

The Perfect Crime

by
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. . . *how beautiful are the old
when they are doing a snow job!*
— Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day*

*Outside sky swept lengthwise by gusts of wind.
Vast and silvery white, it is cut into lines of energy tensed
to the breaking point, into awesome furrows like strata of
tin and lead. Divided into magnetic fields and trembling
with discharges, it is full of concealed electricity. Dia-
gram of a gale akin to the renditions of our Chicago-
scape as imagined by the late local super-hero painter,
Roger Brown. Like the silhouette figures in Brown's
painted high-rises, there's a man in my room, nay, on my
bed, refusing the bed, begging for the floor instead. His
name is Michael Perfect, but answers to "Perf." No
kidding. Said he was a perfect angel when a kid, 'til he
joined the Marines. A rip for a mouth, a rip in his crotch,
a hank of hair, a flair for ill-fortune, an empty stare, a
done deal with sorrow. Shirt off, he shows off his per-
manently scarred and distended abdomen (sans belly-
button) evidence of surgery for liver cirrhosis and rup-
tured spleen. On his chest, under the right collarbone,
there is a scar: a round one with tiny wavelets, like the
imprint of a coin on wax. An old war wound. Says he
smiles when he's angry.*

But I'm sorry. I haven't introduced myself. I am the imperfect human. Here he is. The imperfect human. You will see the imperfect human function. How does such a number function? Waiting. What kind of thing is it? To be waiting, only waiting. But as this is a short story, we can't look into that now. My name is Gerald and I'm sitting on my bed. On the third floor of the Upping Arms Elder Home. Where my son, I call him "Jimmer," put me. Out of love, he says. Sometimes I believe him. I'm a lone egg frying in a dry pan of detail. And my human stuff see-saws back 'n forth between clay as mud and clay as porcelain. I can testify that which ceases to be useful simply begins to *be*. A creature on the borders of nothingness and death. Trying to outwit Ticktockman, the fearsome dude eating away the minutes of my life. Or as a degree-bearing aeronautical engineer who spent his whole life trying to minimize loss

and entropy and logical impossibility would more objectively phrase it: *the negative entropy in the ordered organization of life has now become balanced by the positive entropy of disorder and death*. My head stuffed with dried memories in place of quick thoughts: the YesterNow of elder physics.

At the urging of Jimmer, who says I have talent, I am now the newest member of our institution's "Happy Scribblers" writing club where my inkly offerings come under strict scrutiny. "That's really the pits," is the norm from our club president. "Gerald, do you have a single predominant incident in mind?" a stern Fialta Fenwich queries in response to my hint that I've got a punchy idea for my first outing as a wordsmith. Zipped lips don't sink ships, I remain silent about my son, who took the brunt of the incident, and suggested the topic. And the captain of our ship, Fialta? She was voted such as she takes her compass heading from correspondence courses in creative writing and, during the McCarthy Era, taught English composition to midshipmen at Annapolis. Moreover, she's donated not one but *three* copies of Strunk 'n White's *The Elements of Style* for our club members' enlightenment. "You will reach new platitudes of success," Fialta announced when she passed the three spanking new copies around. Three, my favorite number! Little good these do, those slim books, our members are already shrunk 'n white and nevertheless have little style.

"Do you have a single preeminent character in mind, Gerald?" That's Fialta, she's relentless. Withered, but immaculately unwrinkled, her scalp is dotted with hair implants. She's our home's resident skeptic. Because she mixes an abrasive personality with a sharp intellect, Jimmer has dubbed her our home's "gerontomidwestern Sontag." Even her daughter found her too headstrong to take under wing and care for after her third husband's liver gave out from alcohol; she stopped making meals and refused the fare supplied by Meals-On-Wheels.

"Yes I do have such," I bravely assert, pulling from that depth of courage I drew from on every mission over the flak-torn skies of Germany. "And I've got imaginaaaaaation," I add, drawing a large rainbow arc before her face with my open palm as I sit across the table from her in our home's newly remodeled Sunshine Room. "I want to experiment with narrative structure," I offer, not saying Jimmer has given me a nudge in that direction along with a folder stuffed with textual fragments he's razored from books stolen from academic libraries. She gives me her *Oh, have you!* look. "Yes, I've got a *real* character in mind. A *character* of a character, if you catch my drift." Fialta looks worried, like may be my protagonist is modeled after her. So I quickly clarify, "In fact, my protagonist indirectly got me tossed out of

my last elder home." I'll bet she is thinking, *Now that's the kind of protagonist I could play.*

I notice seven of eight pairs of ears at our table perk up (the exception is Kim Young Sam who's recovering from an Overwhelming of the Vessel, a stroke). They sense a plot — and blood. As a newbie, I expect they'll pick my stuff apart with "That's really the pits." They await a plotless, no "puncher." But I'm praying for 4000 words and a unity of expression good enough to atone for any sins. What's that on my forehead? Sweat? Nervous. The "Fen Witch's" gaze can cast a formidable spell. And I am working with the handicap of some mental obfuscation; why I'm in here in the first place. And what will our members think about my smart son kibbitzing from the sidelines with his shards of copped text?

"Your story must move, move, move," The Witch continues, directing her gaze evenly across our faces as if to dish out her spell evenly. But I know she's tossing her dart my way in particular. She was about to add a fourth "move" when our guest speaker walks in — fifteen minutes late.

"Made a perfect mess of my life," confesses Perf, one of Oak Park's increasingly numerous homeless. "All I used to do was hang with barflies and watch without pity as an olive drowned in my Martini. In those days I had a party trick in which I'd balance a cocktail on my forehead and then lie down on the floor without slipping. That's when I was gainfully employed and winning not a few bowling matches on a semi-pro circuit with the famous, in Ohio anyway, Kegling Kouples. Now I can't afford nothin' but rot gut. So's now me mouth always tastes like it has been used as a latrine by some small creatures o' the night. Ya know, though, addiction is just prayer gone awry, right Jerry?"

Met "Perf" occupying a bench in our local park during one of these walks of mine. He just sat there and lifted his suspender straps, both at once, as if he were shouldering a load, the metal clips of his suspenders two burning clusters of sunbeams. Kept meeting him there over several sunny days. Always fussing with those damn suspenders! Occasionally, he'd utter "Ophelia" under his stale breath. "One of several names-that-touch-me," he later explained. Seemed to keep himself going on gas fumes and cigarettes. Liberal villagers walking by toss a buck or two in his Starbucks cup; neo-cons lecture him on fiscal responsibility, while Born-Again bother him with

Scripture. I catch his attention because I'm wearing my old bombardier's flight insignia on my black leather jacket.

After introducing our guest — Professor Sayit Allreddy, a South Indian writer teaching at Columbia College, Chicago — Fialta flashes a fortune cookie from her Chinese take-out last night and reads: "A snowstorm of cold images counsels against excessive love of winter." Says she plans on adding it to her latest poem (one of several assembly-edited together like a *cento* from such randomly won verbal gems). I hand her one of mine. It was just kinda crumpled up in my left trousers pocket from where it remained after my lunch at Soo Way Kitchen. Our guest speaker comments briefly on Fialta's concept, explains that the *cento* form of appropriation was the thing to do in Alexandrian Greece, then segues into some esoterics about "post-modernism" and "quotation."

I had asked Perf to use the familiar of my name 'cause I was impressed he often resorted to the term "prayer" during his testimonials and confessed that, as a child, he jumped up in the middle of mass yelling, "Didja see her? She nodded! I asked the Blessed Virgin would my dog come home and she nodded yes!" Probably why, besides the weather, I invited him up here. Smuggled him in the side door when the staff member posted there was disinfecting himself at the newly installed Purcell hand-sanitizer station. Oh, yes, the other reason. He's a veteran of The Second. Tarawa Campaign no less. "Lost one testicle, gained a Purple Heart, picked up another ball keglin'." No wonder he has a slightly Kewpish voice that sounds like Lisa Simpson on a peace march. He attributes his alcoholism to his war traumas.

"There's a word for that now, that kinda disturbance, not back then, so it didn't exist as it does now," he explained. "Ever since they came up with that word, my condition's gotten worse, I swear." He maunders on about his sad life. Seems he drove a fork-lift in some heavy-industry up in Green Bay after the war. He couldn't recall the company name, but said everyone wore designer hats, green 'n white. When he mentioned his wife hailed from Wausau, Wisconsin, I did a little elder jig right in front of his startled face. My ex and I both hail from Antigo, I tell him, a blip on the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad Line once. Thirty miles from

Wausau. Now the town's lucky if people stop to fill their gas tank on the way to the North Woods' fishing resorts. Although, the town has some claim to fame: first to be supplied with fluoridated water, Life magazine did a feature on the high school's Junior Prom in the late thirties, one shot featuring my future wife in her prom dress; it was the proud home of not only the guy who invented the famous Suick Musky lure, but also an Iwo Jima flag-raiser whose son wrote a book based on his dad's experiences from which a Hollywood movie was recently made; finally, notorious Timothy McVeigh had shady dealings with the big bald militia-type who runs the Army Surplus store just off main street. My son would add to the list his favorite wine merchant here because the guy was born there and wants to be buried there. My parents and my ex's are all are buried in Antigo's Elmwood Cemetery. I want to be buried there. Jimmer wants to be buried there. Hell, who doesn't want to be buried there?

But death isn't Perf's thing. He prefers we talk bars. The ones that still have rusty BLATZ signs over their rickety premises and the bartender knows how to make a "Berliner." I agree with him that those little Wisconsin burghs usually harbor nostalgic watering holes with dark wood bars that have accrued aura, with names like "The Farmer's Home" and "Beer 'n a Brownie," that take you right back to the thirties when record-size Muskies were still being lifted by the dozens from local lakes directly into the beds of rusted out pickups, and the true fisherman, sporting a name like Frank Suick or Jack Borkenhagen, would be known by a tackle boxes so thick layers of silver paint it could hardly be closed which he'd gotten from his dad, who'd gotten it from his dad, who bought it from a family of a deceased Chippewa fishing guide.

"Alright Allready, I think we are running out of time," interrupts Fialta, trying to keep our meeting within its hour time limit. Allready quickly segues to a Cliff Notes summary of his Doctoral Dissertation. The topic's critic Dorothy Sayers' *trinitarian* theory of artistic creation. My ears perk up at the three-word as three is the number of God, the number of hope, the number of operations I've had so far. Sayers, he explains, sees art as a collaboration between a generative idea (the Father), and style (the Son), and some emotive force (the Ghost). By the time he's done, I'm nearly jumping

in my seat. As Fialta frowns and looks conspicuously at her watch, I tell him about my project, *this* project, and that I'm the father (obviously) and I'm collaborating with my son (less obvious), and we are dealing thematically with the ghosts of my life-past. This evokes an effusive grin and nod from our speaker, but a mouth crumpled like a discarded candy wrapper from Fialta. Oops. I let the cat out of the bag about Jimmer, my pedantic son. By now Fialta is standing and extending a withered hand his way. But before repacking his alligator-skin briefcase and returning the shake, Allready dishes out one last bit of advice, "If you send your writerly fruits out into the cruel world for publication, never, never, never should you give the perusing editor an easy out by enclosing a self-addressed stamped envelope for returns. And never, never, never mention you are a resident in an elder home," he adds, "unless you're contributing to *Modern Maturity*." He gets the expected laugh or two. Even Fialta lets a smile happen.

Spasm of pity squeezed my slowly failing heart. Wouldn't it happen to yours? Torrential rain's forecast, so I offer Perf my bed, my cool linen sheets, but he humbly takes blankets, a pillow, and the floor, returning a weak smile while blinking at me with blue blue blue innocent eyes (envision a tiddly Paul Newman) that could fool anyone and scratches a little at his crotch. I manage to smuggle food up to him. He pees in my bathroom, standing straight as a chess piece, where it's as bright as a hospital's operating room, but he always misses. Refuses the convenience of my yogurt can. Can't recall much he said 'cept the war stuff, my memory is that thing I forget with. I do remember dodging our Fearless Leader and Fialta when smuggling in all sorts of chow to keep my guest's rumbling stomach at bay. Between meals, he seems content to watch DVDs from my collection of World War II documentaries on fighter aces, brave battleships, and D-Day heroics. He gets misty-eyed at my vintage "Victory at Sea" collection, especially when the theme music, "Song for the High Seas" composed by Richard Rodgers, starts each episode of the famous TV series. Brings back pleasant memories of shipmate camaraderie onboard the troop transports before each beach landing.

Our guest having departed, Fialta shakes Bondo McCracken awake. As he's sitting next to me, his re-animated body sends me a whiff of sweat and old

cracker crumbs. He's been slumped over twenty ballpoint scribbled loose-leaf pages from which the title page reads, *Blight: The Great American Novel*. He nearly jumps from his seat. Starts to read his opening sentence, "The dawn rises like sick old men playing on the rooftops in their underwear," and is immediately cut off with a unanimous, "That's really the pits!" Fialta deftly refocuses her attention toward *moi* (my son claims tossing in a little French invites readers take this stuff more seriously). "Now the first thing you have to do, Gerald, is try and get hold of a catchy title; for instance, 'Basil Hargrave's Vermifuge,' or 'Fun at the Incinerating Plant,' catch my drift?" I nod a cautious affirmative. "Start with a good declarative sentence about your main character, such as, 'Hazel Goodtree had just gone mah jong. She felt faint.' Get it?" I was going to ask her if "going mah jong" was like "going postal," but kept my lips zipped. "Remember," she continues, "the voltage between two people, the pressure-cooker of a single human heart, are as fit grist for your stories as the epic convulsions of history."

I boast that all the Supreme Court's five conservative members are Catholic. I like to get the "Catholic talk" agoin', but I see Perf prefers we swap war stories. He said he realized, after watching my cable History Channel and nearly all my WWII videotapes, none mentioned how often even battle-hardened Marines would shoot themselves in one foot to get evacuated out of hellish conditions. Bad attitudes.

I tell him about my lofty altitudes, up past 10,000 feet in St. Christopher, my B-17 Flying Fort. Tell him once this young bombardier is on leave in London, about to be seduced in an apartment (lured upstairs from the smoky bar below by a girl who gave me the look of a distant star, turned, and asked me if I wanted to see her stamp album) when the phone rings and we are told: "Dive directly to the basement, Lootenant, do not stop at the bar, and remain there for the duration of the air raid." So down we went to a basement aglow with oil lamps and small candles snatched from the inn's tables. The girl I was with — Bianca was the name given, but not believed — exhibited a quiet serenity usually achieved only after long days of weeping and sobbing. This accounted for the fact that her Italianate eyes were deeply circled and yet they had the moist, hot flow and spare purposefulness of a business woman that never misses anything. After awhile the basement ceiling shook with

bomb impacts and we feared it'd cave in. It was the first time I'd been on the other side of the bombsight. Under the incessant drumming, time passed like sluggish dirigibles stuffed with freezing water and my BVDs felt like they were made of thatch. This was just a few hours before the bloody charge of dawn and my bouncing bus back to the airfield for another gut-wrenching mission piloted by fearless "Bangin' Bob" Gormley.

Yep, he liked that one, but the story that really sobered him was, "The Case of the Uncanny Can," my pièce de résistance.

After our club meeting, I return to my little monk's cell via our slow-as-molasses elevator. Our Scottish handyman, Daithidh MacEochaidh, has just put mirrors in the lift. He's the guy that lets me take a nip from a bottle of scotch secreted in a janitor's closet and often feeds me trivia, like, and I quote, "Jerry, no chameleon can live with comfort on a tartan." Somehow, I think that applies to my me and my Situation. Some kind of Scottish Zen Koan about my bipolar change-ability. Anyway, Jimmer said Mac hoped the mirror effect would reduce the incidents of claustrophobia suffered by some of the more touchy residents, like "Ill-Phil," our cruel tag for a guy who has the whiff of the volatile about him, who needs to inflict himself on the world ever since unsuccessfully storming a Nazi mortar position. Phil's usual greeting is: "See yuh. Wouldn't want to be yuh," followed with, "You tampered with my *tau* modulation, fucker!" or simply, "Yes, I can very well escape, but during my escape, I'm looking for a weapon," as a thickish vein in his pale head flutters menacingly. At meals he often stacks toast, jelly containers, salt and pepper shakers, and so forth, as high as he can get 'em, constructions we punningly term his "Ill-Phil Tower."

Perf's ears perked as I began my tale: "Our bombing mission for the next day was scrubbed due to bad weather over the target. So our crew worked overtime at the local pub that night. But about 5 a.m., we were startled out of a drunken slumber to shouts that the mission was on again. Perfect conditions suddenly arose over our objective. With a hangover almost too heavy to bear, we all staggered through breakfast, runny eggs and toast, and barely managed to climb into our war birds. To make a long story short, on our way back to base after a

good mission, I had bouts of diarrhea. Nothing to shit in but an empty ammunition box for our .50 caliber machine guns. As luck would have it, our home base was socked in with English fog, so we landed at our alternate field. I left the smelly can in the plane, but a ground crew member ran up to me, 'You left your ammunition box, Lutenant.' I carried the damn thing into the base's terminal and left it in the officer's men's room, but a guy cleaning the latrine retrieved it, ran out and handed it back to me. So I'm stuck holding this dreadful thing. My fellow crew members could hardly keep a straight face. Anyway, finally, the weather cleared. As we started to leave the terminal, I surreptitiously slid the damn can under a seat. I was out the door and almost to my plane, when a gorgeous WAC came running across the tarmac shouting, 'Lutenant, Lutenant, you almost forgot your ammo,' and handed me the cursed thing. Well, Perf, we had to ride all the way back to Rattlesden airbase with that smell wafting through the fuselage, forcing us to go on oxygen even though we were well under 10,000 feet. Needless to say, I became the butt of jokes in half a dozen pubs over the next two weeks. Hell, I coulda gone on a USO tour to entertain the troops!"

Yesterday, Jimmer suggested we put on our father-son flight jackets and test-fly the south elevator. My eyes lit up. Father-and-son mischief. Exiting my room, we ran into Mac. Nobody can pronounce his name so we just call him Mac. As we passed, he acknowledged us with a polite nod and licked his lips with an odd, little grating sound, as if he's made of something peculiar. We hobbled down the hall past small metal plaques with arrows pointing the direction to a range of room numbers. Jimmer said the halls reek of urine (most of us are Depends carrying members of the Flow Flux Klan). When I stopped at the lift, the momentum of my thoughts sent them rushing forward, pressing and wetting the backs of my eyes: thoughts of affection for Jimmer.

I raised my finger old-age-cautiously to press the call button to begin our adventure. After a spell during which Jeane, my ex-wife, could have smoked two cigarettes, the door opened; we stumbled into an alien landscape. The doors WHUMP shut and we are sealed in that queasily rising box, rising slowly toward room 536,

the Community Elder Services office (chairs there swiveling back 'n forth catching green threads of the carpet in the casters) where I will in the very near future repeatedly report Jim's elder abuse. The surrounding walls in the lift are mirrored floor-to-ceiling, giving an illusion of infinite space. I quoted Hamlet to Jimmer — it reminds me of that bright blue day in Oceanside, California when, at age seventy-three, I soloed in a Cessna — "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and yet count myself a King of infinite space."

"Hall of mirrors effect, the scene of the abyss, dad," reflected my theory-jock son. "*Mise-en-abyme*, in French theory, *mon cher père*." Staring at that eternity, all that I'm fond of as me was cupped up in this single, staring instant. I was nothing but distortion and then I completely disappeared into infinite replication. My ego a reflection, not an object.

"For Chrissakes, what is this? — a Jesuit lift?" I teased Jimmer at a moment we both sensed was somehow metaphysical. I felt my gaze become objectivized, it was no longer mine, it was stolen from me. Usually my short-term memory just loops every day or so, but this adventure of ours remained vivid.

Bob Gormely, our pilot, survived whatever the Hun tossed at him, but nearly succumbed to that Uncanny Can that smellful day. Wouldn't you know, but his oxygen mask decided to malfunction and he had to drive our bird with one hand, holding his nose with the other. The guy went on to fly Lockheed Super Connies and then commercial jets, retiring as a Captain with United Airlines in the late-eighties. He moved near my ex-wife. His last airline flight, he took a duck in the face at 250 knots; shattered the 747's windshield. Brought the plane down successfully though. Ballsy guy. Back in '44, drinking in English bars, he'd always have the pick of the skirts. Handsome guy, still is. So not so surprised to think of him making passes at my fickle ex. Oh, well, may the best man win. As Jimmer can verify, our family relations — though strained due to me going off my anti-psychotics, and harrowing and violent as human birth — have eventually emptied into acceptance and resignation.

Must have been about an hour after I return to my cell when Jimmer knocks. I remove the chair propped up to hold my door secure against interlopers and enters my son beaming as only his blue eyes can, holding a book title in my face: *Chefs as Farmers-Scientists: The New Frontier in Food*. I sense dark clouds of root

vegetables and cabbages are on the horizon. In one of MyOwnPrivateIdaho brain events, I swear I smell a sautoir of potatoes simmering gently in duck fat. In a Proustian moment, I recall last night's dinner out with Jimmer, not long after our elevating elevator experience. An awful restaurant bathed in unkindly light and the fish staring up at me from my plate, its one flat, iridescent eye accusing me — all surrounded by dreadful murals of Sicily. Sitting at another table is another not-long-for-this-world resident of our elder home, Vera Lille: an eighty-seven-year-old depressing concatenation of Parkinson's-arthritis-hip-implant. If this ain't enough, *twice*, shrieks emanate from the kitchen. (A month later, the joint's *Kaput*.) We sit on my bed and regurgitate our bad dinner experience (as Jimmer flips through his book and offhandedly mentions "slow food" and "molecular gastronomy"): *he* liked his clams casino, he said, but the olive oil bread dip sucked. Whatever. Too painful to think FOOD when the fare at my Situation is only a notch above penitentiary cuisine. So I quickly change the topic by telling him about my long walks, wanting to know where I've been forcefully resettled — this "village," as locals nostalgically call it — where I am living out my last days. Want to know it by *walking* through it. A side benefit? This will also help improve the use of my legs, balance, and blood flow to keep me lucid. So, daily, I do an hour constitutional around my environs in my clown-sized orthopedic shoes (until I'm shackled to that damn walker).

"Yesterday, on my walk," I start to recite a litany of events to my son, "a German shepherd approached, I turned left to avoid it. Then passed two pastry shops on one block where two Scottish terriers looked less intelligent trotting side-by-side, than when seen alone. Someone was following me again. I ditched him. Near our church, I removed Tony Alamo Christian Ministries anti-Catholic pamphlets off five parked cars. Two cooks and one distracted woman formed a precise (and intense) equilateral triangle in an alley behind that bad Italian restaurant, inside of which another woman buttered a piece of white bread as soft as the plump undersides of her arms. I went for a cone in that ice cream store you claim liberal villagers avoid as the owner is a Tea Party politico; reminded me of my many forays into our family freezer for mounds of mint chocolate chip. Remember? Then, as I crossed in the middle of the street, taking a short-cut to St. Hilarius to go to Confession, a driver made eye-contact with me through her windshield, a stern gaze that said: *I'll allow just enough time for you to cross before I zip by, but hesitate and you're toast*. We both counted on the continuity and truth of elder physics, partaking in a mathematics of the most complex kind." At all this, Jimmer just rolls his eyes.

The only intellect in here I fear is Fialta's. And now she's knocking on my door and yelling, "Open Sesame," or "Sez me," or something like that. Claims she wants to share a box of her precious Koeda chocolates sent by her grandson teaching English in Japan. Jimmer opens the door. Upon entering, she's *too* ingratiating. Suspect she's really here to spy on our father-son collaboration. Jimmer tactfully excuses him-self, "Gotta grade student papers, my hoppies. Bye-bye." He likes to call the residents here "hoppies." Go figure.

As Fialta hands me a choice dark chocolate, she points out a curious enigmatic fairy tale English inscription on the chocolate box: *A lovely and tiny twig is a heroine's treasured chocolate born in the forest*. "Grist for my collections of *centos*," she explains. Catching on to the gist of her project, I suggest she surf for inspiration on *www.English.com*, the wacky website where foreigners attempting to use our fair language send proper English spinning. When she opens my door to leave, I can hear that Bondo has left his door open again; the strains of what sounds like the second movement of Chopin's Twelfth Sonata for Flute and Cuspidor echoes in our pee-tinged hallway.

Sorry. I haven't been able to add to my short story for two days. My feet hurt so. So this morning Jimmer drops by to take me to the podiatrist conveniently located in our building. Nice Korean lady. Seems so young. And her last name *is* Young. Has a sign framed in her waiting room with a curious bit of wisdom from the *I Ching*:

**Deliver yourself from your great toe.
Then the companion comes,
and him you can trust.**

She's too nice and delicate to see my feet, which look like two over-tenderized yellow-white chicken breasts with rooster claws grafted at one end and covered with month-old fungus growing at the tips. Embarrassed at the state of my feet, as if they are a horribly-rhymed poem, Jimmer's in the waiting room with his head stuck into some dumb magazine. Nothing changes during these nail-clipping procedures, except for a newer edition of *Cosmopolitan* (featuring "Waking up at *his* House" or similar dreck) and *Car and Driver* in the magazine rack. I get placed in this big relaxing chair while young Young hacks away at my thick, sick toenails. That distinct SNAP of the clippers. Sounds like something I'd hear in the inside the fuselage of a new plane being assembled as technicians wired the electronics. Even out in the waiting area, Jimmer flinches with each snip. Once she hits a small vein and I yelp and bleed, in vain. Nothing can stop that encroaching yellow plague turning my toes into caricatures of human digits.

Constant pruning and prayer keep it at bay though. I'm unsteady enough on my feet without this shit happening. Have to wear high, orthopedic socks these days. Keeps the fluid from settling in my two southern peninsulas. Swelling (it ain't swell) and losing feeling in those regions too. Something about my heart. Isn't pumping up to snuff. Depressing to see your personal geography being slowly annexed by foreign powers. Thought I fought a war to prevent just that. The doctor, Jimmer, and a white plastic shoe-horn urge me into my black orthopedic shoes with Velcro fasteners. Sixty dollars per sole. Like paying for an indulgence. Way too heavy for my weak legs. I ditch 'em for my white gym shoes when I'm in the home despite being prone to trip on their untied laces. Yah, I know I will catch flak for this, but I'm a lucky bastard. Got a certificate after surviving all those combat missions to prove it. My son and I go for lunch, in our painfully slow-serving dining room.

For a whole week Perf suffers my war stories, me his. For a whole week Perf partakes of coffee 'n leaky eggs for breakfast, for lunch he demands "a greasebomb with cheese 'n extra fuel, but hold the radioactive materials," and for dinner I smuggle in our classy mystery meat of the day. In between, he snacks on my store-bought corn bread which I cover with honey to keep moist. As many residents take up food to their rooms, this bit of subterfuge isn't too difficult. Perf consumes some twenty-one meals — "Better than a twenty-one gun salute." he says with a smile — before the whistle is blown (I fear it's Fialta) and I'm in deep doo-doo.

Having a bad day. Feeling persecuted. Irascible. What I call my "Futterneid Quotient" is rising again. I've complained for a week about Bondo's noisy antics and that my toilet pipes are tapped and my feces analyzed. So annoyingly persistent am I, they agree to move me to another room whose number is, as I insist, a prime number. Jimmer and the handymen here commiserate as they work their butts off lugging my stuff. Jimmer manages to sneak out with and trash some of my possessions. Thinks I'm blind and can't recall what I got. Like my golf clubs. Says he's storing them at his place. Can't fool me. Sold 'em, I know. And where did my archery set go? Said I authorized selling it. Liar, liar, pants on fire! I know he's got his hands in my till, too. Why I moved all my bank accounts from under his nose and figure I'll soon report his elder abusin' ass to the officials on the fifth floor next time I'm looking into the abyss of that mirror in the lift. And that red-haired wife of his . . . in cahoots! No doubt. A psychoanalyst to boot.

I know she's telling them here I'm nuts. Why else are they analyzing my feces and putting meds in my orange juice? When I complain, they accuse me of "petulant self-advertisement." Ho! I can sense they're going to, someday, take their pound of flesh outta me for all the trouble I am.

*They call our Fearless Leader. They call the resident psychologist. They call Jimmer. They call the cops. They tell me I'm naive (polite for stupid). Who's "they?" You know, "them." Anyway, I'm called into Fearless Leader's office; only then do I discover it's decorated in "taxidermic chic" (a cow skull, two stuffed rodents in doll clothes, a lizard embalmed in varnish. and a lasso-shaped sign reading: **Sheep may safely graze where a good shepherd watches**). Gets up from his desk and bows in a parody of old-fashioned grace, revealing a nacreous scalp thinly mantled with long damp creepers of brown hair. Thinks the length makes him hip 'n cool in the eyes of the Baby Boomers who are these days putting their parents in here in droves. Gives me a "Hi, Jerry," in a sing-song, mocking manner to which I mumble a "God-be-with-you," as I ironically mimic a Papal blessing. I hate him, he gets in the way of my lie, my lie for myself. Got big hunch that his self-possession is temporary, like a reflection in water that's wiped out by the first swell.*

"I'm an experience stager," he explains, "our guests here are on stage and you don't fit the cast, aren't what we want people to see as characterizing The Elder-Experience. Capisce, Cochise?" I'm dismissed.

Fearless Leader takes pains to make sure none of this vagabond-in-the-room stuff gets into the papers. Bet he bribed 'em. They do permit me to shake a firm final good-bye to ol' Perf before they separate us (tears in our eyes) and firmly escort him from the premises (more difficult now since he's gained ten pounds and suffers the after effects from a bottle of single malt scotch that Daithidh thought he had successfully hidden in his maintenance closet.)

Pissed. Seems I'm always pissed off at someone or something: my ex-wife, deceptive salesmen, seducers of all types, bleeding-heart liberals, Pope-condemned movies, slow drivers, my former bosses, TV anchors, sex-celebrities, my daughter's suitors, and even well-meaning people who offer the platitude, "You still

have a long time ahead of you." Can't stand our megalomaniac elder home honcho, nor those meal-delaying cooks 'n waitresses here, nor that faking-friendly guy who follows me around in this place and gets into my myriad medications by busting my safe (my son thinks I smashed its door myself to gain credibility); oh yes, and don't forget those guys on staff here who analyze my feces after flushing. Jeez, I hear someone behind the wall sometimes! I imagine those test-tubes too. I try to imagine the faces. Plural because I'm sure it isn't one guy. (Did you catch my bad pun? Bet you didn't.) Must have three shifts. And all males because no female would analyze feces, right? Right?!

Wish they'd just move me outta here. I'm busted, broke. They, my son and his wife, got all my money. And the meds I'm supposed to take, that sneaky bastard who pretends he likes me, fawning asshole, knows just when to break into my room and swipe 'em. I can tell 'cause when I accuse him, he frowns, nods, smiles, snaps his fingers, sucks in his breath, and eventually grins. Had the nuts to break into my safe once. Busted the door. Probably selling my pills on the black market. Must remember to write Jimmer a frank letter about this, this very week. Must twist the turbulence of my liquid intelligence into the stony idiom of the tortured brain.

I never found out Perf's fate. It was one of my more colorful experiences in my elder-life and a first for the Upping Arms Elder Home. And the last straw. As I stand before Fearless Leader, I'm read a litany of offenses. Later, Jimmer is told to find another home for my sorry bones.

An ordinary short story is like a meteor. It has only one moment, a moment when it soars screaming like the phoenix, all its pages aflame, then peters out with a swoosh. Such was that one moment in my life when I met Mr. Perfect and we pulled off the (almost) perfect crime. Almost, as I soon found myself out on the street waiting for Jimmer to drive up and put all that makes up my material life into his shiny silver SUV. Another Situation awaits me ahead. Another story in the making.

A firm knock. I think that's Fialta at my door to remind me about our meeting at 1 p.m. At least that's what my DON'T FORGET dry-erase wall-board lists in bright red ink as my next activity today. Ten minutes later Fialta is drumming her platitudes into us. "Call it precious and go to hell, but I believe a story can be wrecked by a faulty rhythm in a sentence — especially if it occurs toward the end — or a mistake in paragraphing, even punctuation. Henry James was the maestro of

the semi-colon. Hemingway of the paragraph. Virginia Woolf never wrote a bad sentence." After several minutes of Fialta's homily, the club meeting is turned over to our members' readings.

Tandeta Paluba, a vocal member, announces she has just completed a short story, "Jeffy is Eighty-Five," a clever gerontic refunctioning of a classic Harlan Ellison story. As she rattles on, I slowly become aware how much I like how she wears her hair, swept back in an odd '40s pompadour that looks like some auxiliary brain. Tandeta is followed by Magda Wang, a slovenly and loose-tongued woman, who brashly demands to read from her ongoing memoirs, *The Purple Days*, daring us with those darting eyes of hers to give an unfriendly critique.

Rory McDuff, wearing some kind of citrusy cologne, his hair around his ears in little grey waves that look so natural they have to be fake, follows Magda, reading from his newly begun detective novel, *Bubble of Fear* (his original title, *Eight Heads in a Duffle Bag*, was unanimously nixed). "My protagonist, Detective Inspector Justin-Nico Thymme, narrates in the first person, opening my mystery in a men's room thus: 'Having just been involved in a self-defense shooting of a perp I returned to my precinct in Chicago's Greek Town. I've been on duty twenty-four hours straight, powered on copper's-li'l-helpers and mainlined caffeine. I'm now in the precinct shit-house. Staring in the mirror, I notice my hat and trench coat and hands are pinprick-sprayed with the residue of ugly work; my eyes are sunken little blue coals, the wrinkles on my face look so much like plastic that it's hard to tell what's real and what may be a mask.' That's the first paragraph, took me half the day to write it." We all nod our approvals — even hard-to-impress Fialta.

I go last. "I've titled this piece 'The Perfect Crime'." I pause as Bondo rubs his hands in anticipation. I begin, "Outside, sky swept lengthwise by gusts of wind. Vast and silvery white, it is cut into lines of energy tensed to the breaking point, into awesome furrows like strata of tin and lead. Divided into magnetic fields and trembling with discharges, it is full of concealed electricity. Diagram of a gale akin to the renditions of our Chicagoscape as imagined by the late local super-hero painter, Roger Brown. Like the silhouette figures in Brown's painted high-rises, there's a man in my room, nay, on my bed, refusing the bed, begging for the floor instead. . . ."

— The End —

About the Bricoleur: James Hugunin teaches the History of Photography and Contemporary Theory at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. This short story is an elaboration from his novel, *Elder Physics, The Wrong of Time: Monologues from an Elder Home* (2011).