

**IT'S TOO LATE
TO LEAVE EARLY**

An Aerospace Fable



William Walling

It's too Late to Leave Early: An Aerospace Fable by William Walling.

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

For every downtrodden, disillusioned aerospace engineer who ever fought the good fight . . .

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose

Prologue

On a blistering afternoon in the month destined to commemorate a despot even more despotic than he himself, Great Pharaoh Khufu called a halt to the procession of spearmen, archers, priests, chamberlains and court hangers-on making up his retinue. Desolated to think the mighty looked upon his works without despair—a sore point—he motioned for the bearers to set down his lapis lazuli-encrusted palanquin. Shielding his eyes against the westering sun, a swollen, yellow-orange blaze near the horizon, Pharaoh Khufu gazed steadfastly at an oceanlike mirage shimmering above the Great Sand Sea.

Minutes passed. A *khamsin* blew steadily from the southeast, kicking up dust devils among the fidgeting porters and soldiers. At last Pharaoh clapped his hands and called for his master builder, T'Ankh Salot.

Eager to please, the architect prostrated himself, pressing his ample nose to the scorching sand. “Your wish, O confidant of celestial Osiris, O consort of divine Isis, O magnificent beholder of all—?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” rattled Pharaoh. He gestured impatiently with his golden flail. “Over there, on the far shore of the Father of Waters, you shall erect My pyramid, My triumph of triumphs, My glory. See to the matter at once.”

Still obeisant, T'Ankh Salot stiffened ever so slightly.

“Did you hear?”

“A . . . pyra-mid, O favored of Geb and Sekhmet, O bountiful Lord of the Two Lands, O beneficent—?”

“A *pyramid*, yes—P-Y-R-A-M-I-D. Open your ears.”

“A . . . real pyramid?”

“Of course, you dullard.”

“L-like the pyramid,” faltered the architect, “that entombs your illustrious sire, Great Pharaoh Snefru?”

“Only in a manner of speaking. You shall erect a monstrous edifice larger and more grandiose than anything dreamt of by Snefru. And be sure to specify flat sides all the way up to the peak, not bent in the middle at some obscene angle. My tomb will soar to the skies in My everlasting tribute, a home away from home in My afterlife, the abode of My eternal *Ka*.”

T'Ankh Salot groveled. “Begging forgiveness, O Wisest of the Wise, but in this modern day and age don't you think an enormous, old-fashioned pyramidal tomb would be . . . ? What I mean to say is, aren't towering mounds

of stone just a tad . . . passè?”

“What was that?”

“Please reconsider, I beseech you, O Mightiest of the Mighty. It would be remiss of me not to inform you that . . . You mustn’t think I’m quibbling, but in essence a pyra—”

“Stop nattering. Spit it out.”

T’Ankh Salot dared an upward glance. Gauging his master’s demeanor, he swallowed with difficulty. “O Exalted One, I’m loathe to . . . T-take no offense, but it behooves me to explain . . . That is to say, in the opinion of the b-building fraternity, ostentatious structures like the one you have in mind went out with Djoser. Wouldn’t a huge stone p-pyramid be terribly . . . gauche?”

Great Pharaoh Khufu gnashed his teeth. Indulging in a paroxysm of pharaonic indignation, he bellowed, “T’Ankh Salot!”

For his failure to keep pace with state-of-the-art dynastic requirements, the architect was scourged, pummeled with sharp rocks, and had boiling oil poured over his tender insteps. He was impaled on stakes wrought of cheap bronze. He was sawn and mangled. The residue was tossed to a pack of fat crocodiles wearied by eating disfavored Egyptians. The crocodiles yearned for palmier days basking along the riverbank.

Renamed Cheops much, much later by imprecise Greek vagabonds, Great Pharaoh Khufu soon realized that vast projects could not be effected with half-vast plans. He commissioned a more compliant master builder, Neferhotep. Mindful of his predecessor’s fate, and abjectly terrified by the assignment, Neferhotep nevertheless labored for two decades to pile high a colossal monument to human folly containing some two and one-third million unwieldy stone blocks (no one counted them closely).

A monumental government project without equal, construction of the Great Pyramid ensured full employment for tens of thousands of stonecutters, sculptors, slaves, overseers, moneylenders, camel drovers, brewers, barge men, courtesans, concubines, second-string prostitutes, ordinary everyday prostitutes, and just plain whores.

Pharaoh Khufu’s selfish endeavor not only revived a questionable fad, it provided further centuries of profitable activity for priests, tomb builders, tomb robbers, embalmers, middlemen, con men, tax collectors, guides, archaeologists, mystics, and film producers.

Egypt waxed prosperous as millennial dynasties rose and fell, then waned in disrepair. Dreams of ancient grandeur faded as Greeks and Romans, Celts, Saxons, Goths, Norsemen and Mongols sacked and pillaged, settled, invented and built their own ephemeral places upon history’s center stage.

But all of them came to view Khufu’s geometric mountain, looming above the Nile alongside a pair of tawdry imitations, and walked away shaking their heads, mumbling to themselves, thinking how absurd the Egyptians had been to imagine they could ever amount to anything while occupying their minds and hands with such foolishness.

One Burton

On an unseasonably warm spring afternoon of the sort categorically denied by Southern California chambers of commerce—temperature wobbling in the high eighties, with a persistent inversion layer trapping the polluted misery onshore breezes wafted against encircling mountain ramparts—a truly exceptional motor car crested the Sepulveda Canyon grade and began a regal descent of the Hollywood Hills.

Exuding *noblesse majesté*, the motor car appropriated the freeway's center lane, dipping its classic grille into smoggy oven air that blanketed the San Fernando Valley. Fiercely driven VWs and skittering Isuzus thrashed past on either flank, drivers and passengers alike craning to ogle the motor car's immaculate coachwork, its genteel lack of trim. Now and then a *nouveaux riche* Porsche, Jaguar or gleaming Mercedes-Benz would cruise alongside, only to suffer invidious comparison and slink away to lose itself in the moiling traffic flow.

The motor car, a Bentley town coupé of pre-World War II vintage, and champion of many a *concours d'elegance*, had been restored to pristine splendor by its proud owner-driver, Benjamin Claridge Mason, III, the President and Chief Executive Officer of Aerospace General Corporation. Mr. Mason was a *cum laude* graduate of the Harvard Business School, a devout Episcopalian, a Republican of the first water, and a 32nd Degree Mason (no pun intended).

His features every whit as patrician as the motor car's nine coats of hand-rubbed silver lacquer, Mr. Mason owed his ruddy complexion to golf and tennis, his exquisitely cut, tropical-weave linen suit to a private tailor in Rodeo Drive, his platinum locks to sixty-three years of gracious living, and his petulance to the fact that a certain corporate officer was not, at the moment, everything Mason might have wished him to be.

Slouched in the Bentley's passenger seat, AGC Vice President Franklin Burton contemplated the unreeling freeway with watery blue eyes. Having accompanied Mr. Mason to a luncheon at the Beverly Hills Womens Club, whose select membership list included the socially prominent, painfully thin Mrs. Millicent Maddox Mason, Burton was only distantly aware of his leader's pique. At the luncheon, he had scarcely touched his lobster salad supreme, electing instead to seek sustenance among skewered olives nestled at the bottom of several very, very dry vodka martinis.

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And when President Mason had risen to vigorous applause, speaking with forthright charm on his favorite topic—"America's Amazing Adventures in Space"—Burton had done his damndest to stay on cordial terms with the overdressed matrons seated on his left and right whose interrogations demanded answers of sorts. Deciding his function at these extracurricular affairs, never clearly defined to begin with, did *not* include being subjected to inquisitions by aging dragons who drew him into their clutches, Burton had taken an obdurate stand. After all, coveys and squadrons of *grandes dames* draped in bandoliers of glittering gemstones were not creatures with whom a mere vice president should be expected to cope.

His eyes fixed firmly on the road ahead, Mr. Mason pointedly cleared his throat. "Frank," he said with just the proper degree of executive resonance, "Millicent told me you downed seven martinis during the luncheon."

Burton's head rocked as if recoiling from a sneak punch. The Bentley town coupé lacked air conditioning. Mr. Mason's directive to the restorers had specified that the machine be rebuilt *exactly* the way underpaid Rolls Royce mechanics had handcrafted it six decades earlier. "What was . . . that, Ben?"

"I *said*," said Mr. Mason with curdling emphasis, "you apparently downed seven martinis during the luncheon."

"S-seven . . . ?"

"Seven," confirmed his superior.

"Lucky number, heh, heh!"

Mr. Mason's bulging jaw muscles suggested the onset of tetanus. "Millicent," he declared, "also mentioned your purposeful rudeness to Mrs. Lythgoe."

"Not . . . purposeful," temporized Burton, bewildered by the obscure reference.

"Need I remind you," reminded Mason, "that Craig Lythgoe is one of our senior directors."

Burton did not respond. Overcome by the effort of holding up his end of a meaningless conversation, he wilted in the seat, succumbing to torpor.

Mr. Mason's brow furrowed. His lips twitched, then assumed the straightest of straight lines. He wheeled the Bentley town coupé around an off-ramp's descending curlicue and drove six blocks westward through bumper-to-bumper traffic. The furnace heat sitting motionless at stop lights caused Vice President Burton to intermittently lose consciousness.

The indistinct outlines of large, two-story buildings congealed in the smog. The Bentley swung into a wide, divided drive that cleaved through acres of empty parking spaces. Approaching the fenced-off complex, where scattered autos could be seen broiling in the strong, grayish sunlight, the motor car rocked forward on its front suspension and halted beside a plant protection cubicle windowed in green-tinted glass.

A looselimbed older man whose tan uniform badly needed pressing eased his weight down from the cubicle's step. The veteran plant protection officer, known familiarly to all AGC employees as "The Sheriff," offered a

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broken-toothed gargoyle's grin. He touched two fingers to the brim of his battered Stetson. "Afternoon, Mr. Mason, sir. Kinda nice day out, ain't it?"

"I've seen better, Sheriff." AGC's chief executive clipped a scarlet-bordered badge replete with his photograph to the linen suit's breast pocket. He tapped an impatient forefinger on the steering wheel, waiting for Burton to stir from his semi-conscious slump. "Your badge, Frank."

"Badge . . . ?"

"Would you prefer to remain outside?"

"Uh, badge . . . Oh, sure."

Mr. Mason abused the Bentley's gearbox pulling away.

A speculative glint in his rheumy blue eyes, the Sheriff watched the motor car roll through the open gateway in a high chain-link fence and enter the inner security corridor that spanned the facility. When the silver Bentley disappeared behind the gray-painted hulk of "C" Building, the Sheriff muttered, "Slim pickin's in store for that there Burton fella," and sauntered back to his cubicle.

Rather than heading for the reserved slot bearing his stenciled name in "A" Building's executive parking lot, Mr. Mason chose to drive on past. The Bentley town coupè purred along the security corridor, its invisible bow wave causing forklift operators, delivery trucks and vans to veer frantically aside. Mr. Mason braked to a curbside stop before a fortresslike, two-story construct of windowless precast concrete. Switching off the ignition, he worked the latch on the forward-opening door, emerged stiffly, and stretched.

Burton studied this unforeseen move with critical apathy. Floundering from the vehicle, he slammed the passenger door with a vicious *cah-chun-nk!* that drew a wince from Mr. Mason. "Why . . . stop here?" he inquired drowsily.

Lifting one of his tasseled, three-hundred-dollar Swiss Bally loafers, Mr. Mason kicked pensively at the patch of scraggly ivy overspilling the parkway. His contemplative gaze roved past discouraged olive trees, withered shrubs, a drought-stricken boxwood hedge. AGC's landscape gardeners, none of whom spoke English, had set out all "sun" specimens in shaded areas, while "shade" plants fought for survival under the solar blows of an exceptionally warm spring day.

"Why indeed?" Mr. Mason's sigh was long-drawn, reproachful. "Frank, you apparently paid scant heed to what I had to say during the ride."

A hunted expression crossed Burton's clean-cut features. He could recall no recent dialogue other than the critique of his liquid lunch. But his leader's habit of gauging executive ability in direct ratio to executive attention span was common knowledge. "Heard every word, Ben."

"Umm-m-m, I'd hate to think that *you*, of all the men and women on our First Team, were daydreaming."

"Not a chance," denied Burton.

"It's gratifying to hear you say that. Nevertheless, may I refresh your

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memory? At last Monday's senior staff meeting, Bill Ladd spoke to us about . . . Burton, are you with me?"

"Oh, you bet. At last Monday's Sunrise Service, Ladd talked about . . . Oops! 'Scuse me, Ben. I meant the, uh, Monday morning get together."

"Frank, Frank . . ." Mr. Mason's fruity baritone was suddenly laden with benign overtones. "It's perfectly acceptable to be colloquial about our weekly morning pow-wows. I don't object to having them called 'Sunrise Services.' After all, have I ever been stuffy with you members of the First Team?"

"Course not, B.M."

Mr. Mason managed an arctic smile. "Simply not your day, is it? I've spoken to you more than once about addressing me like *that*. 'B.M.' has scatological connotations I cannot abide."

Burton paled. "Sorry, uh . . . Ben."

Mr. Mason hawked and spat into the wilted ivy. He dabbed his lips with executive finesse, using a monogrammed kerchief. "Dr. Ladd had just returned from Washington, I'm sure you will recall. He's convinced me that NASA and DoD are leaning toward acceptance of our second generation Space Shuttle proposal."

Burton took a vain stab at comprehension, tolling the statement syllable by syllable. He came up empty.

"You saw the main parking lot when we drove through," added Mr. Mason disgustedly. "Three-quarters empty, and getting worse. A decade ago, prior to the merger and long before the massive attrition we've suffered, a parking space was difficult to find out there. In this era of uncertainty, Los Angeles has earned the dubious distinction of tolling the nation's highest technical unemployment rate. Many of the unfortunates are—or once were—aerospace employees. With the industry flat on its backside, I'm certain you realize how critical it will be for us to land a major program of significant scope and duration. Last year, the directors agreed to fund an in-depth study that will hopefully lead to a major contract award. Ladd's Advanced Projects team has pursued the Aerospaceplane award with more vim, vigor and determination than I would have believed possible."

Burton concentrated his wavering faculties, striving to elicit a shred of meaning from Mr. Mason's solemn words. "Understand," he lied, biting back a hiccup.

Mr. Mason studied "G" Building's featureless frontage intently, as if probing for weakness in the event of siege. "Some time ago," he said, "attrition in the wake of the XF-26 cancellation forced us to vacate 'G.' I've seeded the ground floor with Ladd's Advanced Projects people. Eventually—if and when the Aerospaceplane plum lands in our laps—we'll install the entire Research & Development Division here and keep Ladd's conceptual engineering team conveniently together under one roof."

Suffering acute equilibrium dysfunction, Burton shuffled his feet. He narrowly avoided a plunge into the ivy. "Ben," he pleaded, slurring his words,

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"bring me up to speed."

"Excuse me?"

"Why're we fooling with the Space Shuttle? I mean, ancient history, isn't it? Rockwell's had one flying for years 'n years."

Mr. Mason's head lifted smartly. "You," he accused, "have not the slightest notion what I've been talking about."

Burton's mouth worked, but only garbled sounds came forth. He teetered on the baking sidewalk, making vague, circular motions with either hand.

Mr. Mason spun on his heel. He marched stiff-legged to the silver Bentley town coupé, wrenched open the door and plopped inside. Just before driving away, he leaned from the open window and said, "Humm-m-mph!"

With the ominous "Humm-m-mph!" ringing in his ears, Burton shivered despite the heat. Staggering to the blank face of "G" Building, he leaned against it for a time, then somehow found the strength to lurch across trackless expanses of asphalt and concrete to his fruitwood-paneled office in "A" Building's posh executive wing.

For his failure to keep pace with state-of-the-art corporate requirements, nothing happened to Vice President Burton for one whole week.

Seven days to the day after the tragic luncheon, he trundled his new Lincoln up to the entrance of "A" Building's executive parking lot and confidently pushed his encoded key card into the admittance slot. For some reason, the red-and-white striped barrier refused to lift. He tried again, then again and again. And yet again. He worked the plastic card in and out until it bent.

Uttering a ripe obscenity, Burton began to tremble. His frightened gaze darted along the unattainable rows of parked autos—Executive Vice President & General Manager Charles Allison's crimson Porsche, Dr. Herbert Mauch's sleek black Mercedes, Mason's silver Bentley, and the rest. He backed the Lincoln away from the obstinate gate, pausing to stare wistfully at the forbidding caveat posted alongside the exit:

DO NOT ENTER—SEVERE TIRE DAMAGE MAY RESULT

A double row of cruel, tilted spikes spring-loaded in the roadway allowed only departing cars to pass with impunity.

In the morning, the key to the executive washroom was gone from Burton's massive fruitwood desk. He ransacked every drawer, ordered his executive secretary to search her own desk, hustled out and scoured the Lincoln's glove box, trotted back and emptied his pockets. He looked into vases and flower pots, peered under papers and calendars. In the end he sat staring disconsolately out the window, feeling doom settle around him like a poisonous vapor.

Franklin Burton drank too much that weekend. His wife threatened twice to leave him unless his vile disposition improved. His elder son, a *Phi Beta Kappa* candidate at the University of Southern California, was arrested on Saturday evening and charged with Possession of a Controlled Substance.

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Late Sunday night, his sunburned younger son returned from a water skiing junket to announce that he had contracted a common social ailment from a lovely girl he'd met in the middle of the Colorado River.

Feeling traduced by life, and filled with towering apprehension, Burton turned deathly pale when he arrived at his "A" Building office on Monday morning. The lettering on the name placard outside his office along executive row had shrunk to something akin to Serbian italics. Panicky, he edged inside. The cut-pile carpeting of a conservative russet hue was gone from his floor. A nondescript sheet metal desk crouched in grim mockery where his "L"-shaped fruitwood model normally sat. The photos of zooming, fire-spouting missiles, spacecraft and airplanes had been stripped from his fruitwood-paneled walls.

And at Mr. Mason's Sunrise Service a quarter-hour later, Vice President Burton learned that he might as well have been fashioned of polished crystal.

The next day his drapes vanished.

The beleaguered executive hunched behind his nondescript desk, fearing for his sanity. He pictured himself barring Mr. Mason from the urinal until his bladder burst. He conjured fanciful images of himself heroically defending the rape of his office with the .357 Smith & Wesson revolver he kept locked in a bureau at home, while a pair of AGC maintenance men in grungy coveralls bobbed and weaved and struggled to get past him to strip away the fruitwood paneling he had learned to love.

Then his executive secretary disappeared, desk, computer terminal, wastebasket and all.

Excommunicated from AGC's inner world, Vice President Burton no longer received corporate directives. His name had been edited from the executive distribution list. Worse, there was no one to word-process and dispatch outgoing missives, nor did the e-mail server any longer recognize his address. He took to slinking to and from a distant washroom, while neighboring executive secretaries kindly pretended he wasn't there.

Later they moved him to Siberia—to "C" Building. Burton stayed on AGC's overhead payroll for months, hanging on grimly with teeth and toenails for an excellent reason. He continued to draw one hundred and thirty-seven thousand, three hundred and forty-two dollars per annum, plus stock options and management incentive bonuses, for doing absolutely nothing.

Or almost nothing. Though condemned to purgatory, he spent hundreds of dollars on postage, thousands more on airline tickets. He visited in person, or dispatched professionally doctored résumés to, every surviving aerospace firm from Miami to Seattle, from San Diego to Bangor. He contacted a number of executive placement headhunters, many of whom had either filed for bankruptcy, or quietly closed their doors and walked away.

The lack of demand for his services astounded Burton. He did manage to garner a few perfunctory interviews, during which he learned several harsh facts of life. He was either overqualified, or underqualified for an executive position, depending upon the whim of a particular interviewer. Secondly, he discovered that the "aerospace" tag utterly doomed his chances of achieving a

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similar post in the private sector. The industry was not merely on its backside, as Mr. Mason had suggested, but totally and irretrievably moribund, a candidate for the crypt. Former middle-management and senior executives now mingled with the unwashed masses of blue-collar unemployed, as well as the washed masses of white-collar unemployables.

Feeling undersized, downsized and desperately sorry for himself, Burton sensed his artfully nurtured management skills eroding hour by hour, day by day, week by week. *If only*, he thought, staring hopelessly at the acoustic ceiling tile of his dingy office, *the damned CIA dilberts had done their job and supported the USSR's communist régime*. With a minimum of foresight on the part of America's lollygagging spooks and self-serving cloak-and-dagger bureaucrats, the lucrative Cold War would *never* have evaporated and left him, plus thousands like him, high and dry, with zero prospects.

A stiffly worded letter from AGC's bevy of corporate attorneys was eventually slipped under the door of Burton's dingy office. The letter advised him that President Mason had "regretfully" accepted his resignation. The fact that he hadn't tendered a resignation further infuriated Burton. His strident, table-pounding protests did little to ruffle the composure of the flock of AGC legal eagles ensconced in their "B" Building aerie.

Rumors circulated after Burton's departure. Some said he had suffered horribly by going against his attorney's advice and contesting his wife's divorce action. Some said he had fled California, a destitute fugitive from alimony payments, and was pumping gas in a nondescript New Mexico filling station. Some said he had developed an affinity for New Mexico sunrises, as well as Tequila Sunrises, and spent hours sitting in the shade, shaking his fist and swearing uncontrollably each time an AGC commercial jetliner painted condensation trails in the brilliant Southwest skies overhead.

Some said T'Ankh Salot had met a much kindlier fate.

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Two Ham

Jolted awake in the throes of a vivid, triple-x-rated dream, Henry Alan Moffett became conscious of the noble reflex distending his pajama bottoms. Assailed by sensuous visions—the residue of a subconscious plunge into virtual unreality—he yawned, resenting the dream’s obliteration nearly as much as he resented perpetual unemployment. No immediate remedy for the latter presented itself, but perhaps the former . . .

Dawn light seeping through lined damask draperies glazed the mirror above an oiled-walnut chest of drawers his dormant career had given him the lie sure to refinish himself. Silver-framed photographs of his son and daughter gleamed in the crepuscular light. His wife’s favorite Regency chair was limned in ghostly outline.

Light rain pattered on the cedar-shake roof. From the corner of the house, a gurgling obbligato made soft music in counterpoint to the diminuendo thump of raindrops overhead—a nagging reminder that the drainpipe he had promised to fix still needed attention. A miniature Niagara would be cascading down the stucco wall, adding a brownish smudge to the raddling cracks and sun checks already there.

Thoughts of neglected drainpipes were thrust aside. Moffett punched the pillow, preparing to slide back into sleep. But lingering randiness had apparently eliminated sleep as an option.

Audrey Lee’s petite, indistinct figure was skewed in her usual curlicue, one arm flung backward over her head. The strap of her nightgown, thus stretched aside, exposed one hemisphere of a dainty breast. The aureole peeked at him in the dimness.

He studied the breast, struck by the symmetry of its silvered outline, and welcomed the resurgence of warmth in his loins. His wife’s breathing continued slow, rhythmic and shallow. Encouraged, he snuggled next to her.

She stirred. “You’re a lecherous lecher,” was her whispered indictment.

“Is there another kind?” When she made no further protest, he pressed his tumescence against her thigh.

“Honestly, Ham,” she murmured, not withdrawing from the caress, “when a girl isn’t safe in her own bed . . .”

“Safe . . . ? Take your little pills, don’t you?”

“Course I do.”

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“What’re husbands for?”

“Husbands are for winning bread and fixing broken drainpipes. Why aren’t you up and out, looking for work?”

“How kind you are to remind me. Yeah, I guess it’s that or Welfare.” He stroked her tummy with his fingernails until she squirmed. “Got that screwy interview at nine-thirty, remember?”

“What time is it now?”

“Happily ever after time.” He tugged her gently over and nuzzled her throat. He had to wait for her so that, together, they could share the brief, transcendental explosion of pleasure. Afterward she lay in his arms, warm and drowsy.

He chuckled. “Hypocrite.”

“Meaning what?”

He smoothed her auburn hair. “Meaning you like sex more than I do.”

“What a shameless thing to say.”

“Don’t bother denying it, Audrey Lee. If not for your straitlaced Southern Belle upbringing, you’d admit it.”

Her head lifted from his chest. “What led to that scholarly conclusion?”

“Considerable research.”

“Shameless! Uh-oh,” she said, glancing at the illuminated bedside clock. “Better get a hustle on. It’s five to eight.”

“Ouch! Soft-boil some eggs, will you?” Ham slid from the bed and sought his robe.



At breakfast, five-year-old Teddy Moffett sopped up oatmeal. Audrey Lee and Ham took turns fending off the melting brown eyes of Ralph, the family dachshund. Ralph’s favorite mealtime game was seeing whose resolution would weaken first when it came to doling out table scraps. The dachsie eventually threw in the towel and waddled away, head down, looking indecently aggrieved.

“Isn’t Missy up yet?” asked Ham.

“She slept over at Gracie’s.”

“On a school night?”

“They’re planning Gracie’s giant birthday extravaganza. The big event’s next week.” Between mouthfuls, Audrey Lee asked if he’d learned who had set up the mystery job interview.

“Nary a clue. But with the aerospace abyss still bottomless, I couldn’t ignore that out-of-the-blue voicemail invitation to send in a résumé. A slim chance is better than none.”

“When your unemployment insurance ran out, you talked about giving up engineering and going back to school.”

Ham chewed a forkful of eggy toast. “Thought about it, sure. But sticking with the main chance takes very little smarts. Thought there was a shot at getting back into Sargent until I talked it over with Clint Dangerfield. Clint says the company nosedived after Sarge passed on. He told me young

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Sargent knows how to sit in his uncle's office and look important, but his summed technical know-how could be tucked in Ralph's left ear."

Teddy looked up in alarm. "Better not!"

Ham patted his son's hand. "Easy, Ted. No one's going to touch your pup's ear."

"Sure better not."

Audrey Lee seemed distantly troubled. "But Aerospace General is . . . It's such a huge company."

"Was," he corrected, "before all the downsizing."

His wife wrinkled her nose. "Well, it still isn't small. For the sake of argument, let's say you do land a position. Wouldn't you feel lost, a teentsy minnow swimming in a great big pond?"

"Beggars do zero choosing," he told her. "I've been on the street so long I'm ready to flip burgers or mow lawns. Engineering for a major aerospace outfit doesn't scare me. What's worry-making is that the downturn shows few signs of bottoming out. The whole L.A. basin's been ground into mincemeat. Thousands of engineers were caught in the cutback gears. I make the odds of landing a decent slot about the same as winning the Lottery. No way will I get my hopes up. But if I should happen to get horseshoes, sensational fringe benefits and retirement packages are still in vogue."

"Retirement!" scoffed Audrey Lee. "You're barely on the wrong side of thirty. Speaking of long odds, what likelihood is there of earning retirement in an industry flat as Kansas?"

"Somewhere 'twixt slim and none," admitted Ham. He spread orange marmalade on a slice of wheat toast. "The prospect's far from dazzling, but today is just talk, and talk's cheap."

"Last week Marge told me her husband —"

"Marge . . . ?"

"You know, the new couple down the block. Her man hung on by his fingernails at Lockheed until they folded the Burbank plant and merged with . . . I don't recall company's name."

"Martin-Marietta," supplied Ham.

"Sounds right. Anyhow, Lockheed's making noises about recalling him, but up north in Silicon Valley. After what they've been through, Marge said they feel like homeless people. In less than ten years, they've lived in L.A.; Orlando, Florida; Huntsville, Alabama; Austin, Texas, and now back here in L.A."

"So it goes," philosophized Ham. "After Mr. Reagan's Evil Empire folded its tents, aerospace engineers became the migratory workers of the late twentieth century."

"If you were to get on at AGC, it could happen to you—us."

"Won't allow that."

His wife's irritation blossomed. "You're always so cocksure, Mr. Smarty Pants Engineer. Moving would mean selling the house, changing Missy's

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school, losing our —”

“Whoa! You’re buying trouble again, Audrey Lee. Don’t be so paranoid.”

“Only the paranoid survive,” said his wife. “Now if you were to land something in Atlanta, Charleston, Memphis, or Charlotte. Even Nashville . . .”

“Uh-uh, scratch that,” he said firmly. “You married a California kid, and that’s where he means to stay.”

His wife’s chin lifted. “Uncle Nat spent time in San Diego during the Vietnam War. He had the right slant on this strange state. He claims the country’s tipped a teensy bit westward, and everything loose rolled to California.”

Ham chuckled. “Uncle Nat is astute, and the world needs stutes.”

His wife ignored the awful pun. “What if you hook up with this fly-by-night missile outfit and they transfer you to . . . ? Where’d you say they had another plant?”

“I didn’t,” he told her with a twinkle. “Okay, if you must know there’s an AGC facility in Colorado, not far from Denver.”

“Colorado! Why, Colorado’s the absolute back of beyond.”

“What qualifies you as the household’s leading authority on Colorado?”

“I flew over those parts two winters ago when I visited my sister. Mountains and snow, snow and mountains, far as the eye could see.”

Ham’s brow creased. “Enlighten me, Audrey Lee. What exactly is the topic of this conversation? Why in hell do we always end up talking in riddles?”

“Shush! Tame your foul mouth in front of T-E-D-D-Y.”

The boy had finished his oatmeal. “Hell,” he said.

“There! See what you’ve done?”

Ham lifted both palms in self-defense. “The accused ate a hearty breakfast, and must now depart.” He survived his wife’s withering stare by pecking her cheek. He brushed his teeth in the half-bath next to the entry, plucked his raincoat from the hall closet and called back a pacifying, “Teddy, how’d you like to help me fix a drainpipe when I get home?”

“Hell,” said Teddy from the dinette.

“I certainly hope you’re satisfied,” was Audrey Lee’s parting shot.

Ham escaped, easing the front door shut behind him.

The late season rain shower was rapidly blowing away. Mounded clouds still formed battlements above Mount Gleason’s camelback to the east. Overhead, the sky had the scoured look of a cerulean bowl. Windblown droplets from a bougainvillea espaliered alongside the entry made Ham duck his head. The leather soles of his black oxfords skidded on wet, tissue-thin cerise petals littering the walkway.

The eight-year-old Plymouth station wagon, beaded with water droplets, started easily, mostly because he had spent Saturday morning adjusting the valves and tuning the engine. He backed into the street, weighing the terror of

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eking out payments on a set of steel-belted radials and the badly needed piston ring and valve work against allowing further decrepitude.

The nebulous prospect of employment again dangled before him like a mirage that receded at a high mach number whenever he approached. During the past year, he had taken dozens of interviews, mailed numberless résumés and filled out countless applications. Only minuscule faith remained in the ability of AGC or any other semi-defunct aerospace firm to offer him a worthwhile position. He and his family had gotten by—barely—due to reasonably prudent savings, unemployment insurance, and Audrey Lee's penny-pinching genius for running the household.

Midmorning traffic was moderate. The freeway steamed as bright spring sunshine evaporated the earlier rainfall. He whistled in time with the windshield wipers' metronome, bobbing his head to see through smeared spray thrown back by preceding cars. He swung the Plymouth around an off-ramp's descending loop and crawled six blocks westward, chafing at the red lights. The unreliable dashboard clock's digits reminded him that it was ninety-two.

Long a San Fernando Valley landmark, the sprawling AGC facility looked semi-deserted. Cyclone-fenced parking lots surrounded an intersecting maze of cement walkways that bordered windowless monolithic buildings painted a dull neutral gray. At the main entrance, sculpted letters edged in blue adorned a tall, missile-shaped pylon:

AEROSPACE GENERAL CORPORATION

An Equal Opportunity Employer

Guiding the station wagon along the divided central drive, Ham followed signs to the Human Resources Center, a one-story frame structure somewhat divorced from the main complex.

An elderly man levitated himself from the curb and hoisted a hand-lettered cardboard sign tacked to a broomstick. "Howdy," he called. "Ain't aimin' t'work for these crumb-bums, are ya?"

"Er, thinking about it." The cardboard sign colorfully described AGC's unfairness to "LABER."

"Helluva mistake," declared the picket.

"I didn't know there was a strike in progress."

"Ain't no strike. Us kitchen workers're protestin' the lousy conditions and stinkin' pay in the company cafeteria, is all."

"That bad?"

"Shitty."

"Sorry to hear it." Ham edged away.

"Do yourself a favor," the picket called after him. "No matter how desperate ya are, don't sell yourself to these sumbitches 'less they offer ya the Moon."

"The Moon," said Ham over his shoulder, "it's a deal."

A half-dozen discouraged looking applicants showed minimal interest when Ham entered a long, narrow room furnished with molded plastic chairs.

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A formica counter labeled GENERAL EMPLOYMENT occupied a portion of one wall. A second counter, opposite, was constructed of teakwood veneer. Here, the engraved placard read:

PROFESSIONAL CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

He adjusted his tie, waiting for a severely thin Asian-American woman seated behind the counter to lift her eyes.

“Morning. H.A. Moffett. I have a nine-thirty appointment with Mr. Arnold.”

The woman tapped the keyboard of a computer terminal. “Yes, Mr. Moffett. Straight back, second door on your left. Mr. Arnold is expecting you.”

He reached the prescribed door, lifted his hand to knock. His knuckles met empty air as the door was whipped inward and he all but fell into the office. A portly, gray-haired gentleman wearing rimless bifocals seized Ham’s descending hand in midair and pumped it vigorously. “Good of you to come on such short notice, Mr. Moffett. Please have a seat.” Mr. Arnold’s ebullient smile came and went with disconcerting suddenness. He scampered to his command post behind a desk overflowing with dossiers and stacked papers. “May I ask who referred you to AGC, Mr. Moffett? I’m afraid no professional openings exist at the moment, but we’re very anxious to learn who reads our newspaper ads. Feedback from applicants is vital.” A second instantaneous smile evidenced Mr. Arnold’s pride at being conversant with engineering patois.

“No one,” Ham told him.

“Er, no . . . one?” Mr. Arnold drummed close-clipped fingernails on his desk blotter. “Then may I ask what prompted you to send in a résumé? Was it dissatisfaction with your work assignments at . . . ?” He broke off to consult Moffett’s paperwork. “Ah, yes; Sargent Electronics, an excellent concern. Wait, this tells me you left Sargent quite some time ago.”

“That’s correct. Someone, a man—I’ve no idea who it was—left a voicemail message saying AGC was interested in learning my background and career goals. It didn’t seem wise to pass up the opportunity, so I mailed a résumé.”

Behind the bifocals, Mr. Arnold’s eyes opaqued suspiciously. “An anonymous referral is unusual, most unusual. Pardon me just one second.” So abruptly that it seemed a spastic reflex, Mr. Arnold snatched up the telephone. He punched numbers with the eraser end of a stubby yellow pencil. “Lucille, see what the database has on applicant Moffett, Henry A. Yes, yes—M-O-F-F-E-T-T.”

Twiddling the pencil stub, Mr. Arnold flashed an apologetic microsecond smile Ham’s way. “What’s that? Dr. Ladd again? Oh, dear me! I think we’ll be forced to lodge a strenuous complaint this time. I can’t help resenting his interference. Yes, I’ll take care of it. Thank you, Lucille.”

His manner pettish, Mr. Arnold clapped down the receiver. He massaged his forehead. “Things often happen in strange ways around here, Mr. Moffett.

It's Too Late to Leave Early

Our Human Resources department is dreadfully understaffed in the wake of all the, uh, downsizing. Dr. Ladd, the engineering director of our Advanced Projects Group, apparently has a special interest in your qualifications. I realize it's an imposition, but could you possibly find time to drop by his office for an interview?"

"Now?" Ham perked up. "Sure, of course." The notion of an actual interview with an actual engineering director raised a distant glimmer of hope. A year's worth of turn-downs caused him to squelch the glimmer immediately.

The employment official's eyes glistened warily. "Not that Dr. Ladd owns proprietary rights to your services, you understand. If only he'd spend the time and energy running his engineering organization he uses trying to do *our* job." Mr. Arnold pursed his lips peevishly. "This request to interview you is a surprise. I'm aware of no requisitions for mechanical engineers in any of our three divisions, and whether you . . . What's vital in the last analysis, Mr. Moffett, is fit."

"Fit . . . ?"

"Oh yes, fit. We dare not attempt to stuff a hexagonal peg in a round hole, dare we?" The phantom smile came and went like sheet lightning.

"Doesn't sound practical."

"By no means. Now then, I think you're all set to . . . Oh, one thing more. You really should fill out an employment application before your interview with . . . On second thought, it's perhaps best to learn how you and Dr. Ladd get along before bothering to complete the, er . . ." Mr. Arnold paused to cogitate.

"I'll take the paperwork home," suggested Ham, eager to talk with someone who spoke his language, "then fill it out and mail it back."

"Ah, splendid!" Mr. Arnold whipped a series of preprinted forms from a segmented file drawer. He stacked the papers neatly, added Moffett's résumé to the top of the pile with geometric precision, and slipped the packet into a white plastic folder bearing the AGC logo. He passed the folder to Ham with a violent gesture, barking a knuckle on the edge of his desk.

"Damn it all!" Embarrassed, Mr. Arnold sucked his bleeding knuckle.

"Better get a band-aid on that knuckle," advised Ham.

"Yes, Lucille has a first-aid kit. Listen, I've included brochures describing our profit sharing plan, supplementary retirement income plan and a number of other benefits I know you'll want to learn about. You will be going to 'G' Building, Mr. Moffett, which is . . . here."

Mr. Arnold spun his high-backed executive chair vertiginously. Sucking the damaged knuckle, he traced Moffett's prospective route on a plastic-covered wall map.

Ham rose. "Right away?"

"At once, if it's convenient. Dr. Ladd seems anxious to talk with you. There's one point, however, that I want made perfectly clear. Feel free to discuss anything and everything with Dr. Ladd, except salary. I hesitate to tell you how involved our engineering and scientific salary structure is during

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these troubled times. When AGC makes a rare professional offer, direct engineering labor averages must be factored into the equation, as well as overhead expenses, points for previous technical experience, points for work-related university courses, points for advanced degrees taken, and so forth and so on. It's a statistician's nightmare, Mr. Moffett. The math is probably more complex than what you engineers use every day."

"No salary discussion."

"Fine, fine." Mr. Arnold bounded to his feet, his manner effervescent. He came around the desk favoring the injured knuckle, and offered his left hand, "I sincerely hope there's a fit, Mr. Moffett. Remember, a fit is absolutely essential."

"A fit. I'll keep it in mind, Mr Arnold." Ham left the Human Resources Center in a bemused frame of mind. He wondered if Mr. Arnold might not throw a fit at any instant.

The elderly picket wearily elevated himself, lofting his cardboard sign. "Didja?"

"Er, no. At least not yet."

"Atta boy! Figured ya was too smart t'work for these double-dealin' jerkoffs."

"If I ever do," said Ham, "I promise never to eat in the company cafeteria."

The elderly picket wheezed laughter. "That's the ticket!" He resumed his seat on the curb. "Keep your word on that, young fella, and you could live t' be my age. Mebbe even longer . . ."