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Back Cover “Railroad Trestle Double Exposure”

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“It means venerable,” he told whoever asked him. “It means revered. My mother gave me the name. My father gave me this place. He had always had this small clothing and coffee and donuts kiosk on the sidewalk on Sixth avenue between 53rd and 54th. He had had it for years. He sold sweat pants and sweat shirts. His father before him had had it. His father before him too for all he knew. He had always been situated directly across from the Hilton Hotel. They had never bothered him. He didn’t know why.”

“Got a friend in there,” he would tell whenever he had a chance pointing with his chin at the old hotel. “Name’s Mike. We’re like this.” Forefinger and middle finger entwined in symbolism.

“Found him walkin’ about half-naked one morning right here on sixth avenue and 54th. Five in the a.m. it was. Cops not out yet or he’d have been in the hoosegow right then and there. Dirty and disheveled he was. Mud and dirt all over him. Stumbling like he didn’t know where he was going. Everybody staring and pointing and laughing at him. ‘Look at that bum,’ they said.”

“Had a crowd of regulars around me that day. Guys who were having their cups of coffee and wanted to shoot the crap for a couple of minutes before starting the grind. All types. Suit guy types. Lumber jacket guy types. All standing around my kiosk killing a few before the day began. Never bought anything but coffee from me. Just liked to hang around for a few seconds. Monday through Friday regulars ... all friends for a minute or two on those mornings.”

“I called that half-naked guy over that day. ‘Hey. Half-naked guy. C’mere,’ I said. Pick a sweat shirt and sweat pants out for yourself. No charge. On the house.’ Hey. I couldn’t let him walk around half-naked, could I? And besides, underneath all that mud he seemed like a straight up guy.”

Mike woke up groggy that morning. His head was killing him. He tried to gather his thoughts. He remembered having had a fight with Louise. She’d been pissed with him clear

through. He didn’t even know why. Maybe because she was she and he was he and they had trouble meshing. It was a nothing. He’d been joking with a girl at the bar. The girl on one side. Louise on the other.

“Why’d the chicken cross the road,” he had asked the girl.

“No idea,” said the girl. “Why?”

Mike had shrugged. “Beats me.”

And the girl had giggled. She was cute. And Louise was furious.

“You were flirting with her.”

Mike had denied it. “Nah. I was just funnin’ with her.”

But Louise had been right of course. Louise was often right though he hated to admit it. And she had dead left him right then and there. Showed him the finger as she walked away she did.

“Go take a flying you know what,” she had said. She never actually cursed. Just hinted at it. She was too refined. And so he had excused himself to the girl who was looking at him with sad eyes.

“Didn’t know you had someone with you,” she said. He shrugged. “Sometimes I’m an idiot,” he said.

She nodded in agreement as he pushed himself away from the bar.

He must have called Louise a hundred times that night. Every time she picked up the phone and heard his voice she hung up.

“Hello?”

“Hello Louise?”

Click. He had to get through to her. He didn’t know how. They were both semi-residents at the Hilton. Regulars, so to speak. Separate but adjoining suites. Both for the same reason. Business. They were both sales-folks. He sold clothing material by the yard. Here you go. Finest silk straight from China. Feel the poof. Whatever that meant. He had made the word up. His customers always understood. She

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Sebastian & Mike

sold jewelry. Two and a half carat solitaires. VVS2. F color. Triple excellent. And when their days were done ... before they went back the next morning to their workaday lives ... they would meet at the bar ... have a light one ... dinner ... maybe a movie ... a little moofkie poofkie ... the news of the day.

"And today ladies and gentlemen ... for this one time only price of the year ... we sell you the cure-all of the century ... the elixir to cure all ills. Headaches? Take a teaspoon and it will be gone in five minutes. Toothache? Ten minutes. Hemorrhoids? Rub it right in at night and they'll be gone in the morning. Buy one now ... get another one for only a small fee."

How much was the small fee? They never told you how much the small fee was. Postage for one. No shipping for the other. Just that small fee.

"What do we call it folks? We call it Favorite Elixir And Ragout. FEAR for short. Yessiree ladies and gentlemen. America's favorite selling product. FEAR. Step right up."

And they would giggle together in bed at the idiocy of the T.V. vendors who assumed most people were stupid. They were the stupid one. Anyone who assumed others were stupid, were stupid themselves.

But there was no uniting tonight. Louise wanted nothing to do with him. The one time she had answered she had screamed at him.

"You flirt with another woman while I'm sitting next to you?" Click.

"Aw Louise."

But she never heard him. He had to figure out a way to get back to her. Maybe if he took a walk in the park. It was only five blocks up. It was dark. He didn't give it a thought. He had needed air. Space to think. Clear his mind. He passed some raucous laughing in the street. People ... having fun. Some ... huddling in conversation. He ... alone. Lucky Mike.

He entered the park ... the laughter behind him fading as he moved further and further away from the street. And then they confronted him. Ten of them. Surrounding him. Okay wise guy. Hand it over. He shook his head. He could hear Louise screaming in his ear. Give it to them. Don't be stupid. But he had been demeaned enough tonight. He wasn't going to be demeaned again.

"Why did the chicken cross the road," he mumbled?

He didn't know what he was saying. He was losing his mind.

"Because he wanted to get killed because he wouldn't hand over his money," one of them said.

And then somebody behind him got him in a chokehold. And another reached into his pocket and grabbed his wallet. Hey. Nice suit he's got there. Let's take it. And then one of them hit him on the head and the next thing he knew it was just before daylight started peeking out over the horizon and he was now half-naked in Central Park all muddied up and disheveled. And he stumbled out and made his way toward the Hilton when he saw that small crowd around the kiosk. Otherwise the streets were still empty. Everybody was talking and drinking coffee. He vaguely knew the place. He had often seen it before. He needed coffee. He had forgotten he was half-naked. Why were they staring at him like that as he approached? Till suddenly ... as he got closer ... he realized his state of being. He didn't know where to look first.

"Hey. Hey you. Half-naked guy." It was the owner. "C'mere. Pick yourself a sweat shirt and pants. No charge." And so Mike reached over and pulled a gray sweatshirt and pants off the shelf. He dressed in front of the world.

"What do I owe you," he said.

"Nah." Sebastian shrugged. "It's a gift from me to you."

"What's your name," said Mike.

"Sebastian," said Sebastian.

"How do you do," said Mike. "I'm Mike."

"How do you do," said Sebastian and then watched

with the others in amazement as Mike traipsed off into the Hilton.

"Well I'll be," said Sebastian. The others nodded in agreement.

Less than fifteen minutes later Mike was back. He still looked like a mess. He walked straight over to Sebastian and handed over an envelope.

"Thanks again," he said. And then ... just before he turned to leave ... he stuck out his hand and said, "Friends?"

"Sure thing," said Sebastian grabbing Mike's hand. "Absolutely."

When Mike was gone Sebastian opened the envelope.

"Will ya look at that. Five hundred smackeros." Everybody around the kiosk slapped Sebastian on the back. "You deserve it Seb. I wouldna done it. Me neither. Me neither too. Not me. Nor me."

It was a story Sebastian would tell over and over again for the rest of his life.

"He was half-naked, I tell you. Struttin' down sixth lookin' like hell had caked him with mud. I clothed him I did. He gave me five hundred bucks. Just like that. And he walked away. I see him now and then. We wave and say hello."

And they all listened ... but by now the originals were all gone and very few believed him.

After Mike had taken the sweats from Sebastian he went straight into the hotel. He would go to see Louise. He had to explain. He had to get some money for that guy at the kiosk. They all stared at him as he walked through the lobby. But they said nothing. They knew him. He was a regular. And they had all seen stranger things than him walking muddied through the lobby in brand new sweats. He had knocked on Louise's door. She had opened it ... ready to give him a final piece of her mind before slamming it once and for all in his face. She had known it was him. Who else would be knocking on her door this early in the morning? She couldn't believe what she saw.

"I'm so sorry, Louise."

"No no," she said. "Come on in. Oh my god. What happened?"

"I need five hundred dollars Louise. I need it right away."

This was all more than she could understand. She went to her purse and then silently handed him the money.

"Be back in five," he said as he left.

He watched Sebastian watching him as he approached. He saw the astonishment in Sebastian's eyes as he handed over the money. And when they shook hands and vowed friendship ... Mike felt better than he had in a long time. He could feel Sebastian's eyes follow him as he went back into the hotel.

"And that's the whole story," he told Louise. "I went into the park to escape my misery at having been so dumb. I succeeded rather well, wouldn't you say?" And Louise laughed lightly after having spent forty-five minutes in utter silence listening to Mike's story after he got back.

"You ever going to talk to other women at the bar again," she said?

"Never in a million years," Louise.

And they became friends again. And remained that way even after they got married one year later. But they still kept their jobs. And they still returned to the Hilton regularly in pursuit of their careers. Only now they sometimes brought their children with them. A boy and a girl.

"I'm tellin' ya," Sebastian would say. "It's the god's honest truth. His name is Mike. And it's been years now. And he still comes back every once in a while and when he does he still come over to say hello."

And they would all smile patiently at him. Good old Sebastian. Losing it a little now, wasn't he?

"But I'm tellin' ya," Sebastian would say. "But I'm tellin' ya," he said. And then he stopped. And

watched the hotel. And they all turned to watch with him. And a good looking, elegantly dressed couple came out with their children and walked straight over to him.

Mike grabbed his hand. "How you doing, Sebastian? You know Louise and my kids."

"Sure do, Mike. Great to see you and Louise again."

And Sebastian shook Louise's hand and then shook each of the children's hand.

"See you soon again, Mike?"

"You bet," said Mike.

And the others looked on.

Benjamin Mark

