

THE CARTON

“What the hell?!”

“Hey, Arlene. Not doing any damage. Just looking. Your cardboard is different from mine.”

“So you destroying mine?”

“Just peeling back a small patch to look at the flute.”

“You a really strange one Randy. You goddamn lucky I watch out for you. What the hell’s a flute?”

“It’s this pleated paper, the corrugations, that keep the flat sheets of the cardboard apart. It’s what makes our boxes so strong. Pretty damn interesting, eh? Pretty damn clever.”

“Don’t take much to muse you Randy. But I’ll be first to admit – hell, only one – you a clever son of a bitch. What you done with that packing box.”

When Randy realized that he’d be living on the street for a while, he figured why not make the best of it? Get the biggest possible carton for starters. So he slipped some pills to one of the delivery drivers for the Frenchish restaurant, *Le Cygne Chanteur*, five blocks down on the other side of the street. Very different from Randy’s neighborhood. The driver would let him know when something was delivered in an especially large cardboard carton.

Maybe four weeks later the driver said he had good news – for another three pills. A big commercial refrigeration unit had been delivered. It was the end of his deliveries, the end of the workday. The driver sat down on the entrance step of one of the abandoned storefronts. Took two cigarettes out of a pack, lit both, gave one to Randy. The driver watched the smoke and became pensive, mellow, in a mood to talk about 14 years of delivering restaurant equipment. The temperature starting to drop and the light starting to fade encouraged reflections.

“Y’know big stuff, like that Samsung 49 cube battleship usedta ship without carboard, just thick plastic wrapping. Thing is they can get banged up. A nightmare. Restaurant won’t take delivery. We’re stuck taking it back and bitching about who’s gotta pay. So some dude at Samsung who probably knows next to

nothing. Real close next to. Asks how come we don't have this kind of shit hitting the fan with regular fridges and stuff. Some working stiff, too smart for management, tells him corrugated cardboard is the original bangup protector. The guy in the tie counts beans. Wow cardboards's gonna cost. But then remembers what it's been costing for returns. So bada and bing, they ship them in huge cardboard containers."

Randy exhaled thoughtfully and said, "Lucky me."

"You hit the nail Randy. Cmon. You can't drag that monster box a half mile. Walk with me to the *Stinking Swan* and I'll take you and the box back in the truck."

"That what the name of the restaurant means? The *Stinking Swan*?"

"Had a Canadian tell us it's the *Singing Swan*. Guys I work with like our translation better. More accurate, you ask me."

That was four years ago. Randy used the box as his castle. Four and a half feet high, so he couldn't stand in it but standing was for outside anyway. His floor was sidewalk, and he had a lot of it; the box was more than six and a half feet wide. When he was first setting it up he thought about orienting it vertically, but why? And it would attract too much attention sticking up like a cardboard skyscraper.

Randy took the thick plastic wrapping and used it with duct tape to waterproof his container. Corrugated was great until it got wet, now it wouldn't. He then scavenged some corrugated slabs here and there and duct-taped them to all sides, making the container strong enough to ward off the occasional kick or the frequent strong wind.

Randy's new truck driver friend had dropped off a couple of slabs of polyurethane foam that had been used for protection during shipping. Two of them became protection from the sidewalk roughness and cold under his sleeping bag. It was a bed no worse than what Randy remembered of his banker days.

In the summer he left the front cardboard flap open, but mostly stayed outside for whatever breeze there was. He would drag the lawn chair from his carton to the shade and cool of the nearby overpass. It was a gathering place of those from the street's boxes, neighborly but silent. The winter was different. He took joy in hearing the wind, in being inside, protected and warm.

Arlene had watched him build his corrugated home. She wasn't interested in copying, and probably couldn't, but she had been on the street a long time and had never seen anything like it.

"Arlene, this will be St. Samsung by the Overpass, the pride of Center Street Estates."

She didn't understand the joke. It didn't matter. There were different types on the street, and here was a new one. He wasn't a threat or a soft touch, but she liked him and told him in her cigarette raspy voice that she would watch out for his home when he was away. She would keep away those who would steal from their corner of the Estates. Arlene was big, fast and known to have knives and skills. More important she was crazy enough to use knives and skills. The crazy might have been real or her street-useful act. Reputation was more important than reality. Randy had seen that also in the corporate world.

It was important to have friends on the street. When he had cigarettes Randy gave one to Arlene to smoke between coughs. Better than her usual source. Her nose bore burn evidence of the street butts she would light. They almost never spoke. Communication was physical presence. Sometimes gestures.

Arlene was his security guard when he left St. Samsung for a meal or shower in the shelter two blocks away. Nothing was ever missing from his small stash when he returned. His chalk mark calendar said he'd been on the street for almost four years. Arlene's cough was worse now, much worse, and sometimes brought up blood. He wasn't counting on her being around much longer. Nor was Arlene. Randy understood that the street people took comfort in not having to plan for the future.

Their plans were for the day, and the day could surprise them, the night more so. A night of strong winds collapsed Arlene's carton. Randy heard its wind driven flapping and investigated. Arlene had pulled her sleeping bag from her collapsing home and was huddled in it on the street. Randy tried to speak to her but the wind was too strong. He made a come-with-me gesture. She tried to take her sleeping bag, but she was shivering too violently to control her hands. Randy pushed her inside his wind defying carton and followed with her sleeping bag. He took one of his foam slabs and laid it out for her sleeping bag. After 10 minutes the shivering stopped. He listened for breathing, before trying for sleep again.

In the morning Randy told her that she could stay that night. The weather was supposed to break, and Arlene would be able to repair her carton the following day. But they both felt awkward sharing a space, and Arlene managed to make it through the next night inside the collapsed carton of her home.

She never came right out and thanked Randy. Saying thanks was reserved for donors to a hat left on the sidewalk and seeded with a few quarters and a dollar bill. To the street people thanks had the stink of insincerity. Their communication needs were simple, and rarely required words. Randy understood.

Randy learned that all of them said they were different, and he stopped saying he was. But he couldn't help thinking it when the past tapped him on the shoulder that second year. A private detective had located him – not that hard really, he never used a fake name. The PI gave him an envelope. He wouldn't answer questions, just pointed at the envelope, "It's in there. Read it."

Randy's father had died. Too late to attend the funeral. There was the matter of the will. The letter was from Rodney Whitner, his father's lawyer for more than 15 years. He and Randy knew each other, at least what they looked like. He knew that Randy would not want to travel hundreds of miles if it could be done by a gofer or mail to the homeless shelter. It couldn't. The lawyer explained that there was an 'issue' that would come up based on the will. Negotiations would go on for a few days and new papers would have to be signed. Too much back and forth for it to be done remotely.

The letter included instructions for Randy to claim an open ticket on United waiting at the airport along with cash enough for minor expenses during travel and a taxi to the airport. He was to call the lawyer to let him know when he'd be landing. A car would meet him.

There really wasn't a choice except to get it over with. He didn't mind the 300 miles as much as the four years. Back to before the banking world, back before the pills to numb the pain of that world. He looked around at the cardboard tenements of Center Street Estates. No one said that life was easy.

Randy walked to the shelter and asked to use the phone in the office. Long distance, but he would call collect. Natalie worried about her flock, but Randy was a smaller worry than most. She trusted him and left the office to give him privacy he didn't need.

He had not been on the street so long that he had forgotten how the modern world worked. He first called the airline, checked that there was a ticket being held for him and asked for the time of the next few flights. He chose one that would give him plenty of time to make it to the airport. No point in cutting it close. No pressure from his busy schedule. Then there was the memory of packing for a trip. Yet another advantage of life on the street.

He thanked Natalie, asked to take a shower and gave her five dollars as a contribution to the towel fund. Natalie looked at his roll of bills and at him.

“Relax. Didn’t rob a bank, Natalie. My father died. Gotta be there for the will stuff. They sent money for travel.”

“Sorry to hear about your loss Randy.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Mostly dry he walked through the cold a few blocks toward the *Swan* to catch a cab. They didn’t stop near the Estates.

Three hours later a crisply uniformed chauffeur was holding a sign *Randolph Westbrook* neatly stenciled. Randy, rumped and threadbare, approached and went off with him. In an age of nonconformist tech billionaires the stares were brief.

The chauffeur was trying to decide whether Randy was a regular guy and might want to talk on the long ride. But he played it safe, the right move since O’Hare made Randy retract into the past. With his attention elsewhere he automatically got into the rear seat of the Lincoln limousine and watched the once familiar past as he sunk back over his head into the depths. No thought to the contrast of the leather and silence with where he had started the trip.

The car dropped him off in the portico. No one answered the door when he rang. He waited but not long enough; it was a big house. On either side of the front door were large snake plants chosen by the Japanese gardner/Feng Shui advisor, whose English was a mystery. When Randy lived in this house there was always a house key buried inconspicuously in the left planter. He started to dig, when the door was opened by a fiftyish housekeeper wearing a black uniform and scowl. She figured out who it must be pawing at the dirt in the planter.

“Randolph?”

“Right. I’m Randy. You’re new.”

“I’ve been working here for two years.”

Randy thought ‘Right, she’s new,’ but kept quiet. She led him to the living room, though the layout was indelible in his mind and too frequently in his dreams. He sat and looked around at what little had changed. Something that had changed for the much worse was his mother who was descending the staircase holding a scotch.

“Evening mom. You look fabulous.”

“Bullshit as usual Randy. I know that I scare children. Age has caught up. It’s toying with me like a housecat. Not like the cardiac tiger that mercifully ripped up your father... what was it? Three weeks ago?”

She took a long sip, emptying the glass, and walked toward the sideboard where a bottle of Johnny Walker Blue was already at half mast.

“Drink Randy?”

“Thanks mom, but no. Don’t take chances with anything addictive.”

“Even cigies?” she said taking one for herself from a silver box.

“Gimme one please. Cigarettes are not addictive. Just look at the testimony of RJ Reynolds.”

She sat, gracefully as always, in the sofa facing him. In the better light she looked worse.

“You know that your father left you nothing. Did Rodney tell you that?”

“Didn’t mention it. Didn’t have to. Dad said he’d leave me nothing and I would rot in hell. He was a man of his word. Couldn’t arrange for the hell part. Some might disagree.”

“Your father was a difficult man.”

“Yeah, Hitler and Stalin too. Enough. Where’s the princess?”

“Your sister will not be joining us for dinner, but Rodney will. He wants to talk to you. For Christ’s sake Randy open your mind. He’s on your side.”

“Great. Plenty of room over here.”

They sat, smoking in silence. Not comfortable, not uncomfortable. Both were used to long stretches without conversation, though for different reasons.

The humorless housekeeper answered the door when Rodney Whitmer arrived not long after 6:30.

“Evelynne, always nice to see you.”

“Evening Rodney. Thank you for not telling me how well I look. An honest lawyer! Age of miracles.”

“Randy, it’s been a while. Thank you for coming.”

Randy said nothing but nodded in acknowledgment. No point in being rude. And Randy had never disliked the lawyer, had always suspected that he was a check on his father’s worst impulses. Anyway, Randy had it on good authority that the lawyer was on his side.

There wasn’t much talk at dinner. Randy was smart enough to know that his body was out of practice with rich food, and exercised, perhaps flaunted, self-discipline. His mother was getting her calories from Johnny Walker. The lawyer was enjoying the food but felt awkward, so business talk started with the coffee and tiramisu.

“Randy, aside from a few small items, charities, long time staff, your father left everything to your mother. Let me save you the task of asking the obvious: why are you here?”

“All ears.”

“Randy, in the vernacular of the young - full confession: I am now your mother’s lawyer; we have signed a contract. As before – when I was your father’s attorney – my job is legal advice. I don’t make what you might call strategy decisions. Only – sometimes – suggestions. Inviting you here was your mother’s idea. She insisted on it.”

“Still all ears. Now they’re even listening.”

“It’s not about your father’s last testament; it’s about the future. Your mother feels that she doesn’t have much time ...”

Evelynne interrupted.

“Thank God. Can’t wait.”

The lawyer continued.

“Your father bequeathed the bulk of his estate to her. We can talk about the size of that bulk, but it’s probably not crucial as long as you understand – and I’m sure you do – that the estate is enormous. You know he started out with a big inheritance, built up several businesses, made shrewd investments...”

“Yeah, Rodney. Got it. Huge. Knew that. Please get on with it.”

“The future is where I’m getting on to. Very soon – and she’s hoping that it’s tomorrow – she has to make up her own will. She has the difficult task of deciding where this money should go.”

Randy thought ‘poor mom,’ but kept quiet. This was too important, and he felt the birth of foreboding. The lawyer continued.

“The list of possible beneficiaries includes a few alienated distant relatives – your family seems to have trouble getting along – a few favorite charities, your sister Ava, and you.”

“Rodney. Stop. Let me shorten your list. I don’t want it. I would donate it to charity. So save me the paperwork and just have that written in; my part goes to some charity. You decide. If you know any charity my father hated choose that one. Where do I sign?”

The lawyer looked uncomfortably around, especially at Evelynne who could hold her scotch well enough to take the hint. She rose from the table and said, “Lady MacBeth exits stage left.”

She was slightly shaky as she tackled the staircase ascent. Randy watched, worried. She was his mother. It was the lawyer's turn again.

"Randy, here's the complication. Your mother and Ava don't get along very well."

"Glory be. I had no idea."

It was a slipup. Randy had meant to be serious, now felt foolish.

Randy had lived through the background. Way too young Ava had fallen for Bruce, movie star looks, nice guy, community college. Evelynne said he wasn't going anywhere and Ava had to find someone with a future. Ava shrugged at the loss of a big wedding and eloped. King Harold, father and husband, said no problem. He would give Bruce a future and mold him to fit it. The molding drove Bruce away. He just wasn't the sort of clay Harold could work with.

Evelynne had been harsher in her judgments of Bruce. Insisting she knew what was best for her only daughter. Ava had to blame someone for the disaster. Her mother raised her hand and cried out "Me, me!" Ava, a divorcée at 23, had trouble getting traction in her life, and decided to blame her mother for pretty much everything. The alternative, seeing that it was her own fault, didn't appeal.

King Harold was having his own problems and didn't take sides. The molding of Randy had gone even worse than with Bruce.

Randy apologized for his wise ass remark. The lawyer shrugged it off and continued.

"Evelynne is considering not bequeathing anything to Ava."

Up to this point Randy had been observing from a distance. Now he tensed up for whatever was to come. It wouldn't be good, and whatever it was triggered his I don't need this shit switch. It wasn't a time for a stupid remark. The lawyer had paused to let it all hit Randy. He continued.

"All to me? Then why not all to charity?"

"Ava is why not. She is worried, and she's not going to sit back and just let that money go to charity. Or to you."

“Rodney, excuse the stupid comment, but it’s not her decision, right?”

“Ava’s scheming to make it her decision. How? Fortunately, she revealed her plan in a screaming fit to frighten her mother. The plan – not that hard to guess – is that during probate her legal team will argue that leaving almost a billion dollars to a homeless son is *prima facie* evidence that your mother was not *compos mentis*. *Prima facie* means...”

“Yeah, yeah. I know what it means. Also *compos mentis*.”

“The court could nullify the will and there’s no telling what it might decide for the money. My best guess is that Ava will go for conservatorship. She’ll ask the court to declare her your guardian. Her legal team will present evidence of your drug use and your life on the street. Their people will bribe a few on the street to testify that you had done dangerous things. They will make the case that you would use the money to do God knows what.

“Acting on behalf of your deceased mother’s written wishes I would fight those efforts.”

“Rodney, what are the chances?”

“You have any dice?”

“No. Don’t have a gun either, thank God. What can we do?”

“I’m going to make a strange suggestion: We immediately have a court declare me your guardian. If we pull it off, Ava’s argument vanishes that you would be irresponsible, maybe dangerous, with the money.”

Sitting in a room from the past Randy had felt free of the past. He wondered whether anyone ever was.

It was the age of scams. Could he trust Rodney? He didn’t know. Why did he care since he didn’t care about the money. Long unused circuits in his brain were connecting. The smarts that had made him such a success before he became such a failure. The smarts alerted him that as his guardian Rodney could pull him off the street and have him put into some institution.

Rodney saw that Randy was thinking and waited. This was no time for rushing. Also not for delicacy.

“Rodney, how do I know you won’t use the conservatorship to put me away in some adult daycare center and relieve yourself of the burden of actually watching out for me?”

“Good question, and I’m glad you’re clever Randy again. We can protect you from my dark schemes by creating a document limiting what I can do about your personal freedom, and conditions that would be involved.”

Nothing was for sure, but two bad choices very likely. In a year, maybe less, he would have either Rodney or Ava as a guardian.

“Rodney, could we wait till after my mother’s funeral to see what Ava’s going to do?”

“We could but we’d be taking a chance of a legal battle over conservatorship. Ava’s team against mine. If we’re going to do it, we should do it now.”

“Rodney, can you give me two thousand against a promissory note pending the settlement of my mother’s estate.”

“Happy to.”

Randy would pay an independent attorney to draw up the document limiting Rodney.

“OK. Rodney. Let’s get it over with. I choose you. Congratulations and sympathy. Will I have to return here?”

“Yes, almost certainly.”

“OK, if it has to be. Now could you please get me the hell out of here.”

Rodney telephoned an always on call assistant, arranged for the first flight out of O’Hare and for a car. The flight got him back to O’Hare at 2 am. He caught a cab, but in a repetition of the morning experience the cabbie wouldn’t enter his neighborhood. He was dropped off four blocks away. An eight-minute walk.

The night was cold and windy. He was wearing his wool overcoat from long ago. It was made for looks not for protection. He pulled up the collar, hunched his shoulders and stuffed his hands deep into the pockets. He could tolerate eight minutes of this.

He saw the overpass, the cartons. He saw his Samsung home, longed to be inside, and cried.