

ONE

Gene was troubled by the leakage of other people's lives into his. On Monday evening, when he got home from work, there was a message on his answering machine for Franco. The caller said he was going to have Franco's legs broken if he didn't get the money. The answering machine was an older model, too dumb to know when it had received a wrong-number call, but it did record the caller's number. Given the man's tone of voice, however, Gene wasn't about to call him to tell him about his mistake. Was he now obligated to get in touch with Franco and warn him about his legs?

It wasn't impossible. He could call all the numbers resembling his and ask for Franco. If he stayed with his own exchange and limited himself to different configurations of his telephone number's four-digit suffix, that made four factorial possibilities, or twenty-four—twenty-three numbers to call, if he eliminated his own. Of course, there were other possibilities. Franco's number could be different from his by one digit. But that was only another thirty-six possibilities. If it was the same as his except for having two transposed digits, that only added five possibilities. All in all, he could probably find Franco in something fewer than sixty-four phone calls.

Was it worth his time? He was certain Franco would say yes, but Gene stewed over it for two days. Perhaps Franco's time would run out before Gene could finish making his decision and then the matter would be taken from his hands. Gene didn't mind having decisions made for him that way. In fact, he usually preferred it to making them himself, regardless of the outcome.

On Wednesday, there was a message from another caller. This one was a man answering a classified ad for a bodyguard. The man had left his number and asked to be called back. Gene thought he should call the man back and tell him about his mistake. But he didn't feel good about the prospect of having a conversation with an out-of-work bodyguard, and he put it off. He had a vague feeling of guilt, as if he were failing Franco, who probably needed a bodyguard.

Gene had no idea how to patch up the leak that had sprung between Franco and him.

He was still thinking about it at work on Thursday, when Cynthia's people came around to the department and took away Lorraine. He had been working in his little office with the door open to the department's reception area. His office had no windows, so he had to keep the door open or it got stuffy. He was only an Assistant Manager. He couldn't get a window without a promotion. And he couldn't get a promotion without risking a great deal more interpersonal leakage than he thought he could tolerate. He

had been an Assistant Manager for nearly ten years, and a little bit of stuffiness and a little less privacy were not too much to put up with for the comfort and security of relative anonymity. But some days were worse than others.

He was trying to make sense out of a very large novel, and he was having little success. For one thing, he couldn't keep it out of his mind that the book was over a thousand pages long and he was only on page seven, which was where he had been for the past thirty minutes. As near as he could tell, it was a story about a man having some difficulty getting to sleep, but the author didn't seem to be in any hurry to tell it. Sentences of heroic proportions described him tossing and turning in bed. Gene found he could only understand these great, panoramic sentences by scanning the paragraph first for terminal punctuation. Once he knew where the sentence was to end, he would seek the subject and the predicate to determine its general drift. Then he would read it all quickly as a unit and step back from it mentally until it resolved itself into a thought.

It was an effective, if tedious, strategy for taking meaning from the book, but it was undermined by the sound of a clerk thumping papers with a rubber stamp out in the reception area. The stamping was just rhythmic enough—five beats to the measure—to keep coherent thought at bay. Thump thump. Thump-thump-thump. It made a base line for the chirping telephones and conversa-

tions that wavered in and out of hearing right outside his door.

“Human Resources. Please hold.”

Thump.

“No, that refers to. . .” Thump. “. . .five business days.” Thump-thump-thump.

“Human Resources. Please hold.”

There was another thousand-page volume to go after this one. Gene wondered what his wife had gotten out of this book and whether reading it all the way through was going to give him any insight into why she left. He hoped the narrator got out of bed before Volume Two. A familiar chime rang and the elevator doors rumbled open. Gene looked up to see a secretary from another department get off the employee elevator and walk toward the desks on the other side. The rubber stamp thumped again. Gene recognized the secretary as being from Finance, and he knew something was going on: support staff didn't usually come over from Finance to Human Resources.

“Human Resources. Thank you for holding.” Thump.

The visitor passed out of earshot as well as view. Gene thought maybe the novel's narrator was awake now. He was reliving some moments from his childhood. But it might have been a dream rather than a memory, because Gene couldn't remember his getting out of bed. The whole book, on the other hand, seemed to be about memories, so that's what it probably was.

Gene's eyes wandered up from the page, and he saw the visiting secretary get back on the elevator. The rubber stamping had stopped, and it was as if a blanket had been thrown over the department. Suddenly, there was no conversation. Gene had an eerie feeling when he realized the phones had stopped ringing, too. There were no sounds other than the building ventilation.

Then it sounded like everybody was speaking at once. No phones, no stamping, no equipment noises, just human voices, babbling. It sounded like a dozen simultaneous conversations with nothing in common other than their animation and excitement. Gene tried not to listen (they were nonexempts, after all), but as he was trying to figure out whether the narrator was awake or asleep, he picked out the phrase "Lambo's brakes failed."

He remembered that, two years before, Roger, the company's celebrated CEO, had bought himself a Lamborghini to drive his starlets around in. The car (known among the nonexempts as "Rambo the Lambo") figured prominently in a spread done on Roger by a popular magazine, the notoriety of which was resented by an executive staff who would have preferred to cultivate the company's low profile.

Partly because he had never seen Roger in person, Gene had bought the magazine and studied the article closely. There was a two-page photo spread. Roger, a broad smile on his Asian face, his arms crossed in front of him,

leaned against the car, which crouched like a predator behind him. He had not looked like a man whose brakes would fail. Gene felt a vague kinship with him and his frank, open expression.

At the thought of Roger being crushed in his Lamborghini out on the highway, Gene felt like he'd lost something, which was a little silly, since he had never known Roger personally. Still, resentment bubbled in him at the injustice of a random traffic fatality. That was when he realized with the clarity of inspiration that it was less likely Roger's brakes had failed than that he had walked in front of a truck, a truck named Cynthia. Even Gene, who so scrupulously maintained a cocoon of ignorance and indifference, knew the Executive Vice President was building a personal power base that would never appear on the company organization chart.

But the support staff chattering outside his door wouldn't suspect that. To them, "lifetime employment" meant something a lot longer than it meant to anybody on the executive staff. And nobody in management wanted to disabuse them of the idea.

As nonexempts, the support staff couldn't know the twisted mass of metal and rubber out on the highway signaled a change in course for the company. They were, in fact, unlikely to notice it even after the company had changed course. Nonexempts, as a rule, are not given to abstract thought and therefore have no sense of the

strategic. Where Gene, as a manager (albeit a junior one), understood departmental goals and tried not be involved with them, nonexempts were more or less unaware of them.

The elevator chimed, and all conversation out in the reception area stopped again when three men and a woman got off. They were Cynthia's outplacement specialists, bland-looking people, dressed impeccably in the corporate uniform of white shirt, dark gray suit, muted red necktie. They never said a word as they deployed themselves in two pairs across the reception area. One pair, the woman and a man wearing glasses with wire frames and aviator lenses, walked toward the short internal corridor leading to Lorraine's office. Gene was surprised at his desire to get up and go to his doorway to watch them, but he noticed the two remaining men were walking in his direction. He closed his book and slipped it into the lower left-hand drawer of his desk, then lifted a sheet of paper from his desk to look at until they passed.

But they didn't pass. Staring at his paper, Gene felt them arrive at his doorway. His heartbeat picked up, and he noticed the paper was damp where he was holding it.

He laid the paper down gingerly and looked up slowly. The two men had stepped just inside and stationed themselves on either side of the doorway. They were not looking at him. There was barely enough room in there with Gene and the filing cabinets and the desk. There had never been so many people in his office, and the three of

them were nearly as close as they would have been riding the subway together.

“Yes?” said Gene. But his voice cracked, and it came out more like “Yikes?”

Neither of the men answered. Through the doorway Gene caught a glimpse of the two other outplacement specialists and Lorraine. They led her to the elevators, and one of them, the man, carried her coat and briefcase. The reception area was silent.

Lorraine’s escort were businesslike and matter-of-fact while they waited for the elevator. The blond woman looked around the department as if she were an interior decorator on holiday. The man in the aviator glasses checked his watch unobtrusively. Lorraine stared at the floor. If she were to look up, she would look right into Gene’s doorway. Gene found himself hoping she wouldn’t.

After what seemed like a week, the elevator arrived, and one of the outplacement specialists—the man with the aviator glasses—stepped into it. Lorraine, still staring at the floor, started to go in after him, then stopped and turned around. The woman grabbed her by the arm to turn her back toward the elevator. Lorraine looked around the department and when her gaze swept over Gene’s doorway, her eyes stopped on him for a moment.

He thought she was about to say something when the outplacement specialist yanked her back around and shoved her into the elevator.

Gene thought he would remember the look on her face as long as he lived. In a way, he was annoyed by it. Why had she looked at him that way? She didn't have anything to say to him. She wasn't his supervisor. She was the Department Director, and in the scheme of things they were separated by another full level of management. What could she possibly have wanted from him in that final moment? Didn't she realize he had his own problems? He still had three books left on his list after he finished the one about the man tossing and turning in bed.

Gene looked from one of his guards to the other.

"May I—" His voice cracked again, and he cleared his throat. "May I help you?"

Neither of the men said anything. They stood like impassive twins: pale, opaque eyes, perfect trouser creases, sidearm-sized bulges under their jackets.

Gene's heart ran like a semiautomatic weapon. The men acted as if he weren't there, but he didn't want to test them by trying to leave.

The elevator door closed behind Lorraine and the two specialists, and nothing broke the stillness. No chattering from the clerks, no ringing telephones, no ca-chunking drawers of filing cabinets. Even the ventilation system seemed to have stopped. The guards stood at the door as fixed and unmovable as administrative overhead.

Gene's breath came with difficulty. The other elevator chimed. Its doors opened, and Cynthia walked into the

reception area—alone—and strode rapidly toward his office. She did not appear to be armed.

Gene's throat began to contract, and he swallowed hard to keep it open. He could not avoid the thought that his employment was about to end, along with Lorraine's.

Cynthia had rich, gray hair with streaks of blond in it. It was full of character, and she wore it like a mane. The grapevine had it that her hair style was one of the points of contention between her and Roger, who didn't think it very businesslike for an Executive Vice President. Of course, that was a rather minor difference compared to the disparate personal values that were said to divide them. As Cynthia approached, she stared straight at Gene with eyes that were spots of bright blue glaze on flawless ceramic. She smiled with her mouth, but the rest of her kept an attitude of intense concentration.

Gene swallowed again. He looked around for some escape in his windowless office. There was none. He stood slowly and pushed his chair out of the way. That gave him about two feet to his left if he wanted to dodge. But there really wasn't any place he could move to that was out of reach of one of the bland-looking men. There was nothing he could do but wait for events to unfold.

Cynthia radiated a ruthless grace, as if she were the eye of a storm that traveled everywhere she went. Winds of uncertainty died in her presence. He watched her entrance like a mouse hypnotized by a cobra.

She turned to her people and dismissed them with a nod. There was an awkward moment while she and one of the guards stepped in the same direction together once, then again, to make way for each other. She lost some of her grace in this dance, and in the flickering of her power, Gene regained a measure of his will, but not enough to act.

Cynthia finally grabbed the man by the shoulders and held him in place, then stepped out of his way. She did it without self-consciousness. She neither grimaced nor laughed, and her aura of authority filled the tiny office again. Gene had the self-control to continue standing, but emotionally he was being drawn and quartered—to fear, curiosity, helplessness, and (if he dared admit it to himself) a perverse and unprofessional sexual attraction to a woman who stared at him as appraisingly and frankly as if she'd just taken title to him.

She stood up against his desk and extended her hand over it; a warm smile opened her face below the opaque eyes. She was Gene's height, and her mane gave her about two inches on him. In his confused state, he wondered whether they'd be evenly matched in eighteen rounds. She would put him away easily, of course.

"Gene," she said, "I'm Cynthia Price."

"Yes," he said carefully. Her hand was firm; to hold it was to be plugged into her high-voltage confidence. But he yielded to decorum and let it go after a single shake. Her face gave no sign that he left her palm moist.

“I’ve come to congratulate you on your report,” she said.

“Report?”

“Don’t repeat me, Gene,” she said. “The thing you wrote about ROI on the human asset.”

ROI? Ah, return on investment. Gene had always been a little slow on abbreviations and code words. He had submitted that report three years before and had never heard anything. He wasn’t aware anybody in the company had read it. Even Lorraine, may she rest in peace, had never said a word. Gene certainly didn’t realize anyone had passed it on to the Executive Vice President. Just another sign of how difficult it was to control the leakage.

“I’m going to give you a chance to prove it was more than just managerial masturbation. I’m going to let you implement it.”

She stood there staring at him, and he knew he was expected to respond. He wished he were still holding her hand; he wasn’t functioning very well on his own power. “I’ll need substantial resources,” he stammered.

“You’ll just have to see to that yourself,” she said.

“I’m not in a position to increase the Human Resources budget.”

Gene realized he was being given responsibility for something, and panic struck him like a blow to the face. If Cynthia noticed he was falling apart, she gave no sign. “I’ll

need you at a Department Directors meeting tomorrow morning,” she said.

“Directors?” he said.

“Don’t repeat me, Gene. If you’re a Director, you’ll have to attend Directors meetings.”

Gene didn’t speak, for fear he might repeat her again.

“There are going to be a number of changes in this company,” she said. “Things are going to be different around here from now on. We’re in this together. We’re a family. We have to act like one. Step one is recognition of our people and their achievements.”

Gene realized his shirt was damp against his body.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Don’t thank me,” said Cynthia. “Just go where you’re told to go and do what you’re told to do. If I can count on that as the basis of our relationship, we’ll live happily ever after.”

And then she left. Her two outplacement specialists trailed behind her. Gene took a breath and thought it must be the first he had taken in half an hour.

When the elevator doors closed behind the three of them, Gene went to the Managers’ rest room. He only vomited once. He washed his face and rubbed it hard with a fresh towel. Then he combed his hair and allowed himself to believe he was still alive, a prelude to allowing himself to believe he had been named Department Director. He grabbed a second towel and rubbed his face with that one

until it hurt. Adaptability had always been his strong suit, but he had a feeling this might be more than he could handle. This was what the management literature called a challenge. He hated challenges.

He stood in the rest room until his face stopped stinging. He was a Director. He looked in the mirror. His face was red from being rubbed so hard, and his hair stuck out in several places, despite the combing. His white shirt had gone limp and wrinkled from the perspiration. He didn't look like a Department Director. He would have to go get his shoes shined today.

A Director. Things in the company were going to be different from now on. The company was a family.

What did that mean?

When he came out of the rest room, the clerks, secretaries, and admins were gathered in the reception area. He didn't feel any familial attachment to them. He knew some of them by name, but if he'd been asked to use their names just then, he would have been at a loss. The department's six managers were nowhere to be seen. They would doubtless emerge from their offices, blinking and tentative, only after they were sure the air was clear. Gene realized it would be his duty to convene them for a meeting about the company's new direction. He wished he knew what it was.

He looked around at the nonexempt faces, and he didn't know what to say. They stared at him without

moving. They reminded him of antelopes he had once seen in a film about lions. He cleared his throat and looked around the room.

“There’s been a reorganization,” he croaked.

He thought he discerned a little twitching here and there, but when he looked around, they weren’t moving, just staring at him.

“The department has been restructured to emphasize return on investment in the human asset.” Forty-odd pairs of staring eyes.

“I’ll let you know the details very soon.”

He wondered what they could be thinking. “Does anyone have any questions?” He looked from one side of the group to the other. There was a hand raised: a young woman dressed like a second-hand-store mannequin, seated at a desk on which were piled two stacks of papers beside a rubber stamp.

“Yes?”

“Are you going to collect our timesheets today?”

The forty-odd pairs of eyes shifted to focus on her.

“Yes,” said Gene.

“Some of us have problems with them,” she said. Gene could feel the group coalescing behind her, as if she were some kind of spokesperson. He doubted she intended anything of the sort, but groups can be volatile, and Gene suddenly understood he was in a delicate position. He was responsible for these people. The panic returned. He fought

it. In the distance, he could hear the young woman elaborating her position on timesheets.

“The bus was a half hour late, and—”

Gene interrupted her. “Why don’t you see me in my office about that,” he yammered. He knew there was panic in his voice; he just wanted to dismiss them and get away before they sniffed it out. The young woman got up from her desk and started to walk toward Lorraine’s office, and as she neared the short corridor, a strange thing happened. He could feel their support for her dissipate, as she changed from a spokesperson to an employee with a personal problem. And then he realized it wasn’t Lorraine’s office she was walking toward. It was his office.

“Have a seat,” he called after her. “I’ll be there in a moment.”

He saw her nod and walk into the little interior corridor. He realized his panic was gone. He was actually in control of the situation. A small, warm orange spot formed in the vicinity of his solar plexus. He had handled his first departmental problem. He was pretty good at this.

“Any more questions?”

A telephone chirped. Someone spoke.

“Human Resources. Please hold.”

A file drawer clicked shut. A stapler crunched. The telephone chirped again.

“Human Resources. Please hold.”

Gene shrugged and walked jauntily over to the desk the young woman had just vacated and picked up the rubber stamp that was lying there. He dropped it into the wastebasket.