember what it was. he wouldn't know it if he found it. He shouldn't be doing that, you know? And anyway, it isn't something you can find that way. It was something else he lost, something entirely different, and there's no way he will ever find it by looking the way he does."

But David was getting a little nervous, and he wished that Mike were there. Everything's okay, he told himself, it's just that he's new and I just don't know him yet. He seems all right, a little loud perhaps, a bit too talkative. But he's just nervous too. It's only his second day here.

"Did you see the woman going by?" Jim asked, and David nodded yes.

"She was scared." Jim said, "And she has every right to be. It's a crazy world out there. She doesn't like going to the subway after work. It's okay in the morning, but you know how this street can get. After six o'clock, when everybody has gone home, that's when the crazies all come out and roam around."

Jim paused for a moment, and when he started to speak again it was in a quieter tone. "Of course, he said, it's not the crazies that you really have to be afraid of. They're easy enough to spot. Once you see them, you're home free. You know exactly who and where they are. All you have to do is avoid them. It's the others that you have to watch out for.

"What others?" David asked.

Jim smiled. "The ones who don't seem crazy." he replied. "It's the people on the edge," he said, "they're the dangerous ones. You can't tell when you see them that they're on the edge, unless you have experience. They look like ordinary folks. Just anybody going about their business. Inside they're boiling over, but you can't tell. They've already crossed the line, gone falling over the edge."

David couldn't speak. He was too busy trying to think of what Jim said. If he is right, he thought, than I've been doing the whole thing wrong. No, he couldn't be. It could never work like that. He didn't want to look at Jim anymore. He didn't want him to say another word. He wanted to tell him, just shut up and leave me alone. I have to go back to work. That old man, David thought, he was just an old man, not



a sign. Just an old man, maybe he thought he saw a dollar bill but it turned out he was wrong. Anybody would have stopped to pick it up. Bending over on the curb like that and picking something up, it doesn't mean you're crazy, not at all.

A man came in and stood by the counter. David said,

“Can I help you?”

The man just looked at him a little strangely, then at Jim, then he turned and looked around the store. When he was facing the front again, he said

“Where's Gwen?”

“Gwen?” David said, “She doesn't work here anymore.”

“What do you mean she doesn't work here anymore”, the man said, “she has to be here. She's supposed to be here.”

David shrugged.

“She quit about a week ago”, he said.

“Why? Why did she quit?”

David shook his head.

“I don't really know”, he said. The man was silent for a moment, and then he began to pace, back and forth in front of the counter, with his hands linked together behind his back.

“Who are you”? he suddenly demanded, but before David could get the words out, Jim interrupted saying,

“Who the hell are you?”

“That's none of your damn business”, the man replied. “I just want to know where Gwen is. She's supposed to be here.” The man slammed his fist onto the counter.

“Well”, Jim said, “as you can see, she's not.”

“Where is she?” Martin demanded, “where are you hiding her?”

“Hiding her?” David asked, confused, but Jim took over again and with a rising anger in his voice declared,

“Nobody's hiding anybody. She isn't here.”

“I don't believe you”, Martin said, “she's always here. She's been here every Thursday night for three years, never missed a shift, so you can stop your lying and your false pretense. I know you've got her somewhere and I'm going to find her now!”

With that he turned and ran towards the back of the store. Jim chased after him, and just before Martin reached the office door, he pounced, and knocked him down. Martin crawled out of Jim's grasp and made another lunge toward the door, pushing it in, yelling for Gwen to come on out, before it was too late. Up front, David stood, bewildered, wondering if he should take any action, call somebody,

do something, but was unable to make a decision. Martin only got a leg into the office when Jim rose up again and aimed a blow at the back of Martin's head.

"Ow", Martin shouted as the fist glanced off his ear. "What the fuck, man? You crazy or what?"

"You better believe it", Jim grunted, readying another punch.

"Screw this", Martin muttered. He turned and, catching Jim by surprise, dashed right by him. He took off heading for the front door and as he passed the cash register, he yelled at David.

"You tell her from me. You're not fooling anyone", and he raced out into the street. Jim was right behind him, with a fierce expression on his face, like a cheetah intent on dragging down its kill. Without a word he rushed out after Martin. David watched as they both disappeared around the corner. He sighed, and murmured to himself.

"We're going to have to do something about these part time people".