

Darryl Benjamin
PO Box 493
Hyde Park VT 05655
802.585.5855
darryl@kafkaturtle.com
Word Count: 6,572

The King of PR

by Darryl Benjamin

We are at the renaissance fair when Charlie says, “I wonder what happened to old Sally.”

Sally was the girl we had a crush on in the second grade. When she moved away in the sixth grade she left us with broken hearts.

Charlie stands behind the white line with a bow and arrow. He takes careful aim at the target and misses. “Here,” I say, “let me try.”

When I was a kid and still in love with Sally I had an archery set. One summer I practiced every day. I imagined Sally sitting in a lawn chair watching me, her white legs folded, tapping a rhythm on the arm of the chair, giving me tips, urging me on.

“Not bad,” Charlie says, clapping me on the shoulder. “Not bad at all.” I had pierced the bull’s eye, and everyone – strangers, too – rewarded me with a round of applause.

Charlie is like that. He says things from out of the blue. “I wonder if she’s still pretty,” he adds.

“Let’s get some mead,” I say.

Later that night I send Charlie an e-mail: “Well, I found her, and she ain’t what she used to be.” I send him a link to her Facebook page. “Holy mackerel!” Charlie writes back, “You really did find her!”

She lives in Phoenix with her husband of twenty-eight years. She is round and her face is as shapeless as a pillow after a sleepless night. She has three kids, all grown and flown, and now is a real estate agent specializing in town houses.

I remember the first time I’d seen her all those years ago. I was young, a still-developing Polaroid, maybe in the first or second grade. I had never met anyone like her. She had neatly combed brown hair that fell around her neck like a velvet scarf. She tossed her hair back frequently, revealing large blue-gray eyes and light freckles. “I’m going to sing a Hawaiian love song,” she announced to the class during Show and Tell. “Pretend I’m in a canoe.” And then she sat on the floor and slowly rowed, singing a sad song in a clear, strong voice.

It was then I fell in love with her. I didn’t know at the time it was love – it was just a feeling in the pit of my stomach that cried out for more. More of what? I couldn’t really say. I wanted to be near her, to see what she would do, so I could drink her in and increase the longing in my belly.

Charlie felt it too. We both fell in love with her. Secretly, we bought plastic beads with our allowances and made necklaces and bracelets for her that neither of us had the courage to give. Our shyness was our defeat, and she fell for Tommy Dovas, the Greek boy, who was easily

the smartest in the class. Our jealousy was infinite. We hated him. We wanted to see him dead, or worse, dropped like a hammer into a hole by Sally. But no, it wasn't to be; until the moment she announced she was moving Tommy was her boyfriend, and neither of us ever got to hold her hand or kiss her.

A week passed and I thought nothing more about Sally, or Charlie, for that matter. I was busy looking for work and trying to put back the broken pieces of my life. No one seemed to want an out-of-work public relations manager.

My résumé and cover letter had been honed to a knife's edge. It glittered with experience and verve; it was as inviting as Penelope to Odysseus after his return. But there were no takers. My ex-wives were after me; the first intent on bleeding what little funds I had left and the second racing to forget me. My son, by my first wife, was out of work somewhere in Arizona and didn't return my calls. I pushed myself wearily through days that fell like dominos, wondering if MacDonald's would take a very experienced PR man, when the phone rang.

"You'd never believe," Charlie said, "who I just spoke to."

I wasn't feeling charitable and didn't want to play guessing games. "The pope, and he's pissed. He says you're late with your confession."

"Sally! Can you believe?"

"Really? You spoke to her?" I was genuinely surprised. I hadn't expected him to actually contact her. Mid-life has a way of losing shyness.

"In the flesh," he said enthusiastically.

"What on earth did you have to talk about?" I asked, curious despite myself.

"Not much. Her husband. Her kids. We're talking by e-mail."

“By e-mail,” I repeatedly stupidly.

“Ain’t that a kick?” Charlie asked.

I agreed it was.

Dr. Gottlieb leans back in his overstuffed mock-leather chair. “The last twenty-five years are a blank,” I say, “I got married, I had a kid, I worked hard, I raised a family, I got bored, I had an affair with a woman half my age, I married her, she divorced me. And now, for the first time in twenty-five years, I find myself alone again, essentially twenty-five again, but older.”

“Why do you want to see me?” he interrupts.

“Listen, Dr. Gottlieb, I don’t really want to see you. It’s painful for me to be here. But it’s more painful for me not to be here. I drive my car looking for work. I cover my eyes with my left hand as I drive. I peek through my fingers to see the road. I sit at home in the garage chain-smoking cigarettes. I can’t find work. I can barely communicate with people. I go to job interviews, but I don’t want to be there, and they know it. I give one-word answers and grunts. I cut myself shaving and leave patches of hair. I forget how to tie my tie. I mis-match my socks. My hands shake. I feel like I’m dragging a hundred-pound anvil attached to a chain around my neck.”

“So you want me to un-depress you.”

“Is that a word?” I ask.

“I don’t say ‘cure’ because I don’t think that’s the right word. Your condition doesn’t have a cure. You’ve suffered a blow to the ego. Are you suicidal?”

I shake my head. “No, I just want to climb into a hole and die.”

“I can get you out of your depression,” the doctor says, “but you have to follow my advice to a T.”

“And what would that be?” I asked.

“Avoid isolation. Isolation is depression’s best friend,” he says.

Sally and I got drunk together at our seventh high school reunion. I was still young, reckless and unmarried. “You know,” I confessed, “I’ve always been in love with you.”

Her eyes focused like gathering smoke. She swayed slightly, already drunk. “Is that so?” she said, “You never showed it much.”

“I was afraid of you,” I admitted. She gazed at me thoughtfully.

“Afraid you might damage my delicate male ego?” I suggested.

She smiled. She had just ended a relationship. She knew all about the delicate male ego, she said.

“Do you want to fuck?” she asked. I imagined we were so adult, so sophisticated. We found an empty ballroom in another part of the hotel.

I wrote her a few letters after that, but she never replied. I lost track and soon forgot her as I shunted to my new, married life.

Charlie is excited. He calls me in the middle of the night. “Ben, I’ve got to talk to you. I’ve got to talk to someone before I explode.”

“For Chrissakes, it’s late. Call me tomorrow.”

But he won’t get off the phone.

“No, it’s crazy, I’ve got to speak to you now. It’s about Sally.”

Suddenly I am awake.

“What about Sally?”

“We’re in love, for crying out loud,” Charlie says.

Charlie is married with three girls. Two are in college and one is about to graduate high school. He’s a hard-working middle-class guy with his own central vacuum business. He installs cyclonic vacuum appliances to rich customers who want the convenience of attaching a hose to the wall.

“It’s one of those e-mail romances,” he says proudly. He never fancied himself much of a computer guy.

“But your wife?” I ask. “Your family?”

“Yeah,” he says heavily.

“And her husband, and her family? This is nuts. You don’t know what she’s really like. You think you can tell by e-mail?”

“That’s where you’re wrong, bud, I know her really well. We’ve been *sharing* things,” he says.

“What kinds of things?”

There was a pause, as if he is trying on a new suit. “Feelings,” he says.

“Feelings,” I say, repeating the word stupidly.

“Sure, it’s dumb, but I don’t know how else to say it,” he says. “I just had to tell someone.”

“Charlie, did you ever stop to think you’re having a mid-life crisis? I’m the King of Mid-Life Crises, for Chrissakes. You want to hear what my shrink says about my second wife? I

married a twenty-three year old with a fifteen-year old mind. I won't even tell you what he says about my first wife. OK, I'll tell you. He says I married my father. Listen to me: don't do anything stupid. Don't jeopardize your relationship with Marsha. God knows who you'll be marrying. You're a log heading for the sawmill."

"Too late, Old Buddy," Charlie whispers, "Sally's coming out for a visit. And guess what? She wants to see *you*, too."

I take my hand away from my blinking eyes. "Me? Why does she want to see me?"

"How should I know? Old times' sake, maybe? I told her you're the one person we can trust with our secret."

Charlie doesn't know about the secret I share with Sally.

"And it's not a mid-life crisis, Benjamin," he says, using my full name to show how serious he is. "I had that when I switched from filtered to cyclonic vacuum systems."

"Right," I say. Only someone who knew Charlie as well as I did could tell he is dead serious. "When is she coming?"

"That's the thing," Charlie says, "she's coming this weekend. She'll be staying at the Comfort Inn. Can you be there at six on Saturday? She wants you to meet her in the bar."

"I don't know, Charlie," I said unenthusiastically.

"Do it for me," he says. "I'll join up later. We can talk things out. You know, logistics and stuff. You've been divorced twice. You can give us some pointers, I told her."

"Yeah, pointers," I say tiredly. "Good night, Charlie."

"Wait!" he says, "Will you come?"

I think about it. "Yeah, Charlie, I'll be there." I hang up and let my head fall against the pillow.

I realize the moments I felt free to dance in my own skin instead of irritably squirm in a bread-crumble speckled rhinoceros suit have been few. I drift to sleep and dream of hunting rhinoceros with a bow and arrow. Only the arrows bounce harmlessly off the thick armor of the beast. Just as fast as I send an arrow it quietly reappears in my quiver. I dream the night away endlessly pursuing an invulnerable prey.

I find Sally sitting alone the bar, watching me approach, those same white legs folded, heavier, her fingers tapping a rhythm on the counter. It is still early, only just six. It's too early to think about dinner. Instead I order a Flying Duck double martini.

She is fatter than she looks in her Facebook picture. Yet it is old Sally all right, her eyes glittering with the same defiant sparkle, plummeting some unfathomable depths, alluring, quickening my pulse.

She smells of lemon. In fact, she looks like a huge lemon drop. Her once-fine brown hair is now dusky with silvers and yellows, tied back with bright golden ribbons; she wears a one piece thin sun-yellow cotton dress that clings to her surprisingly light movements. And that perfume, what is it? Some kind of citrus. Her shoes are a lacquered yellow.

I'm thinking there's no accounting for taste and realize I've mythologized her for so long this shortcoming – dressing like a lemon is not my idea of an attractive ensemble – looms larger than it otherwise might have. So what if she thinks she's a lemon? What's it my business?

“Hi Sally,” I say, “Nice to see you.”

“And you,” she says easily, “I half expected you wouldn't show.”

“I can't imagine . . .” I begin, but my drink comes. The waiter places it wetly on a square of napkin.

“I thought I’d tell you some things before I met Charlie in the flesh,” Sally says preemptively. “He’ll be here at eight.”

I wondered what we could possibly have to talk about for two hours. “In the flesh,” I echo. I wish I would stop repeating other people’s words, but it’s become an obsession; unconscious, involuntary and wholly animate, it erupts from my mouth like an echo in a cave. I make a mental note to bring it up with Dr. Gottlieb.

“Not quite that lurid,” Sally says, unfolding her legs and swinging the barstool toward the back of the bar, her chubby left arm now exposed to me as she gazes into the bar mirror behind the bottles. She pats her ribbons into place. It is endearing, charming. I want to gather the great quivering woman in my arms.

“I’ll have a martini too,” she says, catching the bartender’s raised eyebrows.

We take small exploratory sips for a half a minute without speaking. I let my mind go blank and wait for her to speak.

When I am finally about to say something – *I’m not sure I can stay long* – she swivels her barstool until she’s facing me. “You know, I have three children,” she sighs, as if the achievement can only now be officially acknowledged. “My oldest, Paul, is twenty-three, and then there’s Walter, who’s nineteen, and Kevin, who’s in his last year of high school.” She looked down at her vinyl canary-yellow purse, which rests across her knees. “He’ll take it the hardest,” she says sadly, mostly addressing herself.

“Take what?” I ask.

“Leaving his father, getting together with Charlie,” Sally says and then her head jerks up. “Anyway, I’m not here to talk about me. I want to talk about Paul.”

“Really, I’d like to talk about your family but,” she cuts me off with raised finger.

Be Patient, the finger admonishes. Her face is only inches from mine. She puts her drink down and reaches for my left hand and encloses it in her hands.

The sudden physical contact is soothing. Her hands are warm and surprisingly soft. The lemon scent makes me dizzy. “Ben, when you found me you found more than you bargained for. There’s no way to prepare you for this, so I’m just going to say it.” She leans forward, puts her lips by my left ear and whispers: “My first son Paul is your son.”

I jerk my hand out of her grasp. It is involuntary, like a sneeze; despite this, it only just springs free.

“You’re shittin’ me,” I say quietly. My thoughts race. It must be a test of some kind, something she and Charlie cooked up as a goof. No, it couldn’t be that. I root about frantically for an explanation but she stops me by putting a finger gently across my lips, making a does-not-equal symbol.

“I am telling you the truth, as bizarre as it sounds,” she says. “I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you before. But there was no reason. You were starting a new family and so was I.”

I finish the last of my drink, which is almost empty. I still am not convinced I heard right. “Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask, my voice sounding remote and unsteady.

Obviously she had anticipated the question from the seamless way she now she rolled out her response with a detachment that felt a lot like Dr. Gottlieb’s last couple of sessions. Her words fade into the background as I suffer the familiar pangs of humiliation. My plight, my story, is nothing new; it has happened so many times it’s routine. Sally and Dr. Gottlieb are only going through the motions of giving a damn. I am incapable of surprising people, and that makes me feel old and depleted.

I make a brim of my right hand and hold it over my left eyebrow, like a hat shielding my eyes from a shaft of light. My elbow rests on the counter and I speak directly to Sally beneath the protection of my hand.

“The Reunion?” I croak, as if it could have been otherwise.

She nods slowly.

“And obviously you didn’t use. . .?”

She shakes her head. “No I didn’t. I was young and stupid and it was before AIDS and we were in our early twenties and invulnerable. Lord knows you didn’t have protection, either.”

“How can you be so sure he’s mine?” I ask.

She is prepared for that, too. She digs a tie out of her handbag. I remember the tie. I’d lost it years ago. I like that tie, damn it. It made a good interview tie. It was from the Jerry Garcia collection.

“Let me guess,” I say, “there was a hair and you had its DNA analyzed?”

Incredibly, Sally nods. “That’s pretty much it. Paul’s hair proved a perfect match. You guys are cut from the same cloth all right. Not that there was any doubt.” She smiles and straightens her back. “Nope, not a shadow of a doubt. He has your passion for pistachios, your obsession for literature and cinema, but he is also partly me, level-headed and good with money – he’s a mid-manager, on his way to the top. Only 23, and I’m so proud,” she says.

I feel clouds of darkening responsibilities choke my exit. I’ve had girlfriends spitefully lie they were pregnant because they didn’t want to break up. But never the opposite: instead of staying, she disappears; instead of a fictitious baby, she has a real one. A baby who is now twenty-three man and a complete stranger.

I drink the rest of my drink, which is almost empty

“Honestly, Ben,” Sally says crisply, “none of this would have happened if I hadn’t fallen in love with Charlie.” I couldn’t tell if she was apologizing or stating a fact.

“What about Charlie, your husband? Does he know our little secret? And what about Paul, for that matter?”

Her voice is still as beguiling and pure as the day I first heard her sing the Hawaiian love song. I listen to the sine curves of her voice, letting myself go, transforming me into a sound surfer, riding shotgun on her voice, walking the waves, tripping, falling, swallowed whole by the caressing tide. What do the words matter? They disappear into a dark cavern and only the murmur of her voice remains.

How did she acquire this gift, the power to rearrange my universe? I witness Sally reshuffle my world like a deck of cards simply by speaking. I am outgunned. I can only succumb, take note, try to comprehend, keep my head clear; and that, it seems, can best be accomplished with another drink. When it comes, I empty it before I look up, ready for the next salvo.

She glances at me sharply, downs the rest of her martini without a shudder, and puts the glass four-square on the table. Then she leans forward and delivers the words in a rush, sleekly, like a knife slipping into a custom-leather scabbard. “I know what you think: how could I? How could I pluck Charlie from the universe of my past and make him the center of my world? What am I really after? I’ll tell you: He’s regular as rain, lacks imagination, provides for his family, treats me with respect. He’s the salt of the earth. That’s what I want, someone who’s the salt of the earth.”

“The salt of the earth,” I say, expecting more.

“And he’s as done with his marriage as I am with mine. He’s ready to move on.”

“Dot org,” I say. I say it only because I can’t think of anything to say.

She looks at me for a queer instant, then smiles. “And you wonder why?” she asks.

“Listen, Sally, you don’t know Charlie now. You remember him from when we were kids.”

“Don’t sell me short,” she says. “I took the time to get to know him.” The bartender wants to know if we want another round. “Just bring me some nuts,” Sally says. “I’ll work up a thirst before long.”

“Charlie is the most refreshingly honest person I’ve met since I first met Frank.”

“You make him sound like a toothpaste.”

She narrows her eyes. I plough on. “You’ll get tired of him, too.”

“Yes, probably,” she sighs, “in another forty years, when we’re both gone.”

“You sound smitten,” I say, a little jealous despite myself.

“I’ll tell you about us,” she says. “Charlie is the man I’ve waited my whole life for. For 25 years I’ve been married and always there’s a little corner of my mind where I collect dissatisfactions. If only Frank were more like this, or if only more like that. Until I reached a point where the corner of my mind expanded to my whole mind, and then I knew I had to leave. I had just made up my mind when I received Charlie’s message. He says you were the one who found me. Is that true?”

I nod. *Stupidest fucking mistake I ever made.*

She shakes her head, as if reading my thoughts. “It’s the best thing that ever happened to me. Charlie is sweet and gentle and reliable and passionate and opinionated and loyal and funny and sweet.”

“You said sweet twice,” I say. But I had to admit that just about summed him up, including the double-sweet. Despite my fleeting jealousy, I feel relieved. I was afraid she had come back for me.

“Does your husband know I’m Paul’s father?”

“Nope, uh-uh,” Sally says forcefully, shaking her head. “And he’s not now or ever going to know. No one knows and no one is going to know,” she says solemnly, as if reciting a well-worn Bible passage or incantation. Then she leans toward me. “What is the point of destroying so many lives when everyone’s happy?”

“So no one knows and everyone’s happy,” I say slowly.

She is silent.

“OK, fine,” I say, speeding the words back to a normal tempo, “And I guess you don’t want anything from me? I’m already in two ex-wives and one son deep.” I was aware I sounded apologetic and possibly pathetic. Was I trying to make it easier for her?

I wonder how difficult this is for her. I note she is fortifying herself with alcohol, but otherwise looks composed, calm, relaxed. I am again drawn to her. I want to untie her ribbons and feel her body through her yellow cotton dress. She carries herself erect as the Eiffel tower, soaring and graceful despite her extra fat, which, I observe, has transformed into sensuous curves.

Sally is smiling now. “No one wants anything from you. At least not on this end. Except maybe your blessings for me and Charlie. She glances at her watch. “Our physical relationship begins in an hour,” she announces and closes her eyes, already savoring the moment. Then her eyes snap open. “And you’re wrong, I do know him. I know him through his words. We’ve written hundreds of pages to each other. We had a lot of catching up to do.”

“My blessings?” I say.

“Not for me,” she says, “but for Charlie. You’re like a brother to him.”

“A brother,” I repeat. “A brother who sired his girlfriend’s son,” I say.

I check my watch. In little under an hour I will relinquish the moment to Charlie. No, not the moment: Sally.

I have to meet Paul. He is my first son and I know nothing about him. What does he like, dislike, love, hate? Is he a cross between Sally and me? Is he a cross dresser? Is he a caseload or a joy? How responsible was I for my other son being so emotionally distant? Maybe now I will have a comparison of how things might have been with another wife. With Sally. (I can hear Dr. Gottlieb: “You want to blame everything on your first wife. Go ahead, if it makes you feel better.”)

“I want to meet him,” I say. I brush past her hardening eyes. “My own son has been a disappointment. If I say ‘black’ he says ‘white’ if I say ‘girl’ he says ‘boy.’ He dresses up as cartoon animals and attends conventions where other kids dress up as cartoon animals and then have sex with their costumes on.”

Sally lowers her head. “I’m sorry,” she says.

But her eyes are hard. “You can’t have Paul,” she says firmly. “What exactly do you want to meet him for? What’s the point of this exercise?” Sally asks cuttingly but coolly, gently. “I mean, who’s going to benefit from this? All I can see is the potential damage – to Frank, Paul and me. Why should I trust you now when I didn’t trust you enough to marry?”

For a moment I feel checked and can say nothing. Trust? Trust what? It didn’t make sense. “You liked me enough to fuck me in the ballroom,” I say.

I remembered the night we made love near a window in the hotel. I could still recall the warm musky scent of her body as she moved on the carpet. We barely noticed the high-ceilinged room with thick pseudo-Greek columns and plush green velvety curtains. Then it was over, so fast I wasn't sure it had happened.

Why hadn't she bothered to nurture the relationship? Why hadn't I? What if my emotions had suddenly soared and I wanted more than a zipless fuck?

"I don't want to 'have' or 'eat' him or whatever it is you think," I say. "I just want to meet Paul once. Only once. He doesn't even have to know who I am. I want satisfaction. Gratification. At the very least I won't be forever wondering what he's like. That'd be suffering I shouldn't have to endure. And frankly, you owe it to me not to torture me. He is my son biologically and maybe legally, is he not?"

She nods without taking her eyes off mine.

"Bartender," she says, "I'll have that drink now. Same as last time. I like that Flying Duck. What a funny name. Flying Duck."

She is talking more easily now. She looks away. "I've had love in my life, and loyalty," she says, "Which is more than I'm paying Frank back for. But now I want change. I can't explain it. I got tired, finished. I'm just done with him. It's time to move on," she concludes, no shred of doubt anywhere on her face. She is giving herself a good talking to. She smiles mirthlessly. "Don't you dare say 'dot org' or I'll rip your face off."

Her drink comes and goes. I wait for her judgment. "I'll have to think about it. If I agree there can't be even a shadow of a chance he'd realize who you are or I . . ."

"No," I hear myself say, "It has to be now. No waiting."

She considers. "And after that you'll leave me alone about it forever?"

“Forever,” I say.

Finally, she nods. “Well, all right.” It was then I saw the concession cost her little, that she had outflanked me from the beginning. All along she had been holding the inevitability of my meeting Paul as a trump card. She wanted to see how hard I would fight for it.

“Ah Sally,” I said, suddenly feeling light, “we could have been great together.”

“I doubt it,” she says, and empties her drink.

Who defines if the arc of a life has run amock or is true?

I wasn't sure if I would've wanted me for a father. I require too much independence; someone who always has the eye on the ball in some distant court. Finding a voracious client who swallowed you whole and then claims he's holistic, shouting at you while calming you, agreeing to disagree endlessly, creating problems where there are none; of course my hours belonged to the company store. Maybe if I'd been around more my son wouldn't be hopping around hotels calling me for money almost as often as my first ex-wife.

It was arranged we would meet for breakfast at a “popular place” designated by Sally, who knew us both, and therefore was an advocate among the Eggs Benedict. The plan was for me to sell him life insurance, which he didn't need or want, but would he please do a favor for his mother, who was shopping around for a Good Policy to endow Paul with sufficient moneys on her passing (timely or otherwise) so he could finally realize his dream of building a sunken pool in his back yard?

Here I confess I know nothing of the insurance industry and have even less desire to learn. Any industry that gambles in Ultimates such as life, death, and the gray, mysterious liabilities in-between is too much of a buzz-kill. Nonetheless, I found myself studying the policy racket. Sally thought it was a great idea, a convincing cover, and led the charge. At least I could blame her if things went awry.

I say, "I'll meet him cold, as if I was exactly the person I'm pretending to be. Maybe I'll know one or two things his enthusiastic mother has mentioned about him."

"That's good," she says, "And you're right, I am proud of him."

I think of my son in a fur suit.

"I'm sure you'll be fine," Sally says, mistaking my pained expression for anxiety.

I shake myself back to the present, like a wet dog. "Of course I will, I'm looking forward," I smile.

For a moment Sally regards me thoughtfully, as if she is taking an internal survey on whether or not she was wrong after all not to marry me and have Paul be our rightful son. In the course of twenty-eight years of marriage Sally is now making a change. I have to admit it takes – what is the female equivalent of balls? – *ovaries*, to do what she's doing. She knows her mind and wants something more for herself.

And what about me and my balls? Would I be interested in Sally if she hadn't sent her love arrows at Charlie first?

Probably not. Didn't I have enough baggage to unpack for a lifetime?

The Red Rooster Café is a favorite among locals and the summer crowd. A general store, sparsely supplied except for volumes of beer, lay in front. The café is in the rear with a few tables laid out cafeteria style. Flyswatters, available on request, are needed year-round.

Now it is empty except for Paul sitting in a corner at an elevated tiny round marble table parked on a slightly raised platform. He stands when I arrive. My first impression is that he is handsome, and that I can see my smile reflected in his. He holds himself erect and seems at ease. Maybe six feet tall, dressed in a smart button-down black business suit. He has my eyes, too; hazel and intense, staring through, instead of at, a person. Perhaps his eyebrows are a tad bushier, his nose a bit thinner, but the resemblance is unmistakable. I wonder if he senses any kinship.

“I appreciate you meeting me like this,” I say, embarrassed now that it is happening. We shake hands.

Paul shrugs. “I’m happy to do a favor for my mother. But to tell you the truth, I don’t need her life insurance policy or her money. I’ve been saving and will have my swimming pool this summer.”

Thrifty, I noted. “It’s not just about the money,” I say gamely, “it’s about your mother’s peace-of-mind. She’ll feel better knowing you’re the beneficiary of her property.”

“She’s not planning on dying soon, I hope?” he asks, drawing up a chair.

I take the seat opposite. “No, of course not. It’s just routine. She feels it’s about time to take out a policy, is all.”

We face each other, his eyes studying me.

“Do I know you from somewhere? You look familiar,” he says.

My blood freezes. I had solemnly sworn, and don’t want complications. Maybe I should wrap up with a kindly thank-you-gotta-go-now.

“What profession are you in?” he asks. “What do you really do?”

“I sell life insurance,” I say, a tad defensively.

He frowns. “I mean, before that? What did you do?”

“How do you know there was a ‘before that’?”

He doesn’t answer. I can see the counters spinning in his eyes as his memory seeks a match.

“PR,” I say, “here and there.”

Suddenly his eyes widen and stare directly into mine. “You’re Ben Stannard, aren’t you?” he asks excitedly, his chair scratching back against the linoleum floor. “The fallen top PR guru in the country.”

“Not really fallen,” I correct, “just discredited.”

There is a moment of embarrassed silence.

“Of course I know you!” Paul cries, smacking himself mildly on the forehead, “you’re the reason I got into PR. I can’t believe this.”

He then proceeds to recite my accomplishments as if he’s reading from my résumé: the Hershey Chocolate Fountain Campaign simultaneously activated in seven major American cities; the first brand-name besides NASA on the outside tiles of the shuttle (Red Bull); the re-branding of Swine Flu from the killer it was into an image of a benign, ‘just-under-the-weather-flu’ with the introduction of a hilarious, kindly, gentle pig cartoon character named Sus Scrofus.

“You even got Matt Groening from *The Simpsons* to develop the character,” he says excitedly. And then Paul, my erstwhile son, discreetly sings the intro to Sus Scrofus-the-Pig’s attempt to oust Smokey the Bear as public service Warnmeister:

*Observe at dusk
Where the great wild boar
Roams solitary
Blurred into silent mists
On craggy crests!
Hear him in the gloaming
Grunting and groaning
Near lonely habitations
Or where rustling olive trees
With trunks ancient and gnarled
Cling desperately
To stony hope!*

*Is he a danger? Should we run?
No! Remember, Swines like Sus
Don't kill people.
Rumors kill people!
Don't believe rumors!*

Paul sits back, his eyes shining. “You’re him,” he concludes, “the King of PR.”

“I’m no longer in that racket,” I say. The man-behind-the-curtain partially revealed. How sharp was this kid? *My* kid?

Paul leans forward. “What happened to you could’ve happened to anyone,” he whispers conspirationally. “I don’t blame you a bit.”

“Yeah, well, thanks.” I hadn’t thought of the incident in a while. It had coagulated into a round, hard coin in my brain, about the size and shape of a penny, made of clay and ceaselessly spinning, seeking, sucking my attention like a black hole, forcing me to acknowledge my guilt.

There is a cage with a lion. The girl leans forward and one of her ample breasts slips out of her bikini. She smiles and palms it back into its nest. A great roar comes from the lion. A man – apparently the lion handler – is ready for the stunt. He unlocks the cage. She manages a brave smile and gazes out on cameras that are broadcasting to forty media streams. It is the biggest, most outrageous stunt I have ever tried. The idea is for the girl to say, “This Firebug is so hot

your honey will leap!” and the lion is supposed to leap over the red Volkswagen Firebug. Only it decides to sink its teeth into her thigh.

She releases a terrifying scream as the handler yanks on the lion’s neck. The lion almost lovingly lowers her to the ground where she writhes in a spreading pool of blood. Someone yells, “Call 911,” which is ironic, since modest projections estimate half-billion people are watching; but before anyone can call, the lion attacks the handler and is busy ripping off his limbs when a security officer shoots the lion dead. The girl is now out of her mind, her eyes as wide as targets, staring at bits of arm, fingers, and stomach she thinks are hers.

The girl survived, I didn’t. My company was sued into the ground and the supposed shield of incorporation was not sufficient to protect me from being financially drawn and quartered in court. Even so, I visited her regularly at McLane’s – where I was given to understand she was making a slow but steady recovery.

Her name was Belinda Cathers, and I had destroyed her career, just as surely as she had destroyed mine. She was the kind of beautiful you see when suddenly turning a corner in the city, finding yourself face-to-face with a goddess who knocks the breath out of you as surely as a baseball bat blow to the belly. You are riveted where you stand as she impatiently pushes past you. She’s seen it all before, it fails to impress. She’s going places, you’re anchored to a bit of long-ago-spat-out gum that’s melted and perma-bonded to the sidewalk. She has the same regard for you as a dog has for a fireplug. She refused to see me.

After her face was patched up and she was able to walk, albeit not without a limp, I asked her out for dinner. I had worn her down with the persistence of my visits. We married and were happy for four years. Four years of glorious fucking, injuries notwithstanding. Why is it always four years? And then she divorced me. Moved on. Dot org.

“And you, Paul? What do you do?”

“Nothing like you, sir,” he says. “A pale shadow.”

“Don’t call me sir,” I said irritably.

He grins as if that was the perfect response. Old ragey cagey curmudgeonly me.

“Nothing like you. “I’m a promotional manager for a radio station. You know, contests, give-aways, the whole shooting match.” His face brightens.

“Say,” Paul says, “I tell you what. I’ll buy some of that insurance off you after all.”

“I hope it’s not charity insurance. I don’t want you feeling sorry for me.”

At least my cover had not been blown. I could face Sally.

“Hell no,” he replies passionately, “let’s keep it in the family.”

He had meant ‘from one public relations guy to another’ but he had hit the bull’s eye. He is my kid after all.

“Sure, kid, sure,” I say, “I’ll send you the forms.”

I never dreamed he would actually buy the insurance. I had come unprepared.

Everything happened as Sally said. Sally and Charlie fell crazy in love, divorced their spouses and married. I had kept my end of the bargain and with Sally’s blessings Paul and I occasionally meet for coffee, ostensibly to give him some pointers on getting ahead in the PR business. I am still looking for work and love but Dr. Gottlieb says I’m cured. “You took a pretty screwy route to get healthy,” he said, “but you took my advice and mixed with people. You’re back in the game now. You graduate.”