



The Empty Mirror

Jerry Grasso

Row, row, row your boat
Gently down the stream
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily
Life is but a dream...

--- a child's nursery rhyme

People change. Whether they mean to or not, whether they even want to or not, the fact still remains that life's cumulative experiences, searches, and wanderings of the soul more often than not erode even the best of intentions and most solemn of promises. Friendship, marriage, and even the Icarus of dreams slowly corrodes drop by corrosive drop into an emptiness and restlessness so consuming that any victim lost in the day to day struggles, like Mike Starzman, would suddenly and astonishingly discover his total defeat. The paradox of these dreams, however, provides the only fleeting escape from the rapidly consuming guilt and bitter disappointment of succumbing to daily groping in the dark shadows of what one has ultimately become.

His grease-etched hands hung loosely inside his dust and grime-stained hunter green work pants as if to hide this embarrassment. Even after twenty-one years of general maintenance work over at Trinity College at the outskirts of Hartford, Connecticut, anyone would think Mike should be used to the gawking stares he occasionally received down the noses of those Armani-suited executives that he passed by on the Insurance City sidewalks. The streaks of sweat had long since dried into faint white streaks down the back of his hunter green uniform short-sleeved shirt. The elm tree-lined side streets did little to contribute a sense of relief from the high heat and humidity of this late August evening. The odors of barbecued something-or-other floated like oil on top of the

saturated evening summer air. Six o'clock always had to be quitting time for Mike since his wife, Kathy, expected him to be home for supper to give her some type of relief from their two wild indians. Besides, she said, twelve hours was more than enough for anyone to give to just one job.

Mike's brown eyes were most always focused toward the ground these days as he trudged his way homeward in his steel-toed work shoes. In the forty some odd years he existed as one of those faceless baby-boomers, he never was able to learn how to transcend the barren lot that life had staked out for him. He aspired to be more, to somehow make more of a difference, even if only to himself. But no matter what he tried to accomplish, he just wasn't good enough, or smart enough, or bold enough. Like for instance, when he was ten, he tried out for Little League, hoping that if he made the team, his father would finally take notice of him. During the tryouts, he bobbed or dropped even the softest of balls that were hit to him. He took three mighty swings at the plate during batting practice and managed to maneuver his bat no where near where near the ball that had just been thrown. Although he was fast running the bases, he always did like to run, there were others who were faster. Needless to say, he never even survived the first cut. And he still had to ride his gearless bike the four miles back home alone.

As the middle of three second-generation immigrant children spaced seven and nine years apart, Mike was essentially an only child. As such, he quickly learned the value of an active imagination, especially since there weren't many kids his age for him to play with. Clothespins and cardboard toilet paper rolls became first his fleets of airplanes and then, during the race to the moon, his armadas of spaceships. These took him from the battlefields of World War II to the galaxies beyond.

A sense of duty was nagged into him by his Italian mother, Connie, and her large, extended family. "It's your duty to help your mother," she and her sisters always badgered him. And of course, because it was already his nature, he always did his chores. But it was his father who refined this duty to the parents who gave him a roof over his head, food on his plate, and sent him to private Catholic schools through high school, but couldn't afford the college payments.

He rarely saw his German father, Henry, a soldier who displayed his sense of duty to his fellow countrymen on the battlefields of eastern France, in spite of killing an enemy who might have been distant cousins from his German-born father's side. The man worked two jobs each week, as a clerk who sold men's clothes at an expensive department store by day, and as a guard at Trinity College by night. In fact, it was his father's duty to his son to "get him in" to working at Trinity when it became apparent

that Mike was not going to college, at least because his parents had no financial say in it.

His father, now there's a work of art. Mr. Conversation. When he wasn't working, he was asleep on the sagging couch in front of their second-hand black-and-white TV set, snoring so loudly that it was impossible for anyone else to even consider watching any program. He was a man with no hobbies, no interests, no reason to perform any activity except from a supine position. And the unfortunate thing was that Mike had the nerve of trying not to let him get away with it. After all, look how much he slaved for his family; the quintessential bread winner; until the day of Mike's graduation from high school, when Henry said he couldn't get off work at Trinity because Dave Melon had some family emergency and had asked Henry to fill in for him. A sense of duty to The Job. And so Henry missed his middle son's graduation. But After all, he made it to Tony's graduation, some nine years earlier. Doesn't that count for something?

So what did Mike do about it? About the only thing he could do best: write a letter. So write a letter he did, because it was the only way that allowed him to sift through the deluge of emotions and confused, conflicting thoughts he had about what he thought was right or wrong about raising kids, a son in particular, in that day and age. When did his

father ever play ball with him? Or even take him to a game, or even talk sports with him? Or even have any meaningful conversation which consisted of more than three sentences?

Henry did not appreciate being told in a “Dear Henry” letter of sorts about how his kid felt or thought he was doing as a parent. After all, kids were supposed to be “seen and not heard.” Wasn’t that the cliché? And besides, if his son was developing into any kind of man, he should speak face to face with him; that’s if he would even talk about his feelings at all in the first place. Was that the kind of respect he was going to get after all the time he spent at work so that his family could have a few extras he never even dreamed of having for himself as a boy? Connie spoke no words as she quivered with insult slightly behind Henry when both of them beat a warpath to Mike’s bedroom door. Her sullen, flushed face and cold, judging eyes seethed with betrayal and disappointment in her son’s sense of duty and respect toward his parents.

That resulted in three weeks of the cold shoulder treatment. His sister Denise, then eleven, had nothing to say about the incident in front of their parents. In fact, she had little to say to Mike about it even when their parents weren’t around. She “sort of” understood how Mike felt. The trouble was, however, she never saw much of Mike those days anyway, so she had little on which to make a judgement, one way or another. Besides,

he always hung out “with the boys” after school down at the bowling alley, even though he rarely had enough money himself to play. Or he was assembling Big Macs all weekend long, or occasionally cleaning classrooms with the janitor at school during the week or cleanup duty after a school dance. Basically, he did what he had to, just to stay away from those endless nights at home parked on the living room chair, listening to his father snore, watching his mother noisily flip pages of her library book while he stared stonelike at some mindless sitcom before he finally muttered his goodnights and retreated to his room and his music.

The one true sanctuary he did have was his room. It was the length of their entire cape cod. Small as it was, the room was basically his and he papered the wall by his bed with the record jackets from his brother’s modest popular collection of forty-five rpms. John, Paul, George, and Ringo were everywhere. He would sit in his small sofa chair, staring endlessly out the widow at the brick siding of his neighbor’s house, no more than twenty feet away. Sometimes he would close his eyes and let the vibrations and the words carry him away on his own magical mystery tour of broken hearts and broken dreams.

Mike never had to worry about his brother, who everyone called T.S., being around by then because he had already moved out of the house and had gotten himself a decent job selling insurance with a high school friend

of his. This opportunity was too good for Henry to let pass by in favor of going to Trinity College. Just because his father could get Henry in at a substantial discount since he was employed by the school wasn't a tangible incentive enough for him. Fifty dollars a week in his hands now seemed more practical than some "maybe" job, four years or so later. That injured his father's pride, but most importantly it belittled his sense of duty to his family. To Henry, education was the noblest legacy he could extend to his children, especially since he was forced to drop out of high school and get a job to help pay the rent after his father got sick and eventually died. For his eldest son not to accept an offer like this, for what had seemed like such a shallow reason, was an unspoken defiance of what was meant to be the noblest of gifts he in his limited ability could give to his family. The resulting blowout those two had over that decision was one to haunt everyone in the family, even to this day. By the time Mike was ready to make his own decision, his father never offered; partly because of T.S., partly because of the letter, but publicly, when Mike finally confronted his father, the reason he gave was something about not being able to keep up with the rising cost of books and tuition.

Of course T.S. and Mike got along during the younger years, because, like the relationship he had with his sister, he never saw much of his brother either. About the only fond memories he had of his brother were the times when, by then, Henry Jr. was driving and would

occasionally take Mike out for a joy-ride on a muggy summer's night in his fire engine red '58 Chevy convertible. Mike always enjoyed when T.S. would put the top down and then sternly say to him, "Don't ever tell Mom about this!" as he down-shifted and cruised up some quiet suburban side-road at eighty miles an hour. Mike loved the way the wind ripped through his hair, and the rush of the stars above.

"Hey, Starz, what's happenin'!" Someone stuck his head out of the window of a small, blue beat-up Ford. Mike raised his splayed hand above his head in greeting. He had no idea who it was. At 5'10" and 140 pounds, Mike often wondered how anyone could recognize him. Skinny with streaks of gray in his dark brown hair and only average looks, did not distinguish him from any of the other masses of people that streamed passed him on the sidewalk. His eyesight wasn't the greatest these days. As it was, he had to wear a pair of wire-rims whenever he was going to do some extended reading, like reading any action-type novel. He had no time to do that these days with little Jeffery, who at eleven wasn't so little anymore, going to soccer practice, while Jessie, at nine years old, had to go to her gymnastics and girl scouts. The only time Mike was able to lounge with a book was during his three vacation weeks a year. Have car, will travel, became Mike's motto, courtesy of Kathy.

As the quiet Elm Street merged with the busy Vine Street, Mike crossed cautiously between two town buses. The diesel fumes made his stomach turn for a brief moment until he was safely across the road. Even then, the foul odor seemingly felt burned like acid into the mucous membrane of his nostrils. It took many rapid steps and breathes before his lungs and nostrils began to clear. Summer in the city, especially this hot summer, made breathing feel like that of a three pack a day smoker. And Mike never even smoked. As he approached a park bench next to a bus stop, twenty or thirty yards away from Figaro's Italian restaurant, he decided to rest for a moment before proceeding the remaining three-quarters of a mile home. Even for a Wednesday, Figaro's seemed to pack them in. It was a little too ritzy for Mike's taste.

Starz was not in a hurry to get home tonight. Even though Kathy had to take Jessie to scouts, Jeffery would be out skateboarding with his buddies, relishing the last few weeks of freedom before school and homework started again. So once again, the house would be empty when he arrived home. Empty. The only difference between actually empty and chaotically empty, was that at least Mike could read his paper and drink his usual glass or two of beer in peace. Come on, how could anyone feel emptiness in a house filled with a loving wife, two adoring kids, and their two-thousand escorts?

But the fact was, a growing sense of emptiness and restlessness most often was what Starz felt these days. It started when the kids were born, then grew till now these “empty mirror” spells, as Mike amusingly referred to this to himself, lasted sometimes for weeks. Whenever he felt this way, he always found some excuse not to eat at work. Then when he got home, on the one or two nights a week Kathy had to work at John “Smiley” Smiley’s dentist office, if he had to make supper, he also would not eat. Mike always took an hour or so to fall asleep at night, but during the “empty mirror”, it became more like several hours to fall into a restless sleep, only to have to wake up to go to the bathroom. He would then be unable to fall back to sleep.

Bob and Jim Needlesmithe. Now why did Mike suddenly think of those two? Perhaps it was the two boys who just walked by looking like brothers. Jim-Bob, Mike used to call his friends whenever he used to see them, since whenever anyone saw them as kids, they were always together. Mike and Jim-Bob used to hang out together in eighth grade. The summer before high school, Jim-Bob and his parents invited Mike to join them on a weekend trip to an overcrowded campground in lower Vermont. What Mike remembered most about that trip was the afternoon the three of them spent stalking wild turkey in the woods. It was a day very much like today, hot and humid and not a stirring leaf, even at the tops of those tall maples. The three of them fanned out in a straight line about twenty or

thirty yards apart. They had heard some noises which Jim had said was a turkey mating call. Mike wasn't sure he believed him but he played along just the same. So off they went on their stalking adventure. The game was not to step on any twigs or branches if possible, or make any sound. As the three inched forward through the at times thick underbrush, each would gesture hand signals to the other, marking progress or direction or even good-natured obscenity. They never found any turkey that day, but every once in a while, Mike thinks back to that adventure, the fun of stalking, the closeness of companionship, and the deep-greens and browns of that Vermont woods. He never saw Jim-Bob again. Their Dad got relocated to New Jersey. And Mike was alone once more.

An elderly, white-haired, frail-looking lady supported by a younger woman on her left hand, and a cane in her right hand, emerged slowly from Figaro's. It must be dinner time, Mike concluded. The number of people on the street had rapidly diminished. Walking slowly by in front of him but to the other side of the sidewalk, was a Carlos Santana look-alike. This tall man, a throwback to the early '70's rock musician, had curly short-cropped black hair with a thin black mustache and goatee. He seemed to be looking around for someone or something.

The person escorting the elderly lady must have forgotten something inside, because Starz saw the woman turn abruptly and march back into the restaurant. The senior apparently had some money because she was

elegantly dressed in an ankle-length floral with long sleeves, in spite of the weather, and heavily adorned in sparkling necklaces, broaches, bracelets, and rings, her big night out for the week. Occasionally the sun would glint off one of the stones sending a cascade of sparkles like a fourth of July sparkler. She opened her navy blue leather purse to look for something, perhaps her handkerchief. The stones in her wedding and engagement ring momentarily caught a ray of evening sunshine which attracted her attention. For a lost moment, she faintly smiled as she remembered that evening before a winter's fire when her Fredrick finally proposed to her after stalling for years to cultivate the necessary courage. My, she reflected, that was a long time ago.

“Carlos” also must have seen the light show from the brilliant stones because he abruptly stopped, fixated on the clusters of gems clinging like a trophy around her neck. A smile flashed for an instant like a meteor across his face. A few glances over his shoulders caught site of Mike Starzman slouched on a park bench a few yards away. Carlos’s quick scan of him must have made him conclude that he was no threat, perhaps because of his careless slouch, and also because Mike’s eyes had been diverted away from him for an instant by a pigeon that had boldly swooped down to snatch a crust of hotdog roll from a previous passerby. The pigeon noisily scooped up the crust in his beak in a flurry of feather

and rapid wing movements, and then quickly but triumphantly exited the scene.

“Luck is on my side now,” thought Carlos. He buttoned the middle button of his wrinkled denim vest which had a large orange, red and yellow flame painted on the back. His pace quickened but his eyes never left that treasure. The gleam of those gems seemed to magnetize, hypnotize his growing pupils. In what seemed like a slow-motioned, choreographed series of fluid dance steps, his large, flying right hand chopped abruptly at the senior’s throat, while his booted left foot swept away her cane. In what looked like an ad for some karate school, the helpless victim crumpled backward, her newly-permed head hitting the concrete with an audible thud. Shock was still on her painted face as she lay gurgling in a heap. In three dives of his magical hands, Carlos had the necklace and earrings thrust into his jeans pockets. Then, glancing around one last time, his eyes locked onto Mike’s downward gaze like radar searching the sky.

For an instant Carlos felt a cocky sense of defiance mixed with triumph before panic seized control his actions, making him feel like some repulsive micro-organism under a microscope. The activity and the dull thud of fruit or vegetable falling from a table to the floor below abruptly attracted Mike’s attention. By the time he realized that it truly was

unnatural for an old, well-dressed lady to be lying on a sidewalk, Carlos began to disappear down the street. A cry for help from someone exiting the restaurant was enough to destroy the cinematic reverie the horrid scene had created. Maybe out of instinct, or that sense of duty, Mike launched off his bench in full pursuit. He glanced down quickly at the senior who still lay motionless on the griddle-like pavement as he flew past.

There were only a handful of people between Starz and Carlos. By now Carlos had almost a full city-block head start. The voices which began to buzz like a hornets nest behind Mike, quickly faded from his senses. He felt curiously calm, as if part of some elaborate dream sequence. Only the discomfort caused by the wild pumping of his heart and lungs due to the sudden burst of speed and activity gave him any sense of painful reality.

“Those rocks will go far in settling things with Juan Ricardo,” gloated Carlos as he darted for the first alleyway ahead he saw. Just before he turned the corner, he caught a glimpse of Starz homing directly on him like some tank-destroying missile. A moment of panic briefly turned his stomach inside out as a new shot of adrenaline responded to the crisis at hand. “So, White Guy wants to play?” Panic quickly transformed into contest. “Well, he on our turf now.” Carlos began to transform his fear into rage, even outrage at the thought that some adventurous white guy would

even entertain the thought of treading aggressively on the hallowed ground of the Los Fuegos.

Fortunately for Starz, nothing blocked his view of seeing to where the accoster had changed his direction. He suddenly became aware of the lack of oxygen in the oven-like air around him. For some reason, instinct had taken control of his reactions during the assault. “What am I doing here?” Asked Mike of himself. “I should be home by now.” Not that Kathy or Jessie would notice, since they’d be gone to scouts. Not that Jeffery would notice yet, since he would be out and about “with the boys”, just as Mike himself was at his age. “Funny how life at times can be one giant déjà vu.”

As he slowed to turn down the alleyway the assaulter had recently traversed, Starz suddenly began to wonder just what he would do if he indeed did catch up to the thief. With no self-defense skills other than sheer instinct for survival, Mike knew he wouldn’t last long against a street-worthy opponent. “After all, he is taller and probably a whole lot meaner than I am,” Mike panted. As he exited the alley, he saw a phone on the outside wall of a 7-11 convenience store. He had an idea.

Pulling out his only quarter from his work pants, he fed the phone, dialed 911, and identified himself and his location to the dispatcher. After he quickly described the nature of the call, he did not wait to hear a course of

action or advice as he slammed the receiver down and reclaimed his coin. He then stood there dumbfoundedly as he realized he had absolutely no idea in which direction the mugger went. 50-50 chance: did he go left toward the more public streets and mix with the milling passersby? Or go right, deeper into the more residential, project-oriented section of the city? If he had to put money on the answer, Mike would have chosen left. Then, remembering Kathy's perceptive observation one time a while back, if Mike swears the answer is "A", 98% of the time, if you take answer "B", you will win. Kathy and several of the people Mike worked with over the years would always win the bet or just win for winnings' sake. "That just proves," Mike would lament, "that once a loser, always a loser." That is why even Starz chose to turn right.

As Carlos glanced over his shoulder, he discovered he was no longer being pursued. "Good thing," he muttered in a heavy sweat to himself, "or White Guy would have to have his night ruined." Carlos straightened up and ran his fingers through his hair. He wiped his sweat-laden forehead with the back of his right hand and then wiped his hand on his jeans. He thrust his hands into his pockets in an effort to regain his cool composure, but also to feel the booty of his take. "I actually got away with it," he triumphed. "Not only will Juan Ricardo be pleased I paid him back so quickly," Carlos smiled, "he may be so pleased at my resourcefulness that

he might even give me some money back! He always said he rewards creativity.”

No sooner did he finish this thought that he sighted Starz’ return as he glanced one last time over his shoulder. Carlos was so shocked at Mike’s persistence that he had to stop abruptly with his mouth slightly ajar, mumbling a string of Spanish obscenities. He pretended to look into a small deli shop’s window as he stealthfully gazed in Starz’s direction. Looking back at his reflection in the smudged window’s glass, his brown eyes stared emptily back at him. How his girl Isabel loved his eyes. He felt his dark, Hispanic blood begin to boil up in him as he remembered that steamy night last August, in fact almost to the day, when he lost his Isabel.

A trio from a dominant Bridgeport gang decided to come up to Hartford for a professional basketball exhibition game at the Civic Center. After the game, they went cruising around the various Barios, looking for any particular type of trouble. Carlos and Isabel had just exploded onto the street from a party at her best friend’s apartment. She and Carlos had been quarreling as they often seemed to be doing lately. Isabel, with her long flowing straight black hair and stretch denim pants one size too small, didn’t seem to appreciate the way Carlos would drink and then smoke her friend’s weed for the sole purpose of getting “in the mood.” Whenever Carlos indulged to extremes, the animal inside of him seeped

out. His foul mouth and forward advances were meant to prove to everyone, especially the women, that he was “a force to be reckoned with,” and that anyone who was his friend should feel privileged. This became an addictive fantasy Carlos felt compelled to play out almost on a regular basis at that time. Since his waking life proved to be an embarrassment to him and especially to his mother, his fantasy flights were just the tickets he wanted to purchase in order to be the macho he believed he was in his own mind.

Since he was a member of Los Fuegos, Carlos felt for the first time in his life that he was actually part of a brotherhood who would look out for him and whose territory few dared to invade. As the youngest boy of seven brothers and sisters and no father, Carlos never owned a toy or even at times the shirt on his own back. Their rundown flat was so tiny, that once he was old enough to go to school, he came home only when he had to, for supper or for sleep. He even staked out a small section of the playground as turf he finally called his own, and dared anyone to challenge him for it. Yet on that night, while Isabel stormed down the sidewalk, five or so paces in front of a staggering, swearing Carlos, the black trio from Bridgeport spotted the sexy Isabel, in obvious flight from her incapacitated escort, and pulled their beat-up Cadillac over to the side of the road in a screech of worn rubber.

“Oye, Guapa!” shouted the largest of the three. “How about a little action?” With her chin thrust forward, she gave the three a volcanic glare from her dark brown eyes as she attempted to stride past them. But the three who had been drinking heavily while in their car had other ideas. They quickly surrounded her. After a few seconds for this to register, Carlos shouted with slurred words, “You’re on Los Fuegos turf, putas. Leave now while you still have your lives!”

“Well, I’m certainly scared!” shouted back the largest. He then with his right hand pulled a switchblade out of his pocket with pomp and flare and released the blade from its confinement. The streetlight above glinted off the blade. “What gang did you say? Los Huevos?” The other two laughed at the play on words, changing Carlos’s “flames” to “eggs.”

Looking desperately around for any members of the brotherhood, he spotted two vaguely familiar flames from across the debris-strewn street. But to his horror, the two scooted into a dimly lit opening, slamming the door resoundingly behind them.

“Hey, Man. Great turf you got!” taunted the smallest of the others. “I sure feel safe here.”

Isabel, with seized arms, had remained in surprising control of her senses, until she made the fatal mistake of defiantly kicking her spiked heel into the groin of the small one who let fly a string of curses and obscenities. After the veil of stars lifted from his eyes, in a fit of rage, the small one attempted to smash her teenaged face like a fly swatter with the back of his right hand. The only problem was his blinding anger and pain made him forget he still clutched his open switchblade. The swatting motion of his hand wasn't high enough to catch the side of her face, but it was high enough for her neck. The razor sharpness of the blade cleanly swept a faint but deadly deep line of destruction literally from ear to small-lobed ear.

In complete shock, Isabel could only gurgle her astonishment to the bulging eyes of her captors who immediately let her drop into a bloody heap to the sidewalk. In an instant, the piercing sound and pungent smell of burning rubber was all that was left of the trio from Bridgeport as they careened, fishtailing down the quiet street.

Carlos, still clouded by his own delusions of manhood, strutted over in triumph to his Isabel, who, he had thought being the weak female, had fainted. Instead to his horror he saw rivers of red sluggishly make their way toward the curb and the gutter below...

Starz was beginning to wonder if he had lost the trail. His eyes darted desperately from figure to figure like a cornered zoo animal in this remote part of the Barrio. Clusters of five or ten screechy kids congregated around every other three-family front entrance way. In spite of being dirty, the streets and sidewalks appeared to be surprisingly clear of refuse or debris. The housing also seemed to be in reasonably good condition. That's not to mean that a good paint-job or some minor carpentry wasn't needed, but this was clearly no slum. There seemed to be a sense of pride.

As Starz walked quickly along the sidewalk, many pairs of eyes casually scanned every inch of him as if to pass some critical judgement or inspection on his value as a person. Glancing up at the third floor of one of the buildings, he caught site of a dark shape staring stone-like down at him. For an instant, Mike wondered what it was they thought they saw in him. Had he become some stereotyped object, just as they had become to other outsiders? The Superman eyes of one weathered old man seated at the top stair entrance to another building seemed to penetrate him. How could this judgement be any different than expected for what can only be viewed as just another unfortunate example of always being in the wrong place at the wrong time, similar in circumstance, but from different worlds?

Suddenly, Mike thought he saw the flamed denim vest on a shape similar to the one he had pursued. He decided he would try to remain as inconspicuous as possible against the Barrio backdrop. His new plan was to stalk his turkey as long as possible, and continue calling 911 whenever he passed by a phone, until the police could overtake their position.

“Look at White Guy,” Carlos shook his head. “Does he think I am that stupid that I cannot spot him a mile away? He is on Los Fuegos turf now.” He shoved his hands into his pockets once again and felt the multi-faceted hardness of his trophies. A thin smile grew defiantly on his cratered face. “No,” he thought, “I am not running now. We see who be running soon.” And with that, he grabbed a can of soda out of the hands of some eight year old boy standing alone outside a convenience store. He took a long draft from it, then handed it back to the startled boy. Carlos laughed at the child’s helpless expression.

Starz saw the mugger take something from the hands of a child then give it back. “Who does this guy think he is?” Mike objected to himself. “He even takes things from kids!” Slowly and methodically, Mike stalked Carlos from a block away. A squeal of tires pierced Mike’s ears as two cars sped passed him, one blaring Latino music, the other Rap. Both were filled to capacity with laughing, featureless faces.

Carlos pretended to drop something to the ground. As he stooped to pick the thing up, he quickly glanced back down the street. Seeing this, Starz also stopped, turned sideways, and took out his handkerchief and moped his forehead.

“Why don’t he try to take me?” Carlos demanded to himself. “Then he must realize he has no chance one-on-one with me. He must be thinking he will wait for a weak moment and try to surprise me. Well, it won’t work!” Carlos resumed his walk, only this time with a faster, more deliberate gait. “I’m growing tired of this game. Time to make White Guy sorry he entered Los Fuegos territory!” Just up a head were twin abandoned warehouses, side by side, with a narrow alleyway between them. Carlos decided to make this the final showdown.

Mike saw him disappear between the two buildings. As he was about to cross a side street, he noticed a phone booth next to a bus stop shelter. Digging into his pocket, he fished out his only quarter. The phone booth had no glass or phone book, but surprisingly it did have a dial tone.

“911 dispatch. Please state the nature of your emergency.”

“I called before about the guy who mugged the old lady outside of Figaro’s restaurant. Well, I’ve stalked him to some warehouses near the corner of -” he looked around for a street sign, but found none.

“What is your name and location, sir?” The female voice with a calm Spanish accent asked.

“My name is Mike Starzman, and all I have is the phone number of this pay phone.” He gave the dispatcher the number and quickly hung up again. He only hoped this detour didn’t cost him his trail. He scooped out his coin and darted across the sidestreet and down to the beginning of the alleyway.

He peered around the corner, looking down the gloomy, obstructed passageway, at the many possible hiding places formed by wooded crates, stacks of boxes, and piles of black and brown plastic garbage bags. The smell was almost overpowering in the still, humid evening air. Residents from the area must have been dumping garbage here for some reason all summer long. The twin buildings stood three stories tall with no windows or openings of any kind that Starz could readily see. A line of dark thunderheads had just shut the sunlight source off like a giant wall switch, making the lonely passageway more like a hallway at a Halloween haunted house.

From where he began to tremble, it was difficult for Starz to tell if the alleyway was opened at the far side, or had a deadend. Instinct told him not to proceed any further, but rather to wait for the city police to arrive. He was several miles in the opposite direction from home now, and it would take him close to half an hour longer to get home, if he left now. “Jeffery would probably be home and looking for supper,” Mike concluded. And if Kathy came home early from scouts, she would be angry with him for not being home and keeping an eye out for Jeffery. “An eleven year old on a skateboard is destined for an accident,” Kathy always said, “and it’s our responsibility as parents be at home in case that happens.” But Mike couldn’t leave just now. He was committed to seeing this through. He had a sense of duty.

So he straightened up and started to walk cautiously down the shadowed and now darkened aisle, his ears ready to hear even the progress of ants, listening for the slightest scraping noise or sound of any kind. The gaze of his brown eyes seemed ready to pierce any wooden or even steel-cased obstruction, looking for any movement. As his workboots proceeded one uncertain step at a time as if walking through a forgotten mine field, the blood in his veins began to surge ever quicker throughout his body making him perspire even more. Behind each crate he walked past, he fully expected to see his mugger lunge out at him.

After what seemed like an hour or more as he picked his way through the garbage that now surrounded him, the prolonged contact with breathing the odors was beginning to make his eyes burn and his stomach sick. He stopped for a moment and rubbed his stomach.

“Looking for me, White Guy?” Like a ghost, his mugger materialized from somewhere behind him. After he leaped what felt like two feet into the air, Starz pivoted to face his mugger who held something dark in his right hand. Adrenaline took the place of the blood surging through his expanding veins. Suddenly frozen with fear, Mike spoke not a word.

“Look at him,” gloated Carlos, “he’s terrified. I bet I can make him not stop running until he passed the city limits. It’s my duty to protect this turf.”

For what seemed like an eternity, neither foe moved a muscle, their eyes molten intently together in a stalemate of nerves. The sound of several cars screeching to a stop somewhere outside shattered the silence like glass. Carlos’s head jerked slightly to his left, in reflexive response to searching out the source and identity of the intruding disturbance. That was the break Starz was looking for. He knew exactly what the sounds

meant, and he decided to try to rush past his mugger and send that toothpick body crashing against the side of one of the crates.

Unfortunately for Mike, Carlos had already turned his attention back to the problem at hand, only to find Starz trying to lunge past him. In a flick of his right wrist, a stiletto's blade popped out of his hand. As Mike collided with Carlos in an attempt to drive him careening into the edge of the crate, Carlos instinctively put up both of his hands to repel the onslaught. As Mike slammed into Carlos, he felt a flood of pain as something pierced the middle of his left side.

In a moment of surprise, Carlos felt the fist of his right hand almost enter the side of his victim. He knew exactly what had happened. Then, like a tight coil of wire which just suddenly unraveled, the mugger's eyes became obscured by a blinding explosion of rage. "It's my duty to protect this turf!" A voice screamed inside of him. He gave his clenched right fist one more upward, twisting thrust. Pulling the dark stained blade out of Mike's pierced shirt, Carlos collapsed the blade, and thrust it back into the pocket of his vest. Suddenly, as if some fog had lifted, the sight of Mike's body crumpling to the ground like a pile of soiled rags, rang the alarms of jailbreak inside of Carlos's head. He knew he had to get away quickly before this gruesome sight was discovered by interlopers. He quickly glanced over his shoulder to be sure no one had witnessed his crime

before his legs had erupted into action, rocketing him down the crevice way and out the other end.

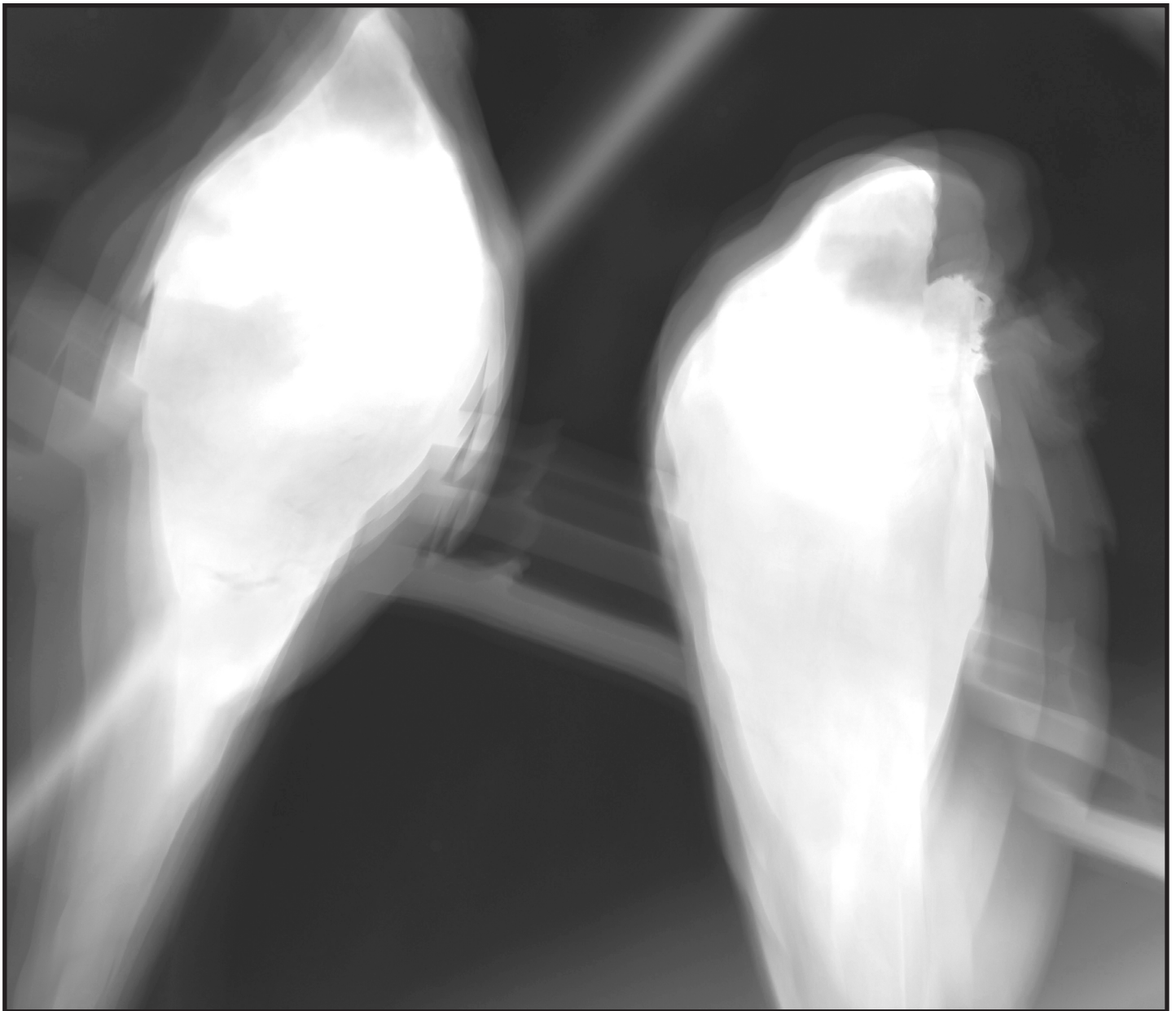
Starz no longer felt any pain as he lay on his gaping side, his head pointed upward toward the darkening sky. What are you looking at? He demanded as he spotted two pigeons on a ledge peering down at him from the top of one of the buildings. He felt an overwhelming sense of fatigue as he struggled to remain awake. "Those Hartford cops are never on time." After all his effort to keep track of this guy, he had to be ready to give those cops a piece of his mind.

Suddenly, he felt that this might be more serious than he originally thought. "Kathy would be angry I did something so stupid." Starz smiled sadly. "Jeffery would already have started eating junk." He just couldn't stay awake anymore.

The last thing his eyes saw, however, was the flight of the two white pigeons into the angry, evening sky.

A faint, distant beeping sound wafted through the stale, ICU air. "Whose girl am I? Daddy's girl," whispered Jessie, gently squeezing Mike's pale hand.

Had this all been just a dream? It was at that instant the realization set in that he had indeed become his father. In fact, he always had been his father. Looking back over the years with his own kids, he lacked the personality to engage in activities or conversations with them. He didn't have the personal toolset to accomplish this. And he hid behind this self-deception. He was now able to forgive his father. But if he looked in the mirror now, however, he would not see his father or himself, just an empty mirror.



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