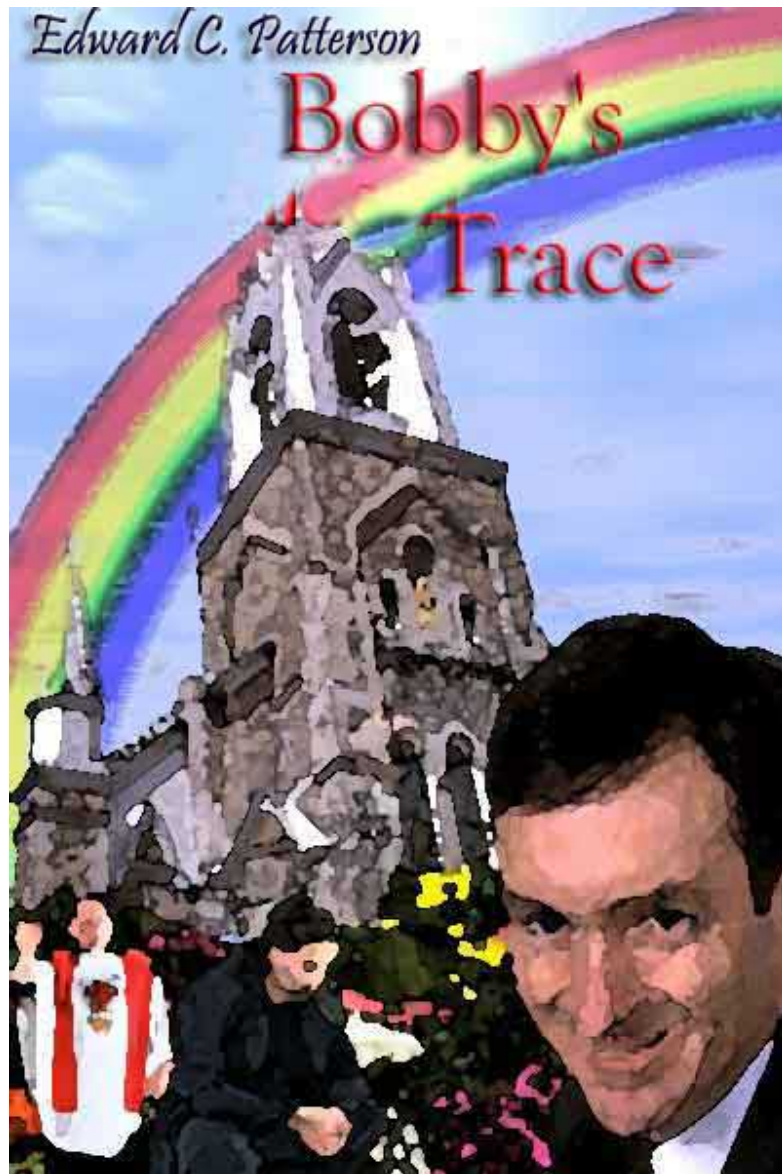


Edward C. Patterson

Bobby's Trace



Bobby's Trace – Edward C. Patterson

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1

Bobby

Bobby's eyes drew the world to his soul. No one could resist them. They winked and flirted with everyone he saw. He underscored this with a smile that blossomed to sunshine whenever he observed his fellow man, which he did often, cataloging them by size and weight and humor. Would they be interesting conversationalists? Would they feign glory and evict truth? Were they good in bed? No matter how those eyes scanned and measured, they enchanted wherever they glanced, an army falling game to Bobby's peepers despite his too-short time.

Bobby's eyes drew the world to his soul; so it was a double-fisted sadness when he died. Diminished first from symptoms — legions of purple lesions; marinating tongue fungus; dementia and incontinence. Blights that faded every vital part save Bobby's eyes, but even they succumbed to the onslaught . . . in the end. Breath laden, Bobby joined the refuse of this earth as sure as destiny's loam. His eyes became nothing more than memories, drawing a solitary recollection from the man who cared for him most — the only man who attended to his graveside — Perry Chaplin.

Bobby's eyes may have drawn the world to his soul, but his death drew only Perry to his plot. Now we can speak the secrets.

††††††††

"Did you see her?" came a whisper from the next cubicle.

Perry Chaplin looked up from his work, his eyes, red and puffy. He heard the voice, but, like the work he feigned, he scarcely noted it.

"I know that look," continued Mary Hughes, who chartered the neighboring cubicle, the one with a better view of *her* — the boss. Mary popped her head over the stockade's rim. "Did you hear me, Perry?"

Perry rolled his eyes, and then returned to his pile of notes. Deadlines. Lines of code to be scrawled and tested, and he hadn't programmed a single measure in over an hour.

"Well?" Mary persisted.

Perry shook his head. He sighed. "You know I can't see her from here. I don't want to see her. When she sees me, she's gonna fry my ass, but I'll tell you what. I don't give a flying fuck."

His pushed a stack of manila folders to the floor. In any other circumstance, they would have become a scattered pile of debris, but these were programming specs, directly from the best minds at Gamma Rex Software Development Studio LLC, so they just flopped on the gray carpeting and laid there — intact. Defiant. Mocking their assaulter.

"Shit."

"Perry," Mary said. Her eyes scolded, yet pitied also. "You're at it again? Don't start now. *She's* on the warpath. If she knew . . ."

Perry glanced up toward the picket line, where nothing south of Mary's nose could be seen, "I told you, I don't give a flying fuck." He stooped and gathered up the folders, a careless effort meant more to keep his cubicle tidy than to pursue any schedule. As he righted the stack, he muttered: "I miss him."

"Shhh," Mary steamed. "Not so loud. *She'll* hear you. They'll all hear you!"

Perry wondered just how Mildred Wickersham, the *boss-lady*, could hear his whispering. Mary meant well, he guessed. She ran interference for him since his return, but this didn't give her maternal rights. Perry's mother had been in the grave since his fourth birthday, and since his father disappeared in a miasma of scotch and rye shortly thereafter, the only maternal rule he had

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experienced came from a paternal Aunt, whose reign over him was slight. No. The distaff side did not steer Perry Chaplin. No one did, unless he counted Bobby. That thought pushed out a tear, which fostered a sigh; then, another round of *shhh*'s from Mary.

Perry sniffed. He didn't bother to blot the tear. *Let it rip*. He was in a foul mood. Both employment and employer were low on his priorities today. He had been okay for the first few days back, but now every minute not absorbed with distractions, belonged to thoughts of his dear, dead Bobby. Vacations at Provincetown — kite flying and dune wrestling; and the prancing at the T-dance in the late afternoon, where even the gulls admired Bobby's form and graceful moves. *Such movements*. Sunday walks in the park. Although Bobby was often distracted by the joggers, which amused Perry, because it meant to make him jealous. How jealous could he be of Bobby? A few more tears pushed over the lids. Perry still refused to blot. His sinuses filled. Head ached dully. If he had nerve, he would beat a trail into Mrs. Wickersham's office and plead illness. *Hell, I'd take off without pay*. But how could he? Out for two weeks for Bobby's last days and . . . the funeral, if one could call it that. Since Mrs. Wickersham wasn't *gay friendly*, Perry's mourning posed as a *fantasized*, once-in-a-lifetime vacation to Italy. That's all Wickersham knew. That's all anyone knew, except Mary Hughes, who was, after all, Perry's closest friend; his only friend now that Bobby's eyes shut.

Suddenly, Mrs. Wickersham appeared in his cubicle. He hastened to blot the tear and apply his fingers to the keyboard, although what spewed across the screen was in no computer language known to man.

"Perry," she said. It was usual for Mildred Wickersham to greet each employee daily in this manner. Sometimes it was followed by the weather report or an inquiry into work progress. In this case, it was mono-syllabic. Mute after that. Perry stared into her eyes. She was a comely woman of forty, or perhaps forty-five — hard to tell as she tended toward the plump. Her auburn hair was pulled into a bun. Black, owl-winged spectacles made her appear more *bossly*, but not managerial. In fact, she was a wizard of sorts — a cracker-jack programmer who inherited Gamma Rex Software Development Studio LLC from her late husband. This was by no means a lucky acquisition. Mildred helped pioneer this business from pocket-change investments to a few millions. Her employees frequently saw her auburn bun bobbing back and forth, pencil stuck in her ear flap as she reviewed each account against the production schedules, the ritual that jump-started the globe on its daily orbit. That ritual complete, she launched into the rounds through the cubicles.

When Perry had decided that Mrs. Wickersham was either too stressed (Mary said she was on the *war-path*), or distracted by the morning statistical reports, he placed his hands to his sides, nodded, and then wished for her disappearance. Wish granted. He heard her quiet step proceed to the next cube.

"Mortimer," she said. Perry heard Mortimer Johnson shuffle some papers and babble something sugar-coated and self-serving, his usual *modus operandi*, although Perry couldn't clearly hear the words. Nor did he care.

Perry returned to his daydream. Sigh. He twirled a pencil between his palms, focusing on the point. If he had been more alert, he would have seen Mary poke her head over the top again, but he was finished working today. There was no reason for him to stay. He was just mustering the courage to face Mrs. Wickersham and ask for an afternoon off. Then he could escape into the fresh wintry air. Perhaps flee to the park. Sit on the lawn. Watch the joggers. His daydream recommenced. More tears, and then suddenly, the pencil snapped — clean in two. He hadn't pressed it hard, but split it did, momentarily distracting him from his ever-present sadness.

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"That'll solve all your problems," Mary said. He jumped. *Where did she come from?* She had slipped across his threshold and tucked herself into the corner. She held a wad of tissues in an outstretched hand. "Here," she said with the fervor of a battlefield nurse. Perry robotically wiped. He didn't want her here; although he knew that once she had invaded his space, she'd be worse than a bed-bug. He liked her; perhaps even loved her. She was the closest thing he had to a *fag-hag*, although she sucked as a *beard*, being married and quite content with her hippie, professor spouse.

Mary hunkered down beside Perry (and she could hunker, no shrinking violet this). "When are you coming back to us? I miss you, snooks."

Mortimer popped his head across Perry's threshold. His eyes widened upon seeing Mrs. Hughes squatting at Mr. Chaplin's side. Mortimer waggled his fingers, and then smiled. "Can I borrow your set-up disk, Perry?"

Mary stood, returning to her corner, while Perry rifled through his diskette box. He flipped disk after disk. "Where is it?" Finally, he dumped the box across his desk, diskettes spreading like a canasta deck. "Damn it. I had it the other day." He slammed his fist on the empty box. "Didn't you borrow it already?"

"If I borrowed it I wouldn't be asking you?"

"You've lost things before, you know."

Mary raised her hand. "Morty, do you really need that shit now?"

"If I didn't, I wouldn't ask, would I?"

Mortimer's glee turned sour, no longer inquisitorial. Mary grasped Mortimer about the shoulders ushering him toward her own cubicle. "I have a set-up disk too. Use mine."

Perry stared after them, and then glanced at the array of diskettes that dominoed across his desk. His hand shook. He swept the desk clean, the diskettes making a perfect fifty-two pick up. The folders went again along with everything else caught beneath Perry's palm.

Mary appeared, this time blocking the cubicle from Mortimer's view. Once he passed, she assaulted the carpet, gathering clips and post-its, diskettes and folders. "This has got to stop, Perry."

"He's gone." Perry wept.

"He's back in his cube."

"No. Bobby's gone."

"Shhh. Lower. Not so loud." Mary plopped the diskettes beside the keyboard. "I know he's gone. You shouldn't have a tear left to shed. Where you're finding all that liquid, beats me."

Another head popped into the cubicle. It was the pimply technician who was installing a network printer. "Is everything okay here?" Mary got to her feet, brushing herself off. Perry looked away. The technician's face flushed. "Soda anyone?"

"No, Ben," Mary said. "We're getting it together. Thanks for the offer. Unless, Perry, do you feel like something to drink?" Perry ignored her. "Thanks Ben. Maybe . . . a little privacy. We'll keep it down."

Ben shrugged, and then sauntered back to his installation.

"It's hard," Perry bumbled. "I see and hear Bobby in everything."

Mary appeared to be gathering her thoughts; platitudes that friends are expected to blurt when other friends are hurting to their heart-soul. "All right, snooks," she finally said. "It's time for your dear Mary to swoop in and set you straight." She giggled. "Forgive me. You'll never be straight."

"Not funny."

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Mary sighed. "If you're seeing Bobby everywhere . . . clear all his stuff out; all the unhappy reminders. You can't continue like this. You've missed work to the point of . . . well, *she's* on the warpath. Your production's down. Your work's shit. You haven't written a line of code that I haven't had to debug. It's crap. Do you hear me? It's crap."

"I know," Perry said. He gazed into her soft brown eyes. "You've been wonderful, dear. I'm sorry if I've been such a shit. I'd be over Bobby if he just dumped me. I've been dumped before. But he's gone. He's never coming back. I'll never . . ."

She gripped his wrist. "I know the feeling. I lost my Aunt Sylvia last year."

"Not the same. *Time was when love and I walked hand in hand.*"

"Are you quoting opera again?" He bit his lip. "That's a good sign."

"*The Sorcerer.*"

"Well, there's hope now if you're speaking in Gilbert & Sullivan. I'll take it as a step toward recovery." She released him. "Maybe now I can get back to work. *She's* on the warpath."

"So you've said." Perry pulled her back.

She gave him a hug. "Are you sure you don't want a soda?" He shrugged. She reached down, retrieving a pencil. "Here, you'll need this."

Perry blinked. He glanced across the desk for the broken pencil, but unless it rolled beneath the desk, it was gone, or . . . *it couldn't be this one*. This one was whole — complete; yet he recalled only one pencil on the desk today. The rest were all clustered in a chipped coffee mug far back behind the monitor. He caressed the pencil. *Magically mended?* One more delusion brought on by his mourning, no doubt.

"So," Mary asked, "what brought on this new weepy wave?"

Perry rolled the pencil between his palms pondering the *new wave* — a *tidal wave* to be sure. "This morning I sensed him sleeping beside me."

"That's natural, Perry."

"It was so real. I could actually hear him breathing. I felt him reaching for me . . . in the dark, but when I turned to caress him. Nothing. An empty bed." He pouted, and the tears stood in his eyes again.

"There, there," Mary said. She hugged him again. "I'm worried you'll lose this job."

"*And a good job too,*" Perry quoted between sniffs.

"There you go." She released him, and then eased back toward the threshold. She paused, turning like a runway model, raising her hands: "Why don't you get out tonight? Go to a movie. Go bowling."

"You'll go with me?"

"Wish I could, snooks, but I'm booked. Maybe the weekend. Actually, why don't you go to a bar and . . ."

"Pick someone up?" He puffed. "Not on your life."

"Go to the Mall then . . ."

"What, and pick someone up there? How's that different? Next you have me cruising ShopRite."

Mary's face brightened. "You know, a friend of a friend of Charlie's knows this dude."

"A blind date?" Perry shook his head. "I know *there's lots of fish in the sea*, but I'm not ready for them."

"You're ready for the nut house, snooks. If you keep this up and lose your job, the poor house. We have deadlines, you know."

Perry shrugged. "I don't think Bobby would approve."

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Mary frowned. Her face contorted. "He's dead, Perry."

Perry lost it. He wept untrammelled as if this was the point where denial died. It brought Mary back to his side.

"Be strong, dear. Stronger. It ain't like a cold you can take a pill to cure, and the symptoms linger . . . linger. They linger, but it's the truth." She wiped his tears, this time with raw fingers. "I think you should consider the friend of the friend of Charlie's. If you want, I'll get you his number."

Perry peered at the pencil. He started. It was broken again — split into two ragged halves. He sprang up, pushing his roll chair back to the wall, then escaped Mary Hughes' good intentions. He headed for the lunchroom.

Mrs. Wickersham's Issue

Mary Hughes thought to follow Perry down the winding tangle of corridors that were formed by the labyrinth of cubicles, but the clock was ticking. *Deadlines*. No help would be coming from Mr. Chaplin, *thank you very much*. As she rounded the bend to her own space, Mrs. Wickersham emerged from her office. The morning rounds had finished, and Mildred's mood had not improved. Her bullet face tinged with concern, mustering no confidence toward a resolution. Mary didn't wish to divine it, but she couldn't escape. Mildred's appearance arrested Mary. Any chance of reverting to the awaiting lines of code now dissolved.

The boss strode past her, heading for the rear of the building. After gusting with her skirts, Mildred halted by the window. This window afforded a shallow parking lot view, complete with an ugly, pea-green dumpster. The parking lot belonged to Gamma Rex. The dumpster however was the property of the Chicken Shack next door. A wintry breeze rattled a plastic bag caught in the dumpster's lid. Mary guessed that the boss hovered there for a reason. It begged attention.

Mary Hughes, on occasion, had been Mildred Wickersham's confidant, not that it bothered her. It was cheaper than therapy, and in Wickersham's case, therapy was in realm of the confessional — the good fathers of Our Lady of Perpetual Grace R.C. just over the border in Glen Rock. Still, Mary had learned from an early age that people often needed an ear, a shoulder and sometimes a knowing (or unknowing) nod to keep them from Ambien induced delusions. So, she sidled to Mildred's side, joining her reflection — a duet in the window pane.

The boss clicked her tongue, and then sighed. "I need to talk to that slob next door," she said. "I'd rather see dog piles in a vacant lot than his scrubby Chicken overspill. Such an eyesore." She turned to Mary, who knew that *this* wasn't the pressing issue. The Chicken vendor was always a good excuse for venting, although, truth be told, the four-piece bucket with corn bread had graced many a Gamma Rex lunch box. "I should have planted trees and saved myself the eye sore."

Mrs. Wickersham reversed course, walking back toward her office. Mary followed in tow. The boss veered toward the lobby — a waiting room for clients and prospects. It smacked of a doctor's office and, lately, had been as silent as a tomb. Still, a receptionist was installed behind the counter.

Redundant, Mary thought.

"Phillipa," Mrs. Wickersham said, rousing the receptionist from the latest issue of *Glamour*. "Has the mail arrived?"

Phillipa rustled the pages, making no effort to hide her slacking. "Yes, Mrs. Wickersham. On the counter."

"Have you opened it yet?"

"Too early," she said. Phillipa closed the magazine, and then reached for a stack of salmon and goldenrod forms. "Vendor requests first."

This was rich. The vendor requests were so dated that President Garfield could have submitted them. Obviously, Phillipa couldn't sense the boss's current mood. Mildred cupped her eyebrows, a migraine percolating. "Phillipa. The mail comes first."

Phillipa shuffled about her workspace. Finding a laminated card, she held it out for review, more as confirmation, because it was a directive so cracked and yellow it might have been the menu for the Chicken Shack. "Vendor requisitions are Tuesday's priority," she said. "Right there. See. And the mail is not to be opened until 9:30." She tapped the card with her index finger.

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Mrs. Wickersham rolled her eyes. “But it’s past eleven.”

Mary expected an explosion instead of this simmering ire, but whatever issue clouded the boss, it went beyond the mail and the dumpster and the bauble that muddled her lobby.

“The mail was late,” Phillipa exclaimed. “So *there* it rests until the other priorities are met. It’s Tuesday.”

Mildred turned to Mary. “So *there* it rests. It missed its window of opportunity and now it must wait ‘til Wednesday to come rolling about the pike.” She swept the mail stack into her arms. Mary reached for it, but Mildred hugged it like an orphaned babe. “My burden, Mary. Mine.” She sauntered toward her office. She ruminated as she went. “When I first plugged away here . . . well not here, for we started in a small walk-in on Maple Avenue, just Mr. Wickersham and myself and . . . Sarah Brighton and, for a time Marshal Aimes.” Her eyes soared to the fluorescent lighting. “He was a good one — a pioneer. COBOL isn’t everyone’s cup of tea you know. Well, *you* would know that, wouldn’t you? But . . . where was I?”

“Maple Avenue.”

“Yes, Maple Avenue. We had only three accounts then.” She stopped to enumerate today’s clientele. No more than twelve, but steady; and lucrative. “Only three accounts then . . . and they never paid on time. The mail bundle was lighter. Still, I’d tackle it every morning.”

“At 9:30?”

Mildred giggled. “Yes, at 9:30; and it was never late, and if it was, I’d be the one to hurry down the street to the Post Office. Ridgewood had a different Post Office then, not that fancy Veteran’s Memorial *thing-a-ma-jig* that sits there now. But I guess the town’s gone upper crust.” She raised a derisive pinky. “Yes, I would tackle the mail or the postmaster, and guess what?” Mary shrugged. “I loved to open the mail. I guess I’ll love to open it today.” She raised her voice. “If the checks are light, I might need to cut expenses to keep the lights on.” She winked.

They stood before her office now. Her gloom had dissipated, or so Mary sensed. As Mrs. Wickersham crossed the threshold, she suddenly stopped. “By the way, Mary. Have you finished the *tie-out* functionality on the Collection System?” The *Collection System* was the glory work of the day — the year, in fact. It was for Gibbs Industries, but if boilerplated, could earn Gamma Rex more mullah than it had earned in years.

“Yes.” Mary beamed. “In fact, I’ve also completed the DSO calculator.”

“Good. Save it to the P drive after the bind. I’ll run it through its paces.” Mary was the second-best programmer on staff, the first being Mildred herself. A course through the morning mail, and then a perusal of several hundred lines of code would do the boss fine. She headed for her desk, but then stopped again. “Mary? What’s Mort really doing this morning?”

“He’s reinstalling his system.”

“Again. How many times will that goose walk over his grave? Well . . . and Perry?”

“Perry’s on . . . break.”

“Again?” Clouds returned. She beckoned Mary across the threshold. “I’m worried about Perry.” Mary shrugged. “I thought he’d be my next star here — a real Marshal Aimes. He’s talented, but lately . . . I don’t know. Ever since he came back from his vacation, he’s been nearly useless. You’re his friend. Couldn’t you . . . well, a hint would help. I’d talk to him, but I don’t want to intimidate him, but . . . we *are* here to work, not daydream. Deadlines, and the big launch is scheduled. I hate dead wood.” Her eyes roved toward the lobby.

Mary nodded. “I’ve said something to him already.”

“Were you clear that we’re a team? Weak links break chains?”

Mary smirked. “He’s smart. He knows. He’ll be okay.”

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“Is everything all right at . . .?”

“He’s had some . . . bad luck. Personal.”

“I understand. I won’t pry, but give him another jog, will you? As a favor to me and . . .”

Mary backed out of the office. “You will let me know when your functions have been saved.”

She noticed Ben cleaning the toner cartridge. “I see you’re breaking our printers again Harris?”

“For a price, I aim to please.”

“At your prices I expect that machine to hum.” She glanced towards the lunchroom, and then shook her head. “And Mary, ask Perry to see when . . . when it’s convenient.” Mary rolled her eyes, but Mildred hadn’t notice.

3

Break Point

The lunchroom was quiet; the assortment of vending machines, coffee slept and microwaves unmolested. They would be assaulted when lunchtime rolled around, but this was the calm before the storm. The windows on this side of the building faced a more pleasant landscape. No Chicken Shack or dumpster here. Ridgewood City had a lovely expanse of parks that, even in winter, hinted at summer glory. It was here, in the vacant lunchroom, that Perry had brokered a seat — a reversed plastic chair, his arms snug on the chair back, his chin deep in the cradle. Eyes blank, staring through the pane.

You bastard, he thought. His breath fogged the pane forming a circle, a reversed vignette. He stared at it, wondering why he chose to cloud the landscape. Already the circlet waned. He breathed again. It formed again. *You bastard*. Reaching to the pane with a shivering finger, he scrawled the word: *Bobby*. Then, just as absently, he wrote: *I miss you*.

"Why did you have to get sick?" he mumbled. *Why didn't you give it to me? Why did you have to fuck around? "Does the punishment fit the crime?"* He twisted, his chin quivering. Lips puckered. Tears welled up, but he managed to keep them in check. Anger blossomed. Resentment. *You bastard*.

How was he supposed to concentrate on coding some fucking appropriation module for some fucking blue suit who pressed money from widows and orphans? How? He fogged again, but the words resisted — lingering. Suddenly, a yellow post-it popped into his line of vision. It pasted on the tip of his nose. "Shit."

It was Mary. "Boo."

"Can't you leave me alone?"

"Guess what's on there?"

Perry's eyes crossed over the sticky note. He ripped it off, ignoring it. "Don't play games. I'm in no mood."

"C'mon, guess."

"I don't care." He glanced at it, and then snapped it to his eye. "What?"

"It's the cell phone number of a young, hot, juicy and available guy named Marlin Fisk; and he's just waiting for you to let your fingers do the walking."

"Not interested."

"The friend of a friend of Charlie's."

"Eugene?" Perry shifted forward, righting himself on the chair. "Still not interested, but nice try."

Mary came close to his ear. "Hot man flesh and you're not interested?"

"Get thee behind me, Satan. There's nothing like sensitivity."

"Oh, I'm sensitive, snooks, 'cause you're at the breaking point. I'd hate to see where you're going, so consider yourself on waivers. If you ignore my post-it, I'm gonna dial up the Fag Patrol and have them cancel your subscription to *The Advocate*."

Perry nearly laughed. He couldn't be angry with her. She was trying — *really trying*. "I appreciated it. Really . . . but . . ." The note fell to the floor.

"Suit yourself," Mary snapped like a Prussian general. "Now for the big news. You've been summoned to see her majesty." She retrieved the note, stuffing it into Perry's pocket protector. "Don't lose the number. You don't know how many bathroom walls Eugene must have combed for it."

"Very funny. What does *she* want?"

"To see you."

"I know, but what does she want?"

"How should I know?" Mary said. She winked. "By the way, there's a new restaurant in Glen Rock . . ."

"You don't give up." He swung around in the chair. "You really don't know what she wants?"

"She probably wants your modules." She pointed to his crotch. "You see, Snooks, men are not the only one's after your modules."

"Shit." Perry hit the lunch table, cradling his head in his arms. "They're not ready."

"I rest my case." Mary pulled a chair to the table. She stared at him for a full two minutes. Had he looked up he would have seen a more motherly side emerge. She glanced through the window, the words still emblazoned on the frost. "Perry. Hate me if you want, but no amount of hoping will bring Bobby back. What I'm hoping for is *your* return. I miss you, Perry Chaplin. Come back to me." She kissed the top of his head, and then mussed his hair. "In the meanwhile, go see *her* and take your lumps like a man; or at least like a sassy drag queen." He waved her off, and she headed for her own modules.

††††††††

Perry remained in a heap for ten minutes more and would have stayed longer, had not Luke Oliver come a-microwaving. Perry found Luke a nice departure from the usual geek that populated Gamma Rex, but at this moment he was just too much eye candy for Perry. So, he nodded to Luke, and then left him to his nuking. The place would be filling up soon. Best to go face the music — like . . . well, not a drag queen, but certainly not with much courage either. He thought he'd be losing his job today. He didn't much care.

A *pad*, he thought. He stopped in his cubicle to search for a clean, blank pad. Why a blank pad suited him now when a cluttered one — one with line after line of code — batches of sine and co-sine, *x* variable and yards of *hex*, would have suited him better. Still, he couldn't find a blank pad; only the broken pencil. That sobered him. He suddenly liked his job. It was worth a shot to keep. He was now determined to face the boss with all the penitence of a shepherd who had let his flock fall off the cliff; the ignominy of a broken crook — life without mutton and lamb chops. Then he spied a blank pad — a proper yellow one, with light blue lines and a red margin. That had to be a good sign, but when he reached for a writing instrument, the pencil at his disposal was . . . whole again. He dropped the pad and left the pencil untouched beside the keyboard.

Mrs. Wickersham's door was closed. *Bad sign*. Or maybe not. She often closed it when she coded, but she also closed it when she reprimanded, although Perry couldn't remember the last time she did that. *True*. She wasn't a bad boss. *What's to fear?* He raised his fist to knock, but hesitated.

"Psst," Mary whispered from her cubicle. "Do it Perry."

He closed his eyes, and then knocked.

"Enter," came the carol.

He peered in as if it were a job interview, and who was to say it wasn't? "You wanted to see me, Mrs. Wickersham?"

"Perry," she said. "Come in and sit down. I'll be with you momentarily."

Perry shuffled across the sea-foam carpet, and then sat in a chair that he was sure was electrified. He rubbed his hands not knowing what to do with them. *Why didn't I take that pad?*

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Mildred pounded on her keyboard, adjusting her glasses to shade the glare from the monitor. “These modules Mary engineered are brilliant. Yes, I like them. Excellent.” She swiveled about, removed her glasses and then placed both hands flat on the desk. “It’s just like the work you used to do, Perry.”

Perry floundered. “I tried.”

“Tried?” Her voice rose. Annoyance. “Don’t you give me that. You used to *do*. You were a real go-getter. I never had any problem with any of your work. A champ, I’d say. Worth every nickel.” She glanced over her spectacles. “But since you came back from . . . from — where were you?”

Perry fumbled with his hands. *Where was that pad?* “I was in . . . Italy.”

This sounded so tentative that anyone present would have assumed this *Italy* was somewhere south of Newark.

“Italy was it?” She removed her glasses and smiled — a genuine smile of grace and beauty. “I like Italy. I honeymooned in *Firenze*. I loved *Firenze*. Did you go to *Firenze*?”

“No. I went to Rome and Florence.”

Mildred glared. “What is the matter with you?” she said. “You’re losing it. Florence *is* the English word for *Firenze*. How could you go to Italy and not know that, unless you were sick the whole time — too much Tuscan sun?”

Perry sweated. His cards had tipped. “No, I was just . . .”

“Just what?” she said. Impatient glance. He looked away, repelling by her eyes. “Is everything okay, Perry? I don’t mean to pry, but generally when a good employee is suddenly less responsive to team needs, or falls behind in the schedule, there’s usually some issue . . . at home. I thought about it this morning when I drove in. You’ve been on my mind, Perry.”

Perry sighed, and then bit his knuckle. “I appreciate that Mrs. Wickersham, and I’m sorry to be such a bother.”

“No bother, if you come around. We all have our share of stress and strain. I can’t help being sympathetic to all my work family — and you *all* are my family.” She gazed toward the large gold framed picture on the wall, the family she buried just three years ago. It was a constant reminder that, when alive, Bill Wickersham ran the business with compassion. She was tougher, but had promised him to rule Gamma Rex with understanding. “So, Perry, I don’t mean to pry, but if I can help you, it will really help us all.” She scanned his face. She should have been a therapist — richer by the hour, but probably poorer by the year. “Is it . . . your girlfriend, perhaps? Some problems there? I forget her name.”

Perry’s breath hitched. “Roberta.” He buried his face in his hands. Suddenly a path opened. “She left me. Roberta left me!” He wept — crocodile tears. Tear for phantom Roberta, instead of phantom Bobby.

“Dear me,” she said. “My poor boy. I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

Perry was on a roll. The closet had taught him well, and once lying spills, the wound could gush for hours. “She left me while we were in Florence . . . *Firenze*.”

“No wonder you couldn’t remember the name of the place.” Perry gazed into her eyes. He saw pity there. Mercy. Opportunity. “Do you need a few more days off?” she asked. “Some time to sort things out, because you’re no good to me here. The team can cover. I’d rather have you whole in a few days than in pieces now. We have the launch coming up.”

“No, Mrs. Wickersham. I’ll be okay.” Another lie, but a gracious one — one that may have closed the door to time off, but seemed fair. Still, the lies came: “I plan to go for some counseling.”

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"That's wise," she said. Suddenly, her face radiated.

This scared Perry. He jumped. "What's the matter?"

"You should also go to church. There's solace there. Good counseling."

Perry shook his head. He suspected that any church that he would enter would need engineers on the following day to check the foundation's soundness. "I'm not big on . . ."

"Oh, you don't need to be. I know a good priest at Our Lady of Perpetual Grace. Father Gerard. He's young, but wise. Much above his age."

"I'm not much of a churchgoer," Perry repeated. He wiped his eyes. "But I'll get some counseling. I promise. I'll get back on track."

"Well, don't do it for me. Do it for you. Keep active. Do something extra curricular. You sing don't you? I remember seeing you in that Gilbert and Sullivan show. That would suit you now. Your hobby. Does it start up again soon?"

"First rehearsal is in two weeks."

"Good. Do that. Great therapy. I did so enjoy your performance in the Pirates of the Guard."

". . . Penzance."

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing. Besides we're doing Ruddygore."

"Ruddy what?"

"Nothing. It's an opera."

She shrugged, but grinned broadly. "Well, Perry, I'll give you an extension on the allocation modules. Mary will help you. How's that?"

He shook his head, a smug pucker shrouding his maw. "Thank you." He stood.

She leaned across the desk. "Really Perry. See the priest. Let me know."

"I'll think about it."

She winked. "You're one of my best."

††††††††

Lunch was nearly over, so Perry sought the solace of the lunch room again. He passed a stream of colleagues as he darted back to his window vigil. He had dodged a bullet, but to what purpose. He was still as blue as ever and not one additional line of code the richer, by any pencil — snapped or mended.

"You're fired?" Mary asked. She had tracked behind him like a Dalmatian to a fire.

He glanced at her. He wanted to be alone, but he was resolved that Mary would be at his heels as long as she fed on his temperament. He was needy. She had a *needy-compass*, always pointing to the most troubled zones with a hope to help navigate people through the doldrums.

"No. Not fired. Worse than that!"

Mary sat across from him, her head cupped in her hands, her inquisitive stare sparring with Perry's slouch.

"I told her *Roberta* left me while we were in Italy."

"You've never been to Italy, snooks."

"That's what I told her to get the vacation to cover my bereavement time. The only Italy I know is Sullivan's Venice. The only Italian I know is the *gondolieri* song from *The Gondoliers*."

"Well at least, Roberta's gone." Perry shuddered. Hurt twitched across his face. "Oh, I didn't mean it that way, hon. I meant, since you invented Roberta, good riddance to *that* lie. I never thought it was a good idea to invent a girl friend to explain a boy friend. You know I didn't mean anything more than good riddance to that fiction."

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"I know you didn't mean to be cruel, toots." He sighed. "The fiction is never gone when you're in the closet. You don't understand."

"You're out of the closet," she said. "I know. Others know."

"But many more don't. Would you believe that Wickersham suggested that I see a priest?"

"That's her remedy for everything. Father Eustace?"

"No. A Father Gerard."

"Oh, that's the young one. Maybe you ought to see him, if he's young and a priest. You know what they say."

"Fuck you."

She giggled. It was clear that a round of *gay* puns were not in order. Time and place. Time and place. "Marlin Fisk is your answer," she said. She patted his shirt pocket.

Suddenly, Perry shook. His lips quivered. His eyes bugged and he stood, erupting.

"Not funny, Mary," he said. "Not funny."

"I'm only trying to help," she said. "Don't get nasty. It's just a cell phone number."

"No, not the friggin' number." He pointed to the windowpane. "That!"

Below the frosty *Bobby*, *I miss you*, another message streaked.

Perry, I miss you too!

"I didn't write that," Mary said. "I wouldn't do such a thing."

"Well, someone has a sick sense of humor. Someone really does."

Perry wiped the pane clear. He gasped. His *Bobby* message wiped clean, but the *other* remained. "God almighty," he said. He came to its brink. "God almighty. It's on the outside." He covered his mouth. He was losing his mind.

"That *is* sick," Mary said. "I think you've had enough for the day. Go home. I'll tell her. She'll understand. Go home, Perry."

He shook his head. He would go now. He stared at the message on the pane, watching his own slowly reappear — only in reverse and below the *other*. He *was* losing his mind.

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