

## How We Kept The Rich Man



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1.

A rich and powerful man flew into our town at the head of a fleet of black helicopters. We had arranged a welcoming ceremony on the main street thinking he would arrive by car. Nearly everyone in the town had gathered to see this rich man and to greet him. The mayor was standing on a stage that had been raised on the courthouse square. He was wearing a long coat and sash.

The rich man's helicopters flew over us, and the crowd let out a great cheer which the rich man would not have been able to hear. Children ran down the street after them, waving their arms and screeching. The helicopters did not land. They flew up into the bluffs that overlook our town and circled the site where the rich man's fabulous new home was being built. Several months earlier the rich man had purchased all of the property on Grandfather Bluff, the largest and tallest of the hills that border our town. The rich man then donated three new fire engines to the fire department, and in return, the town's government issued a permit that allowed the rich man to build whatever he pleased. Trucks began arriving with expensive building materials. Men from the town would climb the hill everyday to unload shipments of exotic teak, African ebony and satinwood, bricks of polished marble in dozens of colors, and, later, a number of rare animals and birds which were released into the rich man's estate and allowed to roam freely.

The helicopters hovered over Grandfather Bluff for several minutes so that the rich man could

survey the construction of his house. We all watched. Then the helicopters turned around and flew back the way they came. As they again passed overhead, everyone waved their hands toward the sky. Some applauded. Some shouted hello. The helicopters did not stop. They soared at incredible speed down the river valley and out of sight.

We did not hear from the rich man again for another year, not until after his house was completed. He arrived surreptitiously in the middle of the night. Large semi-trucks and motor coaches rumbled down Main Street while everyone was asleep in bed. The next morning service people and machinery could be seen moving about the rich man's estate. Many of the town's residents climbed onto the roofs of their houses with telescopes and binoculars and aimed them at the rich man's modern new home on the top of Grandfather Bluff. The house had six enormous windows, three stories high. Through these the rich man could see our entire town, as well as miles of river and the valley beyond. The windows also afforded the people of the town an excellent view of the rich man. But for that entire first week, heavy, buff-colored curtains were drawn over the windows and nothing could be seen of the inside.

Shortly after the rich man's arrival, an edition of our local newspaper appeared at our doors which had no news content on the front page; there was only the paper's logo in the standing head and a full page ad publicizing the rich man's need for an assistant. The ad requested someone local; someone familiar with the laws of our state and the customs of our town; someone who could manage the rich man's properties for him and help him arrange his affairs in his newly chosen home. The leading families in our town summoned back their children whom they had sent away to distant cities to be educated and to occupy important positions. Our newspaper's cartoonist found the situation amusing and drew up a few uncharacteristically clever cartoons about it. In one, the town patriarchs are

fishing together in a boat. The rich man is swimming beneath the boat, and the men are using their children as bait to catch him. In another they are dressed in biblical robes and pushing their children down the Nile in little reed boats for the rich man to find and make kings. It pleased everyone in the town to have a laugh at the major families.

I myself was among those who applied to be the rich man's assistant. I am an accountant by training, but I had not practiced for several years. Business operations in our town are often too small to require detailed bookkeeping, and when the tile factory where I began my career closed, I was not able to find a new position elsewhere for many months. Rather than leaving, I ran for office. My fellow citizens and neighbors elected me Town Treasurer.

I told the men this in my interview. The rich man was not present; instead, I spoke with three of his agents. They asked me questions about my work experience and responsibilities as Town Treasurer. Then they asked about the town's financial situation and if I knew the names of people on the zoning committee. They wrote down the names as I spoke them. They asked if I could provide addresses and home phone numbers of certain councilmen. At the end of the interview, the rich man's agents looked at their watches and asked if I had time to interview again, this time with their superiors. I told them I did, and we climbed another floor in the rich man's house. Next, I met three more men, slightly older than the last three and slightly better dressed. They asked me an identical set of questions, to which I was able to respond more skillfully than the first time due to having now rehearsed my answers. Rather than taking notes they had a secretary make a transcription of the interview. After this, I was taken to yet another group of men. These men were older still, but they seemed more fit and energetic. They did not seem interested in the town or my professional life like my previous interviewers had. Instead, they asked me about my wife and my children, if I played golf, and what my handicap was. We sat on one of the rich man's patios rather than in an office, and I was served a drink. After a few questions, the men seemed to lose interest in me. They began making jokes and chatting with each other. I sat

silently, holding my glass. I wondered if I had failed the interview; but then, all at once, the men looked at their watches and stood. I stood also.

I was led through a succession of amazing rooms. The first was minimal and vast. The floor was tiled in black slate. A beautifully textured rug spread across it and a small granite boulder, about the size of a dog, rested on the rug's one side. Pieces of cubical furniture with pale green upholstery were placed around the room in complete isolation from one another. I found the space very tranquil and somewhat cave-like. I asked what this room was for. The men I was with said they did not know. The next room was a magnificent library with walls that were two stories high. Light beamed through the windowed ceiling onto the cherrywood bookcases that ran from floor to ceiling. Immense as they were, they did not contain a single book. We then passed through the dining room, which was perhaps half an acre in size. A dinner table, hewn all in one piece from a massive sequoia, stretched the entire length of the room. We stopped in the adjoining billiards hall to get cigars and continued on our way.

The men brought me to a great stairway that was wide enough to accommodate a medium-size automobile. Lush burgundy carpet cascaded down its steps. The men leaned on the banisters and sat on dark mahogany furniture. They spoke very softly to one another and smoked. From around the corner came an older gentleman wearing tall boots and a tweed riding jacket and who carried in his gloved hands a visored helmet and crop. The men sitting now rose and everyone put out his cigar in a bronze ashtray beside the stairs. This was the rich man, just come from hunting.

We shook hands and I saw that his eyes were a piercing color of blue and positioned a little too close together on his face. His face was slack and rather mean-looking. He looked like old, black-and-white photographs one sees of pioneers, fierce and bored at the same time. We left the men behind and climbed the stairs, just he and I. My heart was beating very fast and I began sweating badly. We climbed to the very top of the house where the rich man unlocked a door that led to the roof. Beyond was a running helicopter. The rich man gave his riding helmet to one of the crew workers and was given

a new helmet, apparently for flying helicopters. I was given one too, and we boarded the helicopter together.

The rich man was an excellent pilot. I wanted to know how he learned to fly, but I refrained from asking for fear that he would think I was foolish and simple. I think it pleased the rich man that I did not try to talk to him directly. We flew over various precincts that surrounded the town and the rich man inquired about the land below. He wanted to know about the boundaries of watersheds and about road grades. We went to specific farms and factory buildings, and the rich man asked me about their owners, most of whom I knew. I told the rich man about their families and their children. I told him stories I remembered about them. Some of the stories were humorous, but the rich man did not laugh, though he was paying very close attention. He asked me about my own family. I told him about my wife and children, and about my parents. While I spoke the rich man steered the helicopter towards town. I pointed out my house, next to the lumberyard and the park with the gazebo. We hovered over my yard for several seconds. The dog was outside barking at us. I asked the rich man if he wanted to come inside and meet my family. I said that my wife would probably be cooking dinner, if he wanted to stay. The rich man considered my offer for a moment. The wind from the helicopter prop blew heavily over the trees and bushes in our yard. Finally, he said, "You'll have to forgive me, but I am very busy this evening."

"Of course," I said. "You just got here."

We flew back to the rich man's house with the setting sun shining brightly into our faces. We landed, and I was given the job.

Not long after I was hired, the rich man requested that I arrange for him to meet with some of the people of our town. I assumed he meant people like the mayor, the sheriff or the school

superintendent: the town's leaders. The rich man did not actually have anyone particular in mind. We drove around to places in an armored SUV. I took the rich man to the post office and the library where he shook hands and waved at people in the manner of a politician. This seemed perfectly natural since everyone in town knew about the rich man and regarded him as a celebrity. Without our asking, a police escort of four cars arrived, effectively half of the town's police force. The sheriff approached me. He wanted to know where we would be going so that his men could position themselves. I wasn't sure where else to take the rich man. I might have suggested one of the taverns, but the only people in them at that time of the day would have been the town's drunks. There was a coffee shop and bakery where the retired old men gathered, but I was sure the rich man would find them tedious. Thankfully, I did not have to decide. The rich man said he wanted to go to a barbershop. Our town had several, but I knew the rich man wanted the traditional type, with a pole. The one I knew of opened late, at noon. The barber was just setting out his things when we arrived. There was no one waiting for a haircut, which meant, unfortunately, no one to talk to. Of course, the rich man's hair had been carefully groomed and prepared by renowned stylists. He could not allow the barber to alter their work, so I sat for the haircut instead. The barber was nervous and worked quickly. The rich man watched basketball on the shop's television and thumbed through hunting magazines.

The next day when I arrived at work I was immediately summoned to the rich man's cavernous office. I was handed a list of addresses which I recognized as residences in our town. The rich man said, "Yesterday, when we were driving around, I made note of some houses I would like to have. Could you please visit the owners of the properties and make offers?" I stood blinking at the list in my hand. It was three pages.

"Certainly," I said. Then I think I stammered a bit while trying to say, "How high should I bid?" The rich man asked if I thought a half million apiece sounded fair. There were only a handful of houses in my town that were worth that much. I told him that I thought it was very generous. He said that it

was fine if there were people who didn't want to sell. He didn't have to have all of the houses.

I made the offers and the rich man got all of the houses. Every homeowner I approached accepted the offer without negotiation. The distribution of such a sizable amount of money in such an arbitrary manner caused a great deal of excitement throughout the community. Many of the people who sold to the rich man moved away and bought modern suburban homes near the city. Others retired to the country or built new houses that were large and ugly on the edge of town.

The rich man disappointed many of us when it was learned that he would not be maintaining the houses in their original state. He wanted them transported to his estate on Grandfather Bluff. The houses were torn from their foundations and hoisted onto flatbed trailers. Some of the houses were quite large and had to be removed in pieces. The pits and vacant lots that were left behind made everyone angry. They forced the mayor go to the rich man and ask him what he intended to do with all of the empty property he now owned. The rich man apologized to the mayor. He said that he hadn't plans to do anything with the property.

The mayor was astonished. He asserted to the rich man, "You must redevelop these properties. The city will condemn them if you don't."

The rich man calmly responded that he had no use for the land but would be happy to deed them over to the city to save it the expense of condemnation proceedings. The mayor stood beneath the soaring colonnade of the rich man's summer porch speechless and trembling. This gift of the rich man's would make his government solely responsible for the development and maintenance of more than two-dozen isolated lots strewn about the town. I saw the mayor's eyes well up with tears. On behalf of the town, he accepted the rich man's gift graciously.

The houses were placed in picturesque locations around the rich man's estate. Once they were decorated and furnished in a way that pleased the rich man, he invited members of his staff to occupy the houses. I was given old Tom Lacy's house to live in, even though I already had a home in town. The



rich man said he wanted me “within reach.” My wife was not pleased with the decision. She insisted that I tell the rich man no and demand that I be allowed to stay in my own house. Somehow, she could not see how ludicrous that would have been. The children were also unwelcoming of the change. They were farther away from their friends now, and we had to prohibit them from playing outside since the rich man’s animals stalked the grounds at all hours and a good portion of these were dangerous predators.

## 2

It was generally expected that the rich man would bring jobs and economic resurgence to our town. I think even the rich man believed this, but he found later that the town’s residents were not useful for the type of business he did. The rich man’s company produced things like semiconductors and plane fuselages, medical instruments and genetically engineered pesticides. He required electrical engineers and physicists, people who knew about laser etching and molecular beam epitaxy. My town had machinists and farmers, and a few men who knew how to do plastic molding from when the Etch A Sketch factory was still open.

The rich man gave the town other things to do instead. He hired more than a hundred people to serve him at his house and maintain his estate. His agents hired dozens more as maids and handymen for their own households. The rich man also expended a hefty sum to build a new airport. This was done so that shipments of the rich man’s favorite foods could be flown in fresh from all over the world. For the first time ever, French oysters were served in my town, as well as Russian ossetra, Thai bananas,

wagyu beef from Japan, Amazonian sorrel, Scottish langoustines and tender young squid. Preparing such delicacies and serving them with proper ceremony was a new science that the people of the town studied day and night to master. Our little vocational school, which before had taught things like nursing and automobile repair, now taught culinary arts, butling and yacht management. Those who worked the few remaining factory jobs left them to trim trees in the rich man's gardens and plant flowers.

The new airport brought more than just exotic imported goods. The rich man invited other rich men to visit him in his new home. He would take them grouse hunting, and they would drive all-terrain vehicles around the estate. Sometimes, the rich man would throw opulent balls with powerful and important people in attendance. The town would know one of these events was forthcoming when the journalists and photographers began arriving. They would fill the town's two hotels in a matter of hours. All the rest had to live out of a tent city set up at the base of Grandfather Bluff.

The parties were beyond extravagant. Famous musicians would perform on a full-size stage. Overweight old men in exquisite tuxedos would chase paid magazine models who were contracted to circulate through the crowd wearing almost nothing. Celebrities would get drunk and enact loud fights with one another. As the night wore on, the crowd would become inconsolable and begin breaking the rich man's beautiful things. But the rich man never cared. Normally, he would converse lightly with his guests while eating hors d'oeuvres and retire early.

I often wondered why the rich man had chosen to live in our town, among all of us who were nothing like him. It was only after the parties and meeting others of the rich man's kind that I realized he preferred our town precisely because there were no other rich men. There was no one to whom the rich man had to compare himself, no one to compete with. Living among the people of my town, or rather above them, he did not have to court the interest of anyone. It was already given. He did not

have to abide by any law he found distasteful. He was peerless. But he was also totally alone. He had no one.

There was a rule, promulgated by the rich man, that designated the part of the house used for the rich man's living quarters off-limits to all visitors and employees. Only domestic servants were allowed to come and go, and even then, they were required to move through tiny passages built into the walls. The rich man had them dress in different colored uniforms that matched the rooms to which they were assigned. This way, they would blend into the walls, and it would be easier for the rich man to ignore them. I recall a servant once saying that it was so quiet and still in those rooms that he could hear his watch ticking while he went about his work.

All this changed when around the end of the year the rich man invited his brother and his family to spend Christmas with him in his home. The rich man's brother arrived in mid-December with no entourage, no retinue of servants, just his wife and children, whom he drove up the manor road himself in a modest sedan. We received him ceremoniously beneath the house's colonnade, with all of the house's staff standing in formation. He went down the line shaking each person's hand. If he were breaking decorum we would not have known. We had never done a state reception. The butler, who was still figuring out the job, had read about it in his domestic service textbooks and arranged the whole thing from a set of instructions he found in the appendix.

The rich man's brother was younger than the rich man and very charismatic. Where the rich man looked hard and severe, his brother had a round, warm face with red cheeks. He was a little soft in his mid-section. One could tell by his demeanor that he was not given to over-exerting himself. He seemed relaxed and smiled a lot, and when he smiled he revealed a mouth full of large, very white teeth. I shook his hand and found his grip somewhat doughy. I glanced at his eyes and saw that they

were quite noticeably blue. They also appeared very alert. He had with him a beautiful wife and four children, three boys and a girl. They were still little and rambunctious.

After shaking everyone's hand he came to the rich man. His children were already there. They had bypassed the line and ran straight to their uncle. The rich man knelt and embraced all of them at once. He gave each a kiss on the cheek, then rose to meet their father.

"Quite a perch for an old buzzard like yourself," said the rich man's brother, nodding to the house.

"I like to keep myself busy," said the rich man.

"You're too busy. You don't visit often enough." The rich man's brother stepped forward and embraced the rich man. "Brother, I've missed you," he said.

The two pulled each other close and held on tightly. The rich man quietly wept. We all looked away, not wanting to see it. There was something unseemly about watching the rich man express naked emotion. We had never even seen him touch another human being. Now we were watching him lay bare his most intimate feelings. It troubling, for some reason, to see the rich man's humanity so bluntly put on display. When he finally turned and led his family inside, we were glad to see the episode come to an end.

Much had been done to prepare for the arrival of the rich man's family. Clowns and fair rides were hired to entertain the children during their visit. The carnival people were happy to have the work so late in the year, even though it meant standing out in the freezing cold all day with almost nothing to do. The fairground went largely unused during the family's stay. The children preferred—like the rest of us, I must admit—to be with their father. He read to them in the rich man's greenhouse and took them

horseback riding on the back tracts of the estate where they chased the rich man's bison around and pretended to be Indians. Now and then the rich man would prevail on his brother to go shoot skeet with him or play tennis. The brother humiliated the rich man at almost any competitive game, all the while telling good-natured jokes and even letting us employees stand in for him while he took a drink or towed off.

We were all smitten with the rich man's brother. To be honest, I think the reason we liked him as much as we did was because he was everything the rich man was not. He was patient and thoughtful. He was conscious of everyone around him and very generous with himself. He called us by our names. He learned the names of the people in our families and asked about them whenever he encountered us. The rich man's brother displayed a kind of attentive magnanimity that only a man without significant difficulties in his life could access. His station bought him the luxury of being able to be kind. He did not treat us as equals because we were not, not even remotely. He was free and happy. He had the moral strength of someone in complete possession of his own will. We were small by comparison. We allowed ourselves to be subordinated—subordinated by fate, by our desires, by the rich man. The rich man's brother actually cared about us; he was capable of that.

One day, the rich man's brother came to me and asked if I could make arrangement for an extra guest. He asked that I not tell the rich man. I told him that it was not customary for the estate to receive guests without the rich man's knowledge. I told him that his brother might not approve. He assured me that the rich man would be very happy to see this guest. He had invited a friend of theirs from childhood. She was a countess from Italy. He said that their families used to summer in the same town in Switzerland. The rich man had not seen her in a very long time. He would be overjoyed to meet her again. It was difficult for me to imagine the rich man overjoyed at anything. The rich man's brother

sensed my apprehension and reassured me. He said, “Listen, if he’s unhappy about it, I’ll take the blame. I’ll say I brought her in without anyone knowing.” I thanked him for being so considerate.

The rich man’s brother went to the airport himself to meet the countess. He was very careful about smuggling her into the estate. He kept telling me that the rich man could not know. I became curious about what he was up to. I asked a few of the rich man’s close advisors if they knew of this countess from Italy. When I brought it up, they all looked very concerned and asked where I had heard about her. I told them she had just arrived at the estate that very morning. The rich man’s advisors cursed and spit on the ground, and they berated me for not telling them sooner. She was a gold digger, they told me. She hunted rich men for sport and kept jewels and cars and expensive clothes as trophies of her conquests. I asked why a countess would need the money of a rich man. They laughed at my naïveté. Titles meant nothing, they told me. Her family is penniless. She is a countess because she counts on the generosity of powerful people to pay her bills. The advisors guffawed at their own unkind jokes while they drank the rich man’s liquor and smoked the rich man’s cigars. I was inclined to believe that the rich man’s brother would not have brought a gold digger to the house just to rob and pillage the place. I assured the advisors that I would be monitoring the situation closely. They toasted my diligence, though it seemed that they were really mocking me.

I did not meet the countess that first day, but I heard a great deal about her début from the household staff. The rich man was indeed jubilant in her company, just as the brother had promised. He invited her to sit beside him at dinner, and he conversed with her almost exclusively throughout the entire evening. I asked what it was they spoke about for so long. According to the servers, the early dinner courses were occupied with recollections from childhood. During the later courses, the rich man’s brother slyly moved the conversation to talk of romantic forays. I asked the bartender who serves drinks in the drawing room after dinner if he saw the rich man and the countess flirting. He said

that he did not know what was play and what was serious, but they were smiling at each other a fair amount and looking into each other's eyes. I asked him if he saw them touching. He blinked and said, "I've never seen anybody try to touch him before. I don't imagine he'd allow it."

That following day I received a phone call from the rich man instructing me to close the office and send everyone home for the holiday. The rich man's advisors came to me and insisted that the situation was urgent. I told them that I didn't see the harm in it if our employer was happy. I said that certainly we had the countess to thank for our two extra days of vacation. They said I was thick and that I didn't know what I was talking about. "Well then," I said, "obviously I will be unable to help you." I stood up from my desk and went home to see my children. We spent the afternoon at the rich man's impromptu fairground. I had been watching it sit idle outside my office window all week.

It was to be the rich man's first Christmas holiday in our town, and a great celebration was planned. The council spruce was felled from its spot in the courthouse square, the very spot where our town's charter was signed. The old tree was erected in the great hall and gilded with ornaments. The entire house was strewn wall-to-wall with sumptuous decorations. An incredible quantity of food was brought in. Live pigs and turkeys were penned behind the stables. Bottles of good French wine were piled high in the cellar. Boxes and boxes of ingredients lined the kitchen cabinets.

Freed from my business affairs, I helped the master of events prepare the estate for what was to be the largest and most opulent party we had yet to host. I helped coordinate the guest list, which, I was surprised to find, was composed mostly of people from the town. One of the event planners told me that they were people whom the rich man's bother had met during his trip into town. Beside each name were the words "and family". I estimated that the number of guests would exceed one thousand. I sent away for gifts that could be given to the children. I ordered more food, simpler fare that would be more familiar to the townspeople in attendance. I also inspected the house's security apparatus. There

were over 50 surveillance cameras hidden throughout the property which were watched around the clock in shifts by a team of six guards. I knew these six men personally. They used to be vandals and burnouts when they were adolescents, and now they were responsible for keeping watch over one of the world's richest estates. By the end of the day, my inspection had brought me to their monitoring room. Behind the heavy steel door, there was a guard, watching an array of sixteen screens. They were all switching back and forth between different views of the grounds and the house. I happened to notice on one the door to the rich man's bedroom. The door was closed, just like it always was. It occurred to me that the guard sitting next to me had been watching that door for many hours. I wondered what he knew. Very coyly, I asked him if he had seen the new woman who was lodging at the house.

"I've seen lots of her," he said. "She's staying in the pearl room at the back of the south wing."

I looked at him sideways. "You don't... you know. Have a camera—"

"There are no cameras in the bedrooms," he said.

"Good!" I laughed and slapped him on the back. He looked annoyed. "Well where is she now? Have you been keeping track?"

"Uhh." The guard squinted at his monitors. "I just saw them together somewhere. Maybe in the butterfly garden." He switched one of the monitors off of an electrical converter box and over to a different camera. It showed a stone path with flowerbeds growing on either side. It must have been the menagerie. While the rest of the brown world outside had perished weeks ago in the throes of winter, flora and fauna still thrived in the capacious, glass-domed pavilion where the rich man grew tropical plants and housed his jungle animals in the cold months. The guard zoomed in on a spot in the



upper right part of the screen. There on a wrought iron bench one could make out legs, a torso and two heads. It was two figures embracing, perhaps kissing.

“How long has this been going on?” I asked.

The guard shrugged, “It’s really none of my business. We’re not here to spy.” He picked up his pack of cigarettes and pulled one out with his mouth. “Especially not on the guy who signs the paychecks.”

I looked him in the eye and tilted my face slightly. “You understand that I need to know these things, don’t you? Something like this could have implications that affect all of us.”

“How so?” The guard looked puzzled. “He looks like he’s having a good time.”

“Have you ever seen him having a good time?” I pointed to the screen. “This changes things. I don’t yet know how. But we have to be cautious.”

“Sure we do.” The guard spun his chair away from the desk. “Say, I’m gonna go outside for a smoke, can you keep an eye on things?” I told him to take as long as he liked. I remained in the control room all evening and in to the early hours of morning. I watched the rich man and the countess chase one another in the fragrant mists, with the solstice moon shining down on them through the translucent ceiling and the lynx and the ibex looking on through the winding branches. They rolled around in the flowerbeds and lay shoulder-to-shoulder staring up into the starry sky. The rich man showed her the aviary, and together they watched the owls swoop at mice scurrying about the enclosure. Final they visited the aquariums and went swimming naked in the warm, saline tanks while schools of twinkling, jewel-like fish shifted and parted around their bodies. I wavered in and out of sleep, uncertain of what was real and what was imagined. The guard offered me a cup of coffee from his thermos. I declined. “I’m sure my wife must be wondering where I am,” I said, and with that I departed.

Christmas morning broke like a storm over the rich man's house. The entire estate was plunged into chaos. Twice as many people turned out than had been invited. We had to open the polo field for parking and half of the east lawn. The rich man's brother stood in the great hall shaking the hand of each person who came through the door. On one side of him was the council spruce, decorated in tinsel and crystal bulbs, and on the other was a mound of wrapped presents. The brother's wife and children distributed gifts to the guests while support staff continually replenished the pile. Had I known the presents would be opened and played with in the rich man's house I might have chosen duller toys. I regret the dart guns, and the battery operated cars that scurried across the hall's marble floors. We might have done without the toy drums and whistles, and the plastic fire trucks with their electronic sirens. According to the morning's scheduled breakfast was to follow gift distribution, but the rich man's brother thought it would be cruel to make the children sit an entire meal with wrapped presents in their laps. At first we tried to restrain our children, taking their new toys from them and making them sit still in their chairs, but our attempts to forestall the inevitable only led to fits and tantrums. So, following the rich man's brother's lead, we let them go. They met each other in the simple way that children do and began playing and talking and chasing. They shared toys. They stole. They hoarded and hid toys from one another. They divided into groups and teams, the way they had taught themselves on the school playground and made up contests and games of make-believe. The rich man's nephews and niece trotted around on little ponies that had been given to them specially and which elicited violent envy from the other children. They led a party of eight, nine, and ten year-olds in an imaginary scenario that seemed to involve knights and castles. Being the only ones with mounts, they got to be the castle's kings. The niece too, since she wanted to be a king like her brothers.

I pulled my little boy out of a flock of wildlings, very much against his wishes. “Come on. We are going to thank daddy’s employer for the gift he gave you,” I said. He clearly did not want to. He was just as afraid of the rich man as I was. “Come, bring it with you,” I said, pointing to his toy. “It’s very impolite not to say thank you.” We took a lap around the dining room, checked the parlors and the drawing rooms leading off of the dinning hall. I saw no sign of the rich man. I approached the rich man’s brother to inquire into his whereabouts.

“I’m afraid the host will not be present this morning,” he said. “That responsibility has been delegated to me. I hope you’re not too disappointed.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Is he not feeling well?”

The brother laughed, “Oh I’d say he’s probably feeling euphoric. It’s been years since I’ve seen him this happy.”

“You mean—because of the countess?” I pretended to know nothing.

“She convinced him to go with her to the Alps. It’s high season there right now. She never misses it. But listen—” He took a moment to look over the crowd. “Could you do me a favor? Could you make sure that these people have glasses in their hands? I’m going to make my toast.”

The rich man’s brother climbed onto one of the serving tables and was handed a champagne flute. It was startling how quickly the room hushed for him. The children stopped their play and sat down on the floor to listen.

“This has been a joyous morning,” he said, nodding his head and smiling profusely. The crowd politely applauded. “Four years ago my brother had a dream to build this house. And now I stand here in its halls: my brother’s dream realized. And it is all because of you. It was you who built this place and who continue to give it life with your daily works. Look around. See what you have achieved. My

brother dreamt, and you answered, with this... soaring triumph. This affirmation of purpose. How I admire you. How I admire your resolve and the immense power of your collective will. I came here with my family to see my brother and to celebrate our Christmas with him, but I also came to meet the people who made the impossible possible and to celebrate you. My father used to say that there are no sure bets in life. Sadly, he did not live to see you fine people. Thank you all so very much. Today is for you. I wish my brother were here to tell you so himself. I am sure you have noticed his absence this morning. I hope you will forgive him. He is away on urgent business. As always, my brother's first priority is protecting the well being of the company. He makes these sacrifices for you, just as you make your sacrifices for him and for everyone else whose life this company touches." The rich man's brother raised his glass. "I wanted this toast to be in my brother's honor. He insisted that it be in yours. So, I toast him and I toast you, for one and for all. Merry Christmas."

I looked over at my wife. She was crying a little. She said, "He's talking about you, you know." People put down their glasses and began clapping madly. The rich man's brother clapped also. He extended his arms to the crowd, as if to reflect their ovation back to them. I took my phone from my pocket and checked my emails to see if any news had come in from the rich man.

The rich man's absence was not immediately felt on the estate. The household staff occupied itself with the colossal task of cleaning up after the festivity. Those of us employed in the company returned to work and recommenced our ventures and schemes to make the rich man even richer. The New Year

came and went. Then the first week of January passed. Then the second. Papers began piling up in the rich man's office. Company projects were postponed to await the rich man's review. Outside my office window I saw flocks of maids and waiters standing around the delivery bay, smoking cigarettes in the cold. Some days I would go for long walks through the house's endless train of rooms, and I would find cleaning people napping behind furniture or hiding in the drapes playing video games on their cell phones. I didn't bother telling their supervisors. It would not have been any use. There was nothing for anyone to do.

By mid-January, I noticed that the rich man's advisors were getting anxious. According to Swiss newspapers, the rich man and the countess had left Europe and had flown to St. Martin where they boarded the rich man's yacht. The countess found the Alp very chilly that year, so we were told, and she asked the rich man to take her to the tropics where she could get some sun. Each week we had a regularly scheduled conference call with the rich man in which we would report to him the state of our various departments. The rich man's face would appear on a television screen, unshaved and nicely tanned. Every time we would ask him when he planned to return. He provided no definite date. The rich man justified himself by saying that he had never taken a vacation once since he founded the company. Obviously we would never argue with him, but his evasiveness was very frustrating.

The rich man's sabbatical wore on into February. A spontaneous and unspoken panic fell over the town. Everyone began stockpiling foodstuffs and gasoline, as though some disaster loomed on the horizon. Whenever I went into town, people stopped and stared at me on the street. I'd go to the bank, and people would leave their spots in line and crowd around me. They asked when the rich man was coming back. I'd tell them I didn't know. They asked what I was doing to get him to come back. I told them that the rich man's associates and I were doing everything we could to persuade him to return. I told everyone I met to hold on a little longer and remain patient. I told them that the rich man loved our

town. Wealthy people go on long vacations, I said. I told them that working people like us didn't understand that.

One day, the rich man called a special meeting of his directors and advisors. The rich man watched on the television screen as we all filed in to the conference room. He sat languidly on a folding chair, outdoors on some leafy loggia. He told us with no discernable compunction that he would not be returning. He and the countess had gone to her family's villa in Le Marche and would be spending the winter there. We objected as firmly as subordinates could. The countess, apparently, did not like our town. She thought it was drab and provincial. We couldn't argue with her assessment. "But aren't seclusion and scenery the charms of a country estate?" I said. "Sir, you possess the most elegantly appointed house in the hemisphere. I am sure that if the countess were to stay with us for a few weeks she would find your home very much to her liking."

The rich man apologized. He said, "Maybe in the summer."

I would have pleaded my case further, but time was limited and the rich man wanted to discuss the logistics of transitioning operations to Italy. He wanted all of his advisors and business associates to relocate temporarily to the little town on the Adriatic coast where he was staying. The rich man was putting them up in a creaky, old seaside resort. They were all to stay there and work out of their hotel rooms until further arrangements could be made. I would stay back and attend to the closure of the estate. When I heard these words, my head was already throbbing. I took down the rich man's instructions on a note pad. Eighty percent of the staff was to be dismissed. We would keep on a skeleton crew for regular maintenance. Most of the supply orders could be suspended as well. I asked if we should pay severance to the people we were letting go. The rich man said that I should put them on unpaid hiatus and that we would put them back to work when he returned. "It wouldn't be right to fire everyone," he said.

Cooks, cleaners, animal trainers, ice sculptors, tennis court attendants, I turned them all away when they came in to work the next day. Some people had seen it coming and walked back to their cars resigned to their fate. Others wept openly and begged me to spare them. They showed me pictures of their children and asked me what they should do. Friends I had known since childhood called me vile names to my face and threatened to do harm to my family. Angry employees threw food from their bagged lunches at the rich man's agents as they retreated with their luggage. By the end of the day, I was the only representative of the rich man still left in town. And though there were no accommodations for it in the household budget, I hired a dozen new security personnel to patrol the grounds and to guard my house at night.

The town's opinion of the rich man declined rapidly. Because everyone was out of work, our regional economy collapsed almost immediately. The small businesses set up to supply and service the estate all folded. Out of desperation, people began breaking into the estate to loot the places we couldn't patrol. They poached the rich man's exotic animals and ripped the plumbing out of his unoccupied houses. People were setting fire to their own houses hoping to collect insurance and to get out from under their now untenable lifestyles. A mass of unemployed would gather on the courthouse steps every morning. They began to talk. Soon they were holding demonstrations and making demands. They proposed that we tax the rich man and redistribute his wealth by force of law. There was talk of a comprehensive affluence tax that would affect not just the rich man but all citizens found to be in possession of surplus wealth. Those of us responsible for the town's leadership saw that the situation could not be ignored.

I called a meeting with the town's central figures: the mayor, the judge, the sheriff, the vicar, the priest, two key aldermen (the unofficial whips of the two political parties), the owner of the grocery and the feed store, and the owner of the mill and the canning factory. We met in strict secrecy. It was understood that personal interest and obligations to our particular constituencies would need to be

placed aside for the time being. For at least that night, I was not an employee of the rich man, the sheriff did not wear the badge, and the mill owner put his revenue books out of his mind. For this reason, it was imperative that no word of our league reach the bars, barbershops, and church basement gossip circles. Everyone took the gag order very seriously. I was surprised to find that our town's leaders were so adept at conspiracy.

I chose to convene the meeting in the rich man's office, around his leather-lined, teakwood conference table with its elk antler chandelier burning overhead. Of course the rich man's office was forbidden; the infraction was intentional. I wanted to demonstrate to those in attendance the pliability of the rich man's rules, rules that we had always followed without question. We smoked his cigars and drank his liquor, just as I had seen his business associates do. We put our feet on his table. Each of us gave his or her own account of the state of things as we saw them. The sheriff spoke about the escalating crime rate. The aldermen listed businesses that had gone bankrupt just in the last week. The owner of the grocery store indicated that he probably could not fully stock his shelves in the coming month due to plummeting demand. The two clergymen in attendance confirmed that many of the shoppers that had abandoned the grocery store were now turning to the charity pantry for their food and that the churches were in no position to accommodate them all.

"How could things have gotten so bad in just a few weeks?" asked the judge. "Did no one think to prepare for something like this happening?"

The mill owner shook his head. "That's what we were telling guys when they'd give us their notice to go work up here on the bluff. Now they all want their jobs back. I can't hire any more. I've already got those position filled."

"We have to put these people to work," said the mayor. "We need money. Money like what was being paid out when the estate was alive and booming."



“Maybe we can get him to donate to some sort of public works fund,” suggested one of the aldermen.

“The problem with that is it would more than likely be a one time thing,” observed the priest. “It will be difficult getting him to make regular contributions to keep us going.”

The other alderman interjected. “Well how long is this supposed to go on? Are we talking about a stopgap measure here or a systemic change?”

The question was directed at me. I told them that it was unclear how long we would be without the rich man, but that my opinion was that we should see the predicament as indefinite unless we intervene. As I spoke the mayor was eying the large steel safe that sat behind the rich man’s desk. “I bet there’s enough money in that thing to run the town government for a full year.”

I was worried where that sort of talk might get us. “Actually,” I said, “I think he just keeps papers in there. He’s very sensitive to corporate espionage.”

The mayor persisted. “You get his mail, don’t you? I say we open everything and cash whatever checks we find.”

The vicar shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The priest saw and moved to outdo him by saying, “Gentlemen, I don’t know that I could condone such activity.”

The judge dismissed the idea outright: “You’re suggesting we make ourselves felons. We’d never get away with it.”

The sheriff agreed. “He’s got plenty of connections in the statehouse. If we took even a spoon from the silver, there’d be investigators down here day and night.”

I was relieved to see the mayor’s proposal abandoned so quickly.

“Rather than just blindly cooking up solutions let’s try to look for a root cause,” said the judge. “Let’s think analytically about this. Something’s broken here. I’m not sure that we know what.”

The owner of the feed store, a mild man, raised his hand. We looked over his way and waited for him to speak. He remained silent with his hand in the air until the judge asked for his input. “I, uh, have always maintained that, you know, this town needs more economic activity.” He looked around for our approval. “We need more jobs.” The mayor rolled his eyes. “I don’t think this town does enough to promote business,” he continued. “We’ve gotta bring the industry back, and, uh, you know, why can’t we put our people to work ourselves?”

The mayor leaned back in his chair, “What do you propose we do? We mined the ore out of the hills centuries ago. After that we cut down all the timber. We farmed out the land, and we fished the fish out of the rivers. You talk about industry, but people aren’t going to go back to factory work after they’ve had a taste of a better life. We can’t revert back to what we were. That door is closed. We have to move forward. And I don’t see how we can do it without all of this.” The mayor waved his hand over his head, gesturing at the house.

The feed store owner motioned to the conservative party alderman, with whom he was apparently on a first-name basis: “Jim, me and you have talked about this, about the small business owners and all that...” He waited for the alderman to pick up his argument.

“Donald, I’m pro-business. Everybody in this room is on your side right now, but the mayor’s right. We’ve got a whale on the line, and we can’t let him go. Surely you can appreciate that,” said the alderman.

“Yes, but councilman,” the mill owner now took up the feed shop owner’s position, “we’re here doing business, and your rich man’s gone. He may not be coming back.” He looked around the table.

“We need to acknowledge that he may not be coming back.”

We all sat silently look down at the center of the table.

“We’ll lure him back,” said the mayor, finally. Then he turned to me and said, “What do we need to do.”

I told them that I believed the problem originated with the countess. I told them what had been told to me, that she was a gold digger and that she sought to marry the rich man for his money. I speculated that if we removed the countess from the equation, the rich man might come back.

“We could disgrace her in some way,” suggested the priest. “Uncover some scandal. I don’t doubt that a woman like her has at least a few things to hide.”

“An excellent idea,” declared the vicar. “We’ll make her out to be a harlot. He won’t want to have anything to do with her.” The idea was well-received around the room.

The priest clasped his hands. “I’ll talk to the bishop then. He has connections in Rome. He’ll be able to find something.”

Everyone applauded the priest for his ingenuity. I did as well, to be polite, but I was still unresolved. “What if we don’t find anything,” I said, “or what if what we find isn’t salacious enough? What if we break the scandal and he isn’t bothered by it?”

“I think he’d be bothered to find out that the lady he’s with is a tramp,” remarked the vicar. The other men in the room chuckled.

I knew that given the rich man's exceptional position in life, he kept values that were very different from our own. None of us possessed the imagination needed to see the world the way the rich man saw it. I did not believe that people as simple as us could manipulate someone like the rich man. None of us knew the rules to that game. Nevertheless, to appease the group I endorsed the priest's plan. But I also proposed my own alternative project, in case the first one didn't work out. I had been considering it privately for a while. We knew very little about what motivated the rich man, but we knew perfectly well how to reach the countess. She was after the same thing we were. I didn't see why our interests had to be divergent. My plan was that we hire the countess—hire her on as a city employee. We would bribe her. The mayor would open a whole new department at city hall: the Office of Mineral Extraction, and it would be staffed solely by our gold digger. "If what we have heard about her is true," I said, "and all that she wants is money, why we can't we just give it to her. As a stipulation of her contract we would require that she dwell in the county and never leave. If she stays here, it would keep him here also."

The gathering of artless, small-town men sitting around the rich man's gorgeous conference table was skeptical of my proposal. The vicar and the priest dismissed it straight away for being devious. The judge and the sheriff asserted that we would all spend time in the penitentiary if we went ahead with it. While undeterred by the illegality of the plan, the two aldermen expressed a more practical worry that it might necessitate a tax increase, depending upon how much the countess wanted. The two factory owners became resistant when taxes were suggested. They said that it would be unfair to make the business community foot the bill for keeping the rich man in town. Only the mayor was supportive of my idea. He called it sound government policy. "We'll find a way," he said. "Install parking meters around the courthouse, divert money away from snow removal. This'll be our plan b. If we can't slander her, we'll pay her off. It's ingenious."

I admired the mayor for his leadership. In the years that I was city treasurer, he and I worked together quite a bit. His job was much simpler in those days. The town pretty much ran itself. We did things how they had always been done. In times of crisis, one has to take initiative. I shall always appreciate our mayor's courage and his conviction in regard to what I have come think of now as an unsolvable problem.

In order for any of our plans to work, we needed to coax the rich man and the countess back to town, if only for a few days. The priest insisted that the rich man be present when he broke his stories about the countess's lascivious past. He believed that his disgust with her would be magnified if it were joined with the community's outrage. I had never known the rich man to be in any way affected by the feelings and opinions of the townspeople, but I did not argue because in order for my plan to work, I needed the countess present. I could not go to meet her Italy, right under the rich man's nose, without arousing suspicion. I wanted her at the estate. It was the only place I could pursue her safely and be certain that she comply with my demands. The mayor, whom circumstances had made quite conniving, devised a cunning stratagem to persuade them to return. We would hasten to organize a springtime festival. We would call it a town tradition, an ancient rite. And we would name the rich man and the countess our guests of honor. The rich man would presume it the province of his position and status to preside over such a ceremony, so long as we made it seem hollowed and duly archaic. The problem was our town did not celebrate a springtime festival. We would have to concoct one and get everyone to go along with it.

Mid-way through April we erected a maypole on the park green and hung banners over Main Street announcing that there would be a May Day celebration. We called it the 109<sup>th</sup> Maytime Festival; we felt that one hundred and nine years would be sufficient to impress the rich man. Residents of the

town were clearly confused. I suspect many had never even heard of May Day. We advertised it further in the newspaper and on radio stations. We started rumors about memorable events that had occurred at past festivals. It came to be the consensus among the people that Maytime had in fact always been celebrated but that it had been done by someone else, in some other part of the town. The affluent classes believed that it had been a custom of the working classes and condescended to adopt it as their own that year so as not to alienate themselves from the popular mass. The working class saw it as an age-old rite of the rich and were eager to take part themselves so that they might enjoy a privilege that had previously been denied them. No one wanted to appear to be unfamiliar with tradition, and so citizens just pretended like they had been practicing it their entire lives.

The mayor mailed a vellum parchment in a thick pulp envelop to the rich man's Italian villa. It was filled with heraldic inscriptions and illuminated text declaring the rich man and the countess guests of honor to the town's ancient celebration of the Maytime. The parchment named the rich man officer of ceremonies and declared that the countess was to be crowned May Queen. They must have been flattered with all of the ceremonial titles we sought to confer upon them because shortly after the letter's arrival, I received instructions from the rich man to prepare for his arrival. The news rushed through the town as I began hiring dozens of people back to work. The mood everywhere was exuberant. Whatever misgivings people might have had about the strange and sudden appearance of our Maytime Festival were hastily dispelled. We now had good reason to celebrate, and everyone was excited to do so.

Organizing a festival in its inaugural year takes vision and daring. Organizing an inaugural festival which has to give the semblance of being in its one hundred and ninth year is a matter of pure guile. We found a town hundreds of miles away that put on a May Day celebration that was similar to what we had in mind. This town closely resembled our own, except that it did not have any rich people

living in it and was very poor. We paid them to give us all of the props and costumes they used to put on their festival. All of it was very worn out and shabby-looking, which was exactly what we wanted. To give the festival an appearance of legitimacy, we hired a troop of morris dancers and recruited school children from out-of-state who knew how to perform the maypole rite. We devised ersatz rituals which would have appeared to evolve over many generations. One of these was the Swathing of the Stream, wherein we blanketed a section of the river with bed sheets. We said that this was a custom handed down from our ancestors celebrating the day of spring when women could safely begin doing their laundry in the river's current. We invented a few fertility rites that incorporated the young people. We enlisted the high school theater teacher to choreograph a mating dance that his students could perform at the festival. It had something to do with cranes and imitating the performances they do for one another. The kids made feather suits and beak masks. In the dance, they pulled each other's feathers out, causing them to reveal bare skin on their shoulders and stomachs. It amounted to a modest and rather naïve striptease. The drama teacher worried that the dance might be too racy for many people in the town. I said that we probably wanted the dance to be a little transgressive, to make it seem more authentic. It had that flavor of paganism about it, like a genuine rite of spring. I surmised that if we made it seem primitive enough, people would not think to apply their modern moral sense to what they were seeing. The drama teacher took my advice and added three or four gestures of sun worship to the production.

Of the dozen or so events planned, we predicted that the tractor pull would be most successful. All of the real fairs held in town had tractor pulls in them. We figured that including one in the Maytime festival would get us a better crowd. Most important, of course, was the crowning of the May Queen. The May Queen idea was really our masterstroke. The entire festival was organized around the countess and her crowning. Because her role was so crucial, the rich man and the countess would not be able to exempt themselves from the festival without ruining everything. The obligation to attend

would weigh too heavily on them. They would have to come, otherwise we would have no festival and the tradition would be desecrated.

The rich man did finally return to our town. He flew in during the early morning, just two days before the festival was scheduled to begin. Some staff and I stood in the pre-dawn dark together to see him arrive. We had been idle for so long and had grown so accustomed to sleeping in that the hour felt unbearably early. The rich man's jet taxied to the gate. The hatch opened and some flight attendants readied the mobile stairway leading down to the tarmac. Then the rich man emerged, his blazer and slacks wrinkled from travel and his hair lopsided with cowlicks. I restrained myself to shaking the rich man's hand and bidding him good morning. I really wanted to hug the man and kiss his forehead. Instead, I simply held open a heavy overcoat for him so that he could put his arms through the sleeves. The countess was not with the rich man on the flight. He must have felt chagrined by this since he thought it necessary to tell us that an ill-timed appointment would keep her in Italy an extra day and that she would be making the journey tomorrow. I could hardly have cared, I was so thrilled with our triumph. We had made the rich man return. I had laid my plan and it had succeeded resoundingly. Here he was in front of us, and a full staff was back on the job and feverishly at work preparing the house. The estate was awake and buzzing.

That day, I went to town for business, and everywhere I went I was met by my fellow citizens and was glorified for my achievement. I remember thinking how that day would likely be enshrined in our town's history, the day the rich man came back to us, and my name would be attached to it. It was the first time in my life that I felt I might actually be remembered for something. In all the time I had been employed by the rich man, I had never been motivated by avarice. I did not envy the rich man's power. I had not taken delight in luxurious things as many of my peers had done. I had resisted all of the temptations that radiate from wealth and power and which might corrupt a man. But now, walking



through streets I had known since I was a child, being treated as hero by people who had always regarded me as nothing other than average, I came to desire something that I had not previously known anything about. It was a lust for renown, a need to be recognized and venerated. I wanted to be known as more than a simple employee of a powerful man. I wanted people to see that I had tamed the uncertainty and precariousness of fortune that dominated our lives. I had swayed a strange and terrible force and was now using it to preserve our future for a good long time. It seemed right that I be preserved in that future also. I had made the rich man come back; I would not let him leave again. I put all other possibilities out of my mind.

The priest heard that I was about town running errands and decided to pay me a visit. I was crossing the street at Third and Pine when the church van sped in front of me and stopped in the middle of the crosswalk. I recognized the deacon at the wheel. I said hello, but he didn't respond. The door of the van slid open and inside was the priest. He motioned for me to get in, so I complied. My car was several blocks away; I figured they could drive me there.

The priest closed the door behind me and said, "The news I'm hearing is that she was not on the plane this morning. Can you confirm this? Tell me what you know."

I was confused about what was going on. The deacon was driving in the opposite direction of my car. "Who? The countess?" I said.

"Yes, the countess. Do you know where she is?"

"In Italy, I suspect."

"Well is she coming or not?"

"Yes, uh. I was told that she would be arriving tomorrow."

The priest leaned back in seat. He addressed the deacon now: "In that case we'll want to run the story today. This might actually work out better. He'll be here to hear it, and she won't be around to defend herself."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"We have our story," he said. "The bishop has been talking to the Italian brethren—he's quite sympathetic to our position, you know. He's found some things that we can use: a long history of promiscuity, habitual fornication, a possible orgy or two."

"I think you'll need more than that," I said.

"Oh we have more. There is a nine year old boy in Rimini, an orphan, whose foster parents are willing to say that he's her illegitimate son, and that she abandoned him on the steps of the church at less than a month old."

"Is there any truth to it?" I asked.

"Probably not," said the priest, "but it will fit well with her history of boozing and philandering, and that's all verifiable."

"It's going to sound preposterous."

"Worth a try, isn't it?" he said, grinning.

It seemed reckless to me. The priest had not told us that he intended to lie about the countess. I told him, "I don't think it is worth a try. Surely she'll deny it, and then she'll go looking for whoever planted the rumor. What if it gets back to her that we're responsible? You think he'll trust us over her? We'll be through. They'll leave town for good, or they'll make us leave."

“You think this is the first person I’ve dragged through the mud?” said the priest. “You don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t think you’re fully aware of the consequences—“

“No, you’re the one who doesn’t see. You don’t know the things I’ve done. I have my channels. I’m capable of much more than you think I am.”

Arguing with the priest would have been useless. I decided I needed resolve the matter myself before he could get his scheme underway. I said, “That’s fine. I’m not stopping you. But I ask that you at least save this orphan plan for a few days, until I’ve had a chance to try my idea. She won’t negotiate with us if there are a bunch of slanderous rumors circulating around about her. Remember, if we can’t get her to go away then we’ll need to convince her to live here.

The priest shook his head. “I’m sorry, he said, “but that won’t do. We are planting the story today while she’s still away and unable to refute it.”

“No,” I said. “This sabotages my plan completely. We all agreed that we would give my way a try. You’re going against the will of the group and the better interests of this town.”

The priest waved his hand across his face, as if shooing a fly. “This plan of yours. Tell me, what’s to stop her from taking your bribe and then reneging on the deal? Why would someone like her, a countess, allow you to play her for a pawn? People like that do as they please. And my goodness, what if they marry? That enormous fortune will be hers too. Do you think this tiny stipend you’re offering will have any influence on what she does?”

“We can deal with that when the time comes,” I said. “First she has to take the deal. And I have to insist that you hold off and let us pursue that outcome.”

"I wish you'd relax and just let us handle this," the priest said.

I shook my head. "You're about to make an incredible mistake."

The priest sighed and sat erect to stretch his back. "Well, I think we've said all that needs to be said here. Where would you like us to drop you off?"

My face flushed red with anger. Violent thoughts entered my mind. I considered for a moment setting fire to the church steeple in retaliation. I thought about hiring one of the men who comb the town's alleyways for scrap metal to bludgeon the priest and the deacon both. Maybe not kill them, but hospitalize them, prevent them from carrying out their design. Fortunately, I settled on a more reasonable course of action.

"If you go ahead and spread this ridiculous lie without at least giving me a couple days to set matters straight, I swear to you I will expose you as the source, and we will all use you as the scapegoat to avoid blame."

The priest's eyes narrowed. "I guess you're going to have your way, aren't you?"

"I want you to honor your agreement. That's all."

"You want us to follow you," the priest said. "You want to be this town's savior, and you want us to believe that you are." The priest cracked the window beside him and put his fingers out the window. "Well I can do that. I can follow just fine. It is my earthly vocation to obey. It comes naturally to me. But if it's going to be you who leads us, you need to know what that responsibility entails. You must be ready to make the sacrifice when the time comes."

I knew that what the priest was saying was a ploy of some kind, but I didn't know what. I remained silent and looked away out the window. The priest reached over the seat and tapped the

deacon on the shoulder. "Stop here." We were all the way across town from where they had originally picked me up.

I stepped out of the van without looking at the priest. From behind me I heard him say, "You have three days. If she isn't working for you by then, we're running the story." They drove off, and I walked the two miles back to my car. I went over each of the Maytime ceremonies and the planning in my head. Then later, I imagined the little boy from Rimini, scurrying around in the rich man's house with a platoon of nannies running after.

We opened the Maytime Festival with a parade down Main Street. It was conceived to be as generic as possible: police and fire department followed by the high school marching band, and then the social clubs and charity organizations. We wanted it to be familiar-seeming, so that people might conflate it with other public events. We used floats and regalia cobbled together from all of our town's other holiday parades. As Grand Marshall of the event, we placed the rich man at the end of the procession, on a float repurposed from our Christmas pageant. Normally it would have been Santa Claus sitting on the particleboard and papier-mâché throne, but today our town had come out to see the rich man. I marveled at how perfect everything was coming together. If there were any lingering doubts as to the validity of the Maytime Festival, I am certain that they were put to rest by the majesty and the excellence of the rich man. Just his being there gave us all the legitimacy we needed. And if the people appeared convinced, there was certainly no reason for the rich man to doubt the authenticity of what we presented him.

The parade terminated at the courthouse square and the festival officially began. First we did the flower traipsing ritual. Then the unraveling of the sweaters was performed and the display of flannels and furs. The countess remained at the estate for most of the celebration. With just a few

hours remaining before the coronation, she finally ordered a car to bring her to city hall where she could adorn herself in the ceremonial vestments and anoint her body in scented oils. We constructed a whole preparation routine that was absurdly elaborate. My idea was to keep her at city hall as long possible. There she would be alone, away from the rich man and his agents, and available for a private audience. I knocked on the door of the squat little conference that we had converted into a dressing room. The door opened to reveal the countess, perched on a stool, surrounded by handlers and stylists, all of them primping her hair, adjusting her clothing and applying cosmetics to her face. It occurred to me just then that this was my first time encountering the countess in person. I was actually rather unimpressed. She looked older than I had expected. Her body thin and sinewy. She wore a tired-looking expression on her face and her features were sallow and sunken. The lotions that had been applied to her overly tanned skin created a sheen that made her look lacquered. Her breasts were obviously fake, as well as her nose and lips. I entered the room and introduced myself. The countess, gazing past me with her drowsy eyes, said:

“Yes, I know about you. I’ve heard them say you are the sheep dog. You gather the herd for the slaughter, do you not?” I paused for a moment, uncertain of how to respond. My befuddlement amused the countess.

“Your town has peculiar customs,” she continued. “It would be fascinating to learn the history of how they came to be.”

“We have always celebrated spring. It’s a time of rebirth for us,” I said.

“It is good to see people protecting their traditions. And what an honor to be included!” exclaimed the countess with a phony smile. “Tell me, was it you who thought to invite us?”

“I had suggested including you in the ceremonies. We owe so much to you both, after all,” I said.

The countess began thumbing through a magazine while a stylist pulled curlers from her hair, “Most men would prefer their employers to be out of the country. They can’t order you around so much when they’re away. But you seem keen to have yours back.”

“I am very pleased to see the two of you return,” I said. “That’s actually what I came here to talk to you about. Do you mind if we have a word together in private.”

The countess glanced up from her magazine and curled her brow quizzically. She consented and ordered her coterie of stylists to leave the room. Once everyone had gone she crossed her legs, lit a cigarette, and waited for me to begin speaking.

“On behalf of this town, I would like to make you an offer.” I told the countess about our predicament and how essential the rich man was to the town’s economy. I explained that it was imperative that the estate remain active and that we hoped that she might help us to that end. I then presented to her our offer: remain in the rich man’s house, refrain from travel and long term excursions abroad, and by doing so, compel the rich man also to remain and to go about his daily life here on his estate. In return, the town would provide compensation. I showed the countess a notecard on which I had written the figure that we were able to pay her. To my dismay, she did not even look at it.

“I thought your plan was to disgrace me with shameless lies.”

My mouth probably dropped open as I stammered, “I—I beg your pardon?”

“You people have a very narrow view of the world. You think you can go dredging up muck in the church without it getting back to me? I have relatives in the clergy. The bishop of Ancona is a friend of the family. Those same people whom you asked to slander me came to my villa and alerted me to

your plot. The story about the orphaned child, the illegitimate son, I myself had the brothers at Rimini pass the rumor to your priest. And as soon as he makes it public, he will be caught in the trap that I have laid. All of you will, and I shall be rid of you greedy, repugnant people for good.”

As the countess spoke I felt the world collapse around me. As if out of an instinct for survival I made a last, desperate attempt to supplicate myself and win her support. I pleaded, “Please understand our position. It was necessary that we take action. There was a faction that wanted to sabotage you. I was always against them. I maintained that we should work together. Now the deal I have offered you is beneficial to both of us. It could be very lucrative for you if you would just accept. As for our priest, I’ll see that he gets punished. I’ll have him ruined, if that’s what you want.”

The countess retorted, “For a modest stipend you have proposed to make me your prisoner. I would sooner live in a den of snakes. I could not conceive of spending one day more in this insipid town, among you pathetic leeches. Understand me when I say that I have no use for you. Today I shall perform this ludicrous charade and be the May Queen for your festival. Tomorrow I will reveal everything and I will crush you. I ask that you leave now and let me get all of this over with. I do not wish to speak to you any further.”

Stunned by the countess’s reproach, I wandered out of the city hall unsure of what to do. An enormous crowd had accumulated on the courthouse square. The stage was being set for the crowning of the May Queen. The sun had set, and though it was getting dark, the evening was still warm and balmy. I stood for a while just off the square watching the mass of people shift around the stage. I realized that for the past several months I had been struggling beneath an immense weight. I have never been a man given to asserting his will in the world. I have always been one who follows, who is perfectly willing to submit to the lot I have been given. When my fortune sours, I do my best to evade the consequences. It has never been in my nature to attempt to change the conditions that shape the



world around me. There are men who do see the world as malleable, and they believe themselves to be in possession of enough agency to bend it ever so slightly to meet their needs. The rich man is one of these people. In the last several months, I had attempted to style myself into one as well. Predictably, I failed.

There now remained a single course of action. I had reached a point at which all of my options had fallen away. My obsessive worry over all of the different causalities and unforeseeable circumstances which had threatened to overturn my plot had now completely dissolved. It felt comforting, to hand my destiny back over to fortune. In the back of my mind, I think I had known that the plan would never work. In fact, I had made alternative preparations in anticipation of this exact turn of events. It was my plan c, the ultimate measure that we all should have accepted and embraced. I don't believe my co-conspirators ever acknowledged it as a possibility. To me, though I tried earnestly to dismiss it from my mind, it was foregone conclusion.

I went to my car and pulled from it a brief case. It was light, almost completely empty. As I walked back to the festival I could hear the marching band begin to play the overwrought fair songs we had chosen to signal the beginning of the coronation. The morris dancers jigged vehemently for their handkerchief dance. The school children were roused and sent twirling around the maypole. The high school cheerleaders arrayed themselves across Main street and began gyrating to the beat of the marching band. As if out of tulip blooms and sea foam, and not a city hall restroom, the countess emerged, carrying lilies and draped in a shimmering white dress edged with lace and primrose. The crowd gasped at her noble carriage and highborn demeanor. They had never known anything like it. Standing on the stage to meet her were the mayor and the rich man. I plunged into the crowd and pushed my way through the throng of people, making my way to the front. The mayor met the countess first and shook her hand in the same dopey way he shook everyone's hand. We had advised him to kiss

her on her left cheek as a greeting; he must have deemed the gesture too alien to attempt. The countess then turned to the rich man and gave him a long, elegant kiss, to which the crowd responded with immense applause. The mayor stepped to the podium and tapped each microphone with his finger. He began delivering the inane twaddle that we had written to introduce the event. The countess and the mayor squinted beneath the bright, white spotlights we had set up to illuminate the stage. Cutting my way through the last dense ranks of people near the stage, I ducked the security fence and emerged beside the cupbearer and the tenant of the crown. They were readying themselves to convey the ceremonial accouterments onto the stage. I nodded to the two security guards between whom I had just passed. Neither was paying any attention to me. They were busy scanning the mob, looking for signs of unruliness or would-be assassins. I stood behind the ceremonial officers. Both were teenagers, I think maybe altar boys at the church or eagle scouts or something. The one carried a cheap tiara on a velvet cushion. This was to be the May Queen's crown. The other carried a crystal chalice on a brass platter. In the chalice was a single draught of cider. In the lunatic liturgy we had invented, this was supposed to represent the last drop of cider from last fall's harvest, a sign that winter had expired.

The mayor summoned the tenant of the crown to his side. As the crowd watched the boy negotiate the stairs to the stage, crown and cushion outstretched before him, I cracked open my briefcase and slid my hand inside. From it I withdrew a tiny vial which I had taped to the briefcase's wall. I hid it in my closed fist and looked around to see if anyone was watching. I unscrewed the cap and, in a single deft motion, I removed the dropper and squeezed a few dabs of the tincture into the second boy's chalice. The ink-black drops dissolve slowly in the mellow cider. It was aconitine, derived from the fatal wolfsbane. I had found a few sprigs of the flower growing in an unkempt corner of the rich man's greenhouse. I cut a five stems and extracted the poisonous alkaloid from their pulp. Now it was in the ceremonial cider, which would be given to the countess for her to drink, just as the ceremony prescribed. I stood watching those drops molder and disperse. I expected to feel more conflicted. I

worried, when I was mixing the poison, that I would not be capable of such ruthless action. But on the contrary, I found that my resolve had grown and solidified. As the cupbearer stepped forward and mounted the stairs a thrill shot through my body, the kind of exuberance one only feels during the culminating episode of his life.

The cupbearer halted before the mayor and presented the chalice. The mayor made his false blessing and handed the cup to the countess to drink. My pulse was racing. I felt beads of sweat role down the sides of my face. For some reason, there was a hesitation. The countess looked into the chalice. Then she looked down into the audience, beneath the bright lights, at me. There was a smirk on her face. I began to panic. Did she know? How could she know? I had told no one. Perhaps, I thought, it was an instinct, some diabolical insight. I remained stone-faced so as to reveal nothing. She was too far away to read my eyes.

The countess lifted the chalice away from the platter. She held it up and marveled at it in a very theatrical manner. Then, she turned and handed it to the rich man. The countess spoke into the microphones: "Such a beautiful cup. This drink belongs to the festival's true guest of honor. I think he's the reason we're all here, don't you?" The countess glanced sideways in my direction. The rich man held the chalice awkwardly. He was afraid of distorting the custom. The mayor was flipping through his index cards like a fool. I considered motioning to him to disallow it, but I feared exposing myself. Finally, he dropped his hands and shrugged. He must have determined that there was no harm in dishonoring a phony tradition. The crowd was clapping and shouting and appeared to want the rich man to drink. He raised the chalice to his lips, and in three or four small sips, the rich man swallowed the poison.

At around 12:30 am, as the he was readying himself for bed, the rich man began experiencing severe heart palpitations. The countess found him unconscious on the bathroom floor. He had suffered a small stroke. The paramedics were summoned, and the rich man was rushed to the town hospital. As he was being wheeled to the emergency room, the rich man was stuck with another more massive stroke. It collapsed his lungs and put him in a coma. He was hooked to machines to keep him alive and was finally stabilized. The doctors told everyone that it was unclear when or if he would ever wake.

I lay awake in bed until the following day, my mind racing between the ways in which I might be incriminated. I knew that the countess would not turn me in. If she accused me of poisoning the chalice then it would have meant that she had intentionally given it to the rich man to drink, thus making her an accessory to the crime. Other than her, there was no one else to turn me in. Part of me wanted so desperately to flee that night, to find a new town and start all over, I knew that if I were to have disappeared suddenly, my guilt would be obvious. They would come looking for me. My family would be disgraced. My only option was to stay and to try to conceal my culpability.

The town held vigils on the courthouse square for the rich man. Both the priest and the vicar held nightly services in which they led prayers for him. Several dozen people gathered outside the hospital to show their support and sympathy. The news covered the story non-stop. Like anything relating to the rich man, his struggle to survive grew into a spectacle.

I continued going into the office and working. I did not want to be at home when they came to arrest me, so I sat at my desk waiting for the day to come. Somehow, it never did. A week after the rich man was admitted to the hospital, the doctors reported that his stroke was caused by a brain aneurysm.

There was no mention of poisoning. I thought this was very strange. There was no way they could have missed the trace chemicals in the rich man's blood samples. The signs and symptoms were apparent. Motives abounded; one does not become rich without making a few enemies. But there was no investigation, no mention of wrongdoing. Someone was concealing the truth about what had happened, at least publically.

I began looking around the office for answers. All the while the rich man was in the hospital his associates had been all furiously jockeying for position and making bold power grabs. They were giving themselves new titles and repurposing different rooms in the house for their offices. They were starting entirely new departments and making themselves the leaders. All of them were staking out little provinces in the rich man's company which they could claim as theirs in the event that he never came back. It made me wonder if they had all colluded to suppress the facts about the rich man's poisoning. If it came out that there had been foul play, the company would fall under scrutiny, and the rich man's associates would all have to behave ethically and exhibit loyalty. They had a clear interest in keeping everyone distracted and making themselves as inconspicuous as possible.

As the rich man entered his second week on life support, his chances of survival began to look grim. The doctors were convinced that he wouldn't pull through. They were apparently debating how long they should keep him on life support at the very moment when his heart began to quicken and the rich man miraculously awoke. All the doctors and nurses cheered. The other residents in the hospital forgot about their own ailments and joined the celebration. I was in my office making up the initial plans for a funeral procession when I received the phone call. I collapsed beneath my desk, sobbing uncontrollably.

The rich man lived, in spite of my unconscionable foolishness and the countess's malice. He had eluded death and endured, but he emerged from the ordeal a damaged man. The poison had shattered

his mind and perforated his insides. His body would not digest food properly, and consequently, he remained very weak and tired. He lay in his hospital bed for many more weeks, motionless and bitter. He was unresponsive to the doctors and resisted treatments. Because it was painful for him to eat, he refused meals and would relent only when the doctors threatened to force-feed him. After many months in the hospital, the rich man's brother brought him back to the estate where—the doctors hoped—his recuperation might be more successful. The staff nursed him day and night. The rich man's brother sat with him for hours and hours reading his favorite books to him and watching sports on the television. It was horrifying to see him that way. He was a shell of a man. Because he was so diffident about his physical therapy, his body remained slack. His speaking was very slow and slurred. He had difficulty focusing on ideas and was mostly incapable of analytical thinking. The rich man said he wanted to come back to work, but it was impossible. His brother consented to have him put on a schedule of regular sedatives, to make his now purposeless life more bearable. The rich man never regained full dexterity or cognition. His recovery remained incomplete. The vigorous, assertive man whom we had known was lost.

Not surprisingly, the countess stayed by the rich man's side. Like a vulture circling its prey, she waited patiently through the hospitalizations and the futile therapies. When the rich man came home, she insisted on being the one who administered his medications. We would watch with revulsion as she placed the pills on his tongue and then pet and kiss his throat to get him to swallow them. I later realized that she was performing this role of the saintly nursemaid to re-establish the rich man's intimate attachment to her and make him feel dependant on her care and warmth. She was playing the long con. As soon as he was well enough, the rich man would reciprocate her perceived devotion to him by giving her whatever she pleased. We all knew perfectly well what she was doing, the rich man's brother included. Whether it bothered him or not, he never attempted to intervene. She made the rich man happy, one of the only things in his sad and broken life that still did. Whatever her cost, I think he

decided it was worth it. As we all predicted, as soon as the rich man had reached a point in his recovery where he could scratch his mark into a check, the countess went back to her long holidays and her international excursions. We saw very little of her after that.

As the rich man's recovery dragged on, the investors in his company grew impatient. The question of who would run the business would have to be confronted. It was the rich man's will that his brother accept the presidency and lead. The rich man's brother was reluctant to accept. He knew that he did not possess the business acumen to run the company well, and he was disinclined to leadership. The executives came to the rich man's brother with a proposal: they offered to run the company for him. He would assume the title of president, but the executive group would retain all decision-making authority. They would control everything. The rich man's brother was rightly suspicious of the deal, but he really had no other choice. Against his better judgment, he consented, and in a cramped, suffocating little room hidden in some secret recess of the rich man's house, I watched him sign away the company to those reptiles. They seemed to be salivating over him while he signed the papers. For so long they had fed on the rich man's scraps. Now they were sitting at the dinner table.

The rich man's brother saw that the executives would never be able to cooperate to run the whole company together so he divided it into separate autonomous business units and gave one to each executive to run as his own. The divisions were made roughly along operational lines so that there was a separate subsidiary for the banking arm of the company, another for all of the shipping interests, another for food processing, for textiles and so forth. The rich man's brother went down a list of names, as if reciting a roll call. After each name he would state the division to which that individual would be attached. I was astounded to hear, somewhere near the bottom, my own name uttered. I was put in charge of a building supplies business. I was mystified as to why the rich man's brother would have chosen me. I had no background in business administration and knew nothing about the residential

construction industry. In any case, I was pleased to be given the opportunity. I also felt ashamed in a way, because it meant that the rich man's brother counted me among the rest of the rich man's associates. For some reason, I had always thought I was different than them: less self-serving, less covetous. After the meeting, they all congratulated me like I was one of their own.

I used my new position to help the town wherever I could. I centralized all of the business's manufacturing in town and built an eight-storey office building right on Main street to house my new headquarters. Most of the existing workers refused to make the move, so we let them go with severance, and I hired local people to take their places. Right away there were problems. We did not retain enough veteran employees to train the new. Employees whom we were able to train did not turn out to be as productive as we needed them to be. Living the last few years off of the rich man's largess had made the people of my town lazy. The people I put in positions of leadership were wasteful and brash with the budgets I gave them. The workers beneath them could not be relied upon to produce quality products on a consistent schedule. I couldn't help feeling that my employees were ungrateful. I moved mountains and made a number of questionable business decisions to bring work to our town. No one recognized the sacrifices I made, or at least they were unwilling to make any sacrifices of their own in return.

We began losing customers almost immediately. I pulled us out of pipes and fittings because the market was too competitive. Then I had to pull the plug on fiberglass insulation. Within four years I had to sell the business to avoid bankruptcy. I took the money I made on the deal and re-opened the old pulp mill just down river on the edge of town. We were able to sustain that business a little better than the last. We had up and down years, but the general trend was toward decline. I continually tried finding funds from elsewhere in the rich man's company to cover my shortfalls, but the others were doing little better than I was. They too were mismanaging their businesses, throwing money at all



manner of speculative ventures and experiments, funneling cash to their own little pet projects, and writing illegal contracts with external companies where they had investments. The rich man's fortune had been so magnificent and so incomprehensible in size that we all regarded it as bottomless. It seemed that no matter how severe our mistakes, no matter how great our losses, they could be paid for and that there would be plenty left over for next year. We all took as much as we could get our hands on and spent it as quickly as we could. In doing so, we squandered the rich man's fortune. We dismantled his company and pillaged his assets. We sold away everything that was profitable and held on to everything that was costly until it died. The rich man's holdings dwindled. Then the day came when the money ran out, and it was all over.

All the company buildings are gone now. The rich executives have left. The lavish parties are over. The town is back to the way it was in the years before the rich man came. Empty storefronts line Main street. Neighborhoods are full of derelict houses. The courthouse square is grown over with weeds and the streets around it are full of potholes. You can still see the rich man's house looming over the town on the top of grandfather bluff. The forest has reclaimed much of the great lawn. The gardens have all gone wild. Most of the exotic animals are dead. The ones that were able to survive the winters now range freely over the rolling bluffs. Occasionally you'll see them in town eating people's garbage.

The estate is silent and still, but it is not empty. The rich man still lives there. He resides in the house alone. The staff is gone. Dust covers shroud all of the rooms. The windows have all been shuttered, some boarded up. Utilities have been turned off in most parts of the house, so the place is very cold and dark. The rich man keeps to his private quarters in the back. He will venture elsewhere in the house to collect books or furniture to burn in his fireplace, but other than that, he does not leave his room. Out of a sense of duty, and perhaps nostalgia for better times, I go to visit him. Every day

around noon, I drive up the crumbling drive and make my way through the dark corridors and the vast, empty spaces of the house. I bring the rich man food and supplies. I administer his medicines and log his vital signs. I talk to him for a bit. When I leave, he is disappointed and tries to get me to stay longer. I usually do.

One day, I ventured to the estate to pay him one of my usual visits. When I entered the house I discovered a number of rooms thrown all out of order and disarranged. In one of the hallways I found a long gash carved in to one of the walls. As I went further I heard a sudden commotion coming from the kitchen. By this point I assumed looters had broken into the house and were rummaging around looking for valuables. I was worried for the rich man's safety, and hoped that he had remained in his room and had not tried to challenge them. I carefully crept through the dining room and then down the stairs to the kitchen. The door hung open, so I peered inside to try to see the intruder. I could make out the outline of an animal. It was one of the rich man's prize stags. He was licking salt off the floor from a jar that had fallen and cracked open. I figured it must have gotten into the house that morning and had rampaged from room to room looking for food. I closed the door to the kitchen to trap him in. I would have someone in to take care of it later. First, I wanted to check on the rich man. I went to his room and knocked on the door. There was no answer. I knocked again, and then opened the door. The room was empty. I began running from room to room shouting for the rich man. I searched until my body was hot beneath my coat and panting. Finally, as I was jogging by one of the drawing rooms, I heard the rich man call back faintly. I found him hiding beneath a snooker table. He had been gathering kindling for his morning fire when he heard the buck break through a window in a nearby room. The rich man's addled mind had imagined that an assassin had infiltrated his home and was coming to kill him. He hid for hours. I put my coat over him—he was shivering cold.

I helped the rich man back to his room and into his bed. I then went to work making a fire out of a dismantled wardrobe that lay in a pile by the fireplace. I could hear the rich man moaning behind me. He might have been crying. Once I had the fire going, I fetched a kettle and put it over the flame to make tea. The rich man gazed into the fire for a long time while I prepared breakfast for him on the other side of the room. When I returned with his tea and some toast, he looked up at me and said, "You hate me, don't you?"

The rich man was prone to confused rambling from time to time so I ignored him at first. I thought the morning's tribulation might have disoriented him. But he continued.

"You despise me, all of you. I've always known it. I should not have stayed here."

"You shouldn't say those things. It isn't true".

"It is true," said the rich man. "In the beginning you hated me because I was rich. Now you hate me for losing it all. You people, you blame me for all of your problems. I know you wish I had never come, but you wouldn't have wanted me to leave either." The rich man's voice was faint and broken. He did not sound angry. He wasn't being accusatory. He was just tired, and defeated.

I told him, "Sir, I can't understand how you could think that. The people of this town adore you. They worked for you for years and were loyal to you. They served you in your own house. You brought incredible opportunity to this town. The people still honor your name with festivals and memorials. We owe so much to you."

The rich man wrinkled his brow. "You owe me? What do you owe me? Do you owe me my fortune? My health? The life I've lost? How do you plan to repay me for that? If I've given you so much, what do you give me in return? What could you possibly give me?" The rich man paused. He wanted an answer.

“I say that we owe you because you have been so generous. The people are grateful. No one in this town has forgotten what you did. To us, you are a great man. How could we feel anything for you but love?” I said this hoping it would put him in a better mood. The conversation was making me uncomfortable.

The rich man put his legs underneath the blankets of his bed and leaned back on his pillows. He said, “Even if it were true—if you thought you owed me, you would still hate me. You would feel obligated to give back, and for that you would be resentful. The burden of duty is irksome, and your kind does not accept it well. That isn’t why you hate me. You hate me because you feel I didn’t give enough. You think that I came and seized control, and then led you all into ruin. But I am not responsible for your misfortunes. That’s your doing. If I it were well I might have prevented it, saved you from yourselves.”

I considered leaving the rich man right then and there. I did not need to have this argument with him. I was no longer his employee and did not need to make myself amiable to him if I chose not to. But he was so pitiful in his state, the state that I had put him in. I did not want him to despair. I wished he would just accept my version of things and go on living peacefully. In an attempt to placate him, I said, “Sir, I give you my word. You are admired and revered. The people are enriched by the legacy you leave them. I can only tell you what I see and hear, and what I have found is that the people regard you as a hero. You are a giant among men and that is how you will be remembered. All I can ask is that you trust what I say.”

The rich man laughed, and then coughed heavily. “You think I trust you? You haven’t spoken an honest word to me as long as I’ve known you. You hide behind your professionalism and this faulty decorum that you built up for yourself. You’ve never spoken to me like a human being. To you I’m an employer, or a boss. I’m a name plaque on an office door, a bank account, a signature, numbers on a

spreadsheet. I would not expect someone in your position to grant me the dignity of an honest opinion.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” I said.

“Don’t be sorry. I don’t particularly care about you either. I hired you looking for a useful business associate, not a friend.”

“I’m not your employee any more,” I said.

“I wouldn’t say that you’re my friend either,” he said.

I sensed that the rich man was becoming exasperated with our conversation, so I poured him one last cup of tea and left. The rich man was wrong thinking that we all hate him. The people in town don’t blame him for his company’s demise. They blame me. And I don’t hate the rich man either. Just as he said, I am not fully able to regard him as a living, breathing human being with emotions and desires. He is something like an idea to me. He could never be a target for my hatred, nor could I ever feel love for him. I do not feel real remorse about what I did to him. When I see him now infirmed, I do not feel compassion. I pity the fall of his lofty office. I do not pity the man. He is not a man to me. He is simply a manifestation of circumstance, a concept—one that I do not fully understand.

After our confrontation, I decided it would be better to send a real nurse to visit the rich man rather than going myself. I made the arrangements and paid the bills. I never went back to the estate, and I never saw the rich man again.