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CHAIN MALE

*Congratulations, you have reached
the next step of your education.*

—STANISLAVSKY, TO HIS ACTING STUDENTS

Boon left the automotive shop early, before Walt and his boys arrived. He went to Jive Joe's for coffee. He had the drill down. He walked confidently in, ordered coffee and sat down. As he drank it slowly, he watched for someone who looked like a feasible source of assistance to pay for it. This morning, carrying his sign, he was dismayed at his prospects. There was no one in Jive Joe's. He ordered coffee and used more cream and sugar than usual. He was out of food stamp money, and his food stash in the car was gone. He was hungry. He waited.

Two young women came in, dressed for office work, ordered

lattes and left, carrying their nice purses and their traveler cups of brew. A man came in who looked surly and quite unpleasant, also ordering a coffee to go. An elderly man came in and sat down with a cup of tea and talked to himself. He was severely palsied, shabbily dressed and drooling. Boon put his hand on the man's shoulder and nodded to him, smiling, then took his seat again at a back table.

Boon knew the minute he saw him. Here's my guy. He was tall and thin, with long, very dark, brown hair, wearing black pants, a black t-shirt and a chain mail vest, a long vest. Boon instantly knew the younger man had made it himself. Boon knew his art history. He could tell a Morisot from a Renoir, and his knowledge was so profound that he was assured that if someone walked in with prints of a Berthe or an Auguste, he would be able to tell them which was which, and, very specifically, why. He could also expostulate quite thoroughly about the personal character of the artist who had done a certain piece. He knew the younger man at the counter, maybe he was 40, was an artist and that he had made the vest himself. This man would pay for his coffee. Boon reached down for the heart sign propped against his leg and put it on the table top in front of him.

The man sat across the aisle from Boon and nodded, acknowledging his presence.

Boon responded, "Good, fair day!"

"It is! I see you have a creation."

"Yes. My most recent project. You're the first to see it. I usually do sculptures; this is my one and only sign. Sixteen sculptures and one sign, cast into the richness that is Portland. The name's Boon."

"Donovan. Well now, let's have a look." He got up, coffee in hand and walked across to peruse the heart sign. "Very strong. The gold is powerful, especially in conjunction with the whimsy and sentimental aspects. The balance here is refreshing. There's a compositional integrity which compels the viewer to relate quite specifically to the message. It's unusual to link the heart motif

and the mind. The partial quote from a Shakespearean sonnet is inspired, since most viewers will complete the line and feel there are no impediments to buying. It works. I am assuming this is a sign for a business. Is the antique store real or imagined?”

“It’s real. I’m on my way to install it as soon as I finish this cup of coffee and get it paid for. I’ve been up all night working on this, start to finish, and I feel some urgency about getting it hung. Star-studded banner, it is.”

“Let me pay for your coffee, Boon. I like to support the arts.”

“Why, thank you, the community of like-minded souls thanks you, Donovan. And you do belong to that community, don’t you? The vest. It’s noteworthy: tangled vines of shining tines, woven as if Mother Nature herself embroidered it.”

“Thank you. I do mail when I’m in transition.”

“And are you in transition now?”

“Yes. I am looking at the day and seeing a wonderfully open book.”

“Well, I have just the thing. Why don’t you come with me and help me hang this sign? I also have adjunct plans to paint the trim on the windows of the shop red; I have half a pint of paint with me. I’m also going to wash the windows, since they are the eyes to the soul of the newly named shop. It’s maybe two hours of work, and I would enjoy having help with the project.”

“So this is your shop! Of course! Well, I’m delighted to help.”

“No, no. This isn’t my shop; I just have a studio where I’ve done sixteen or so sculptures. No shop for me. It belongs to a superlative individual whom I admire. She’s quite elderly and suffers from arthritis. These sorts of tasks are difficult for her and I am volunteering my services. I have plans to also assist her inside and clean and rearrange, if she’s amenable. She thinks I’m crazy, but she puts up with me. I think she’ll be able to see the wisdom of my plan.”

“Maybe having me along will help. I’ve never been to this shop, but I’m interested in antiques. This is intriguing, but I have to eat something first. Have you eaten?”

“No, actually, I haven’t.”

“Then let’s go have breakfast, my buy, and get onto this project.”

“That’s a plan, Donovan. I’m curious. What do you think you would have done with this fair day had you not met me?”

“I have no idea. I never have two days alike and I never plan anything.”

“So you don’t have a job, or responsibilities which preclude doing whatever comes along? Breezin’ free?”

“No, I don’t. I have designed my life to flow. I admit no impediments.”

“Well, water, my friend, flows freely under our bridge of friendship. Where should we eat? Ardelle’s Kitchen is half a block down; I might recommend that.”

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They ordered at Ardelle’s and ate, Boon trying to slow down and not look like the ravaged empty gut he really was, and asked, “This is the well-defined breakfast; I thank you, Donovan. Tell me something; you say you like antiques. You know all the shops here; which is the favored house of old?”

Donovan paused, eating the orange slice garnish, rind and all, “I just arrived yesterday.” This wasn’t true, since Donovan had been working away at projects in Portland for over three months. What he meant was that on this trip he had arrived yesterday.

“From which multiverse?” Boon laughed.

“From San Francisco.”

“Ah, San Fran. The end all and the being of all historic. You probably know your antiques, then.”

Donovan looked down. He didn’t reply.

Boon took note of the recalcitrance and moved on. “Well, let’s go hang a sign and brighten some eyes and lift a spirit or three.”

“Where is the shop located, Boon?”

“The Langlois Historical District. It’s down by..”

“I know where it is. There are five shops there, none of them named Good Fortune Antiques.”

“That’s right! You have found the jewel in our city’s crown on your first day! That’s impressive! And there isn’t a shop named Good Fortune Antiques until we hang this sign. It’s a new name for an old, tired lady. The shop and the owner have seen better days and it’s my intention to significantly rebirth the entire scene.”

“Which shop are you renaming?”

“Helen’s Antiques. A name that isn’t a name for excitement, I’m sure you agree.”

Donovan was standing. He’d abruptly gotten up and put money on the table for the check. “Let’s go.”

Boon felt the wave, the scent, the undulation of spirit, the nod from the unknown sailor at the end of the pier. There wasn’t a sailor and there wasn’t a pier, but there was a nod, nonetheless. Boon saw an eagle in the sky, screaming. It wasn’t an eagle, of course, it was only a silent pigeon, but Boon always saw eagles. Everything that flew was an eagle to Boon. He picked up the sign and watched the waitress clearing the table. She stuffed all of the bills in her pocket, as if the whole thing was her tip. Boon moved his feet toward the door, while his body resisted. Something felt funny.

6

FULL DAY'S WORK WITH PAY

He loved this and he loved nothing but this, to the point of forgetting everything that was not this, of remaining for hours...and days, before the same spectacle determined to penetrate within, to understand it, to express it— an obstinate creature, a seeker, diligent in the manner of the shepherds who discovered in the solitude of the fields the beginning of art, of astronomy, of poetry.

—THE CRITIC GEFFROY ASSESSING PAUL CEZANNE

Jerald Redding had a difficult time deciding what to do with his thumb. He had stricken it with a hammer and the nail was sore and turning black. It bothered him. This was a man who found a loose thread dismaying to the extreme. This was a man who couldn't bear to see a mote, even a mote of dust, on any-

thing whatever. This was a man who washed a glass out of his cupboard, in the dishwasher, before using it. This was a man who brushed his teeth for sixty seconds three times a day. He used a stop watch to make certain the timing was precise. The thumb bothered him and he considered going to the emergency room and having the nail removed. He considered it and he rejected it. It seemed morally wrong to ask professionals who dealt with emergencies to perform such a task. He reassured himself: this is not an emergency and the coagulated blood under the nail will disperse. The verb phrase 'will disperse,' implicating the future, eventually troubled Jerald so much that he didn't use it, even in his private thoughts.

Jerald left his condominium and drove to work in his spotless vehicle, a perversely black, one decade-old Lincoln Continental. He had purchased it new and the odometer read 64,000 miles. It was professionally serviced monthly and the interior was detailed, also professionally, weekly. He drove the 2.39 miles to his workplace, parked, and arrived at exactly the appointed hour: 8AM. He worked until noon, lunched at his desk, and resumed work at 1:00 sharp, finishing his work day at 5:00. He then returned to his condominium and resumed this same work, now without pay, until 10:00 PM, when he went to bed.

Jerald was a gemologist. He rented office space in the Langlois Historical District, a delightful walk-up with a view. He had retired to this spot, following years of work in New York City and in Brussels. He was retained by a firm called Grand Select Gemology, GSG, Inc., an international gemstone resource center. He now called himself an emeritus research gemologist, and Jerald was always quite specific with people who asked what he did: he was a gemologist, to which the reply was often, so you're a jeweler, to which Jerald replied that he certainly was not a jeweler. He was a scientist. This was inarguably true. Jerald did not own or wear jewelry. He had little interest in jewelry, only in an occasional gem which was set in a mounting, which he carefully removed.

His interest was in gems, a lifelong interest, his only interest, which had begun at the age of five with a treasure box of stones his aunt gave him. These stones were agates, or, more precisely, chalcedony quartz, displaying concentric layers in a stunning array of colors and textures. The wooden box containing these original stones, which was actually a recipe box, still sat on Jerald's desk. It had been in precisely the same position, on the left front corner of the huge desk—everywhere Jerald had been he always had a huge desk—for fifty years.

There was one important fact surrounding Jerald and his gemstone fascination, which, of course, was an obsession. This fact was unknown, even to Jerald. No one in the entire world knew more about gemstones than Jerald Redding. No one single person could recite the history of each stone, nor identify stones and assess their quality as competently as Jerald Redding. Although the depth of his expertise was not recognized, his services were much in demand. He was regarded as an expert. In truth, he was *the* expert. Jerald had never once in his life erred in the arena of gemology. It was quite easy to imagine how hitting his thumb with a hammer while hanging a painting would disturb such a man. He worshipped perfection. Beauty was his passion.

Arnold! What are you doing here? You're back!

I am. I brought you a mocha. How's it going. How's Boon doing?

Well, Boon did the sign and has finally had a decent meal and has met someone to help hang the sign.

Is it a chick?

No, no. Just another guy. Donovan.

Sounds like you're poking along. That's not much to have happened since I left. You have to pick up the pace, Babette. Christ, I've made a million meals, had kid conversations, rehearsed, performed, slid under the sheets with a stellar woman

and scheduled two new gigs since we last spoke. You have to get Boon moving.

Well, point taken. I was just beginning chapter seven when you walked in. Why don't you give me a title and a quote, since you're such a fast mover?

Well, I can't do that, I don't know what's happening next. Besides, I can't hang around. I'm on my way to the library.

Neither do I, remember? I have no idea what's happening next, Arnold. What difference does it make? Give me a title and a quote and then you can go.

7

DRUM ROLL

*The right woman moves a man through life
as music moves the soul.*

—ARNOLD WILLIAM NEWTON, JAZZ PIANIST

“What are you boys doing? You get down from there, Boon.” Helen stood on the sidewalk looking up at Boon who had the old sign, which hung from an overhanging roof, off its hinges. It swung forlornly from a rusty chain.

“Mornin’ fair Helen of the rocket ship! You must get on board; we’re soon to blast off into the atmosphere. This is Donovan. Donovan, here you go.” He handed Donovan the old sign. “Now hand up the priceless work of art by the grand master of new impressions.”

“Boon, so help me! Trenton put up that sign and it means too much to me. I want you to put it back up right this minute.”

Donovan engaged the strident tone and the woman as well. “Helen, if I may call you Helen, it might be advisable to allow Boon to hang the sign he made for you, even if for only a few moments. He’s crazy, a little crazy about this sign, and I’m afraid of the scene which might commence if we don’t allow him this small courtesy. Let’s indulge him, you and I, and then I will personally assist with reinstalling your previous sign if that’s what you prefer.” He smiled so endearingly and put his hand out so kindly to steady her nerves, that she stopped yapping and just stood there.

The Good Fortune Antiques sign was installed. The golden arrow pointed at the door. Boon came down from the ladder and left to return it, to the store three doors down, from which he had borrowed it.

Donovan took Helen by the hand, “Miss Helen, let’s step back a few feet, down the sidewalk, and have a longer look at this sign. We might pretend that we are tourists, seeing it for the first time. What would we think? Would we want to go inside and see what might be available for sale?”

Helen stood there and stared, then began sniffing. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I do believe Trenton would have admired it, just as you do. I admire it, as well.”

“Did you know Trenton? You seem too young...”

“I did not, and that is unfortunate, truly.”

“It really is! He was so wonderful. He said I was his rudder, that I guided him through his life. He said he had a difficult time of it before he met me, and he always said I had saved him. He was very romantic, just like the sign. I do think you’re right. He would have loved this sign. I want to keep it. Where’s Boon?”

Boon was gone. The pint of red paint and a brush sat on the sidewalk. A spray bottle of Windex and a half roll of paper towels sat on the sidewalk. Donovan escorted Helen back into the shop and exited, looking up and down the sidewalk for Boon.

He waited, thinking the talkative Boon might be engaged in a conversation in the shop down the street. He waited ten minutes, after which he decided to begin washing the windows. He began inside, explaining to Helen that it was Boon's idea to clean the eyes of the shop's soul. He cleaned inside and then did the outside windows, amazed at the depth of the grime. He waited again, but now realized that Boon was gone. He picked up the brush and the paint and painted the window trim on the three front windows. When he finished, he went in to see Helen, hauling the old sign inside.

She was sitting behind the cash register, red-eyed from crying, but stood and attempted composure when she heard him enter. "Donovan, it looks nice. You did such a nice job. I wish I could pay you something for your hard work. And Boon, too. I wish I could pay him for the sign, but I can't."

"Oh, no! That would detract from the whole purpose, Helen! Even if you could pay us, we wouldn't be able to take it. Good fortune will accrue in other ways for us. You musn't worry. This is something that requires that money not be exchanged. This is a very firm rule, which we dare not break."

"I think you are giving me a line, young man, but it's nice of you."

"I am most certainly not giving you a line, Helen. Do I look like that kind of man?"

"Well, no..."

"Then it's settled. You're happy. That's the payment. Now, I would like to have a look around. I'd like to see what Good Fortune Antiques has to offer."

Helen's head dropped as she frowned, "I'm not proud of how this place looks. Trenton kept it up, and I tried for a few years, but I just haven't had much energy. I've let things go. I know I have."

"Well, that's not the end of the world, Helen. With just a few days of effort, this entire place could be transformed."

“It would take money. I’d have to hire someone and there are repairs. You see the floor. The plumbing in the bathroom doesn’t work in the sink and the whole place is run down. There’s a roof leak in the back room. It’s just too far gone.”

“No, it isn’t. Tell you what. I can volunteer some time and energy. I like this place. I can help. Let me look around. What you could do for me is make a list of repairs that need to be done. I’m handy at things like that, but I don’t know the place like you do. Just prepare a list and I can work away at it. No time like the present. I’m going to wander around a bit, if that’s OK with you.”

“I guess. Go ahead.”

Donovan was out of sight but not out of Helen’s mind, certainly, for forty-three minutes. She kept looking at the clock. She had trouble thinking about anything except time and what Donovan might be thinking as he wandered through the dingy aisles.

“This place is tremendous, Helen! I’m excited! I must leave for now, but I’ll be back in the morning and get started. Please try to have a list ready for me, if you would. That’s essential. I’ll see you then. I’m so pleased to have met you.”

Helen knew she’d never see him again. Of course she wouldn’t. No one in his right mind would take on the renovation of her shop, and Donovan, unlike Boon, seemed perfectly sane to her. No, she wouldn’t see him again, but she was still pleased. She had a new sign and the windows were clean and she would have to go look at the red-trimmed windows. Just this much was a vast improvement.

Donovan left the shop and started up the street when he noticed the planter box in front of Good Fortune Antiques. He had noticed it while Boon was fussing with the sign because it was ugly. It was a large brick planter filled with dirt and the entire top edge of the thing was destroyed and the bricks were scattered around in the dirt. Donovan had thought it was a shame someone didn’t repair it and plant flowers in it. He stood

staring at the planter box now and was thoroughly confused. Someone had smoothed the dirt and arranged the bricks in three interlocking hearts. As Donovan looked at it, he realized that the person who did this had not had to spend much time doing it, but the effect was a tremendous improvement and very pleasing. He knew who had done it. No one else would be able to imagine this improvement and make the change this quickly. It had to be Boon. Where was he?