

The room was dark and silent. The only illumination came from a couple bulbs in a flashing sign from a Mandarin restaurant across the street. The woman's face was exposed as a ghastly, emaciated silhouette against the intermittent light.

In her mind, it had been a completely wasted life. Compromised, languid, settling for less when she could have achieved so much more. This would be her epitaph and her legacy.

In her lap lay an old yearbook turned to a page that showed the picture of a beaming teenager holding the class president's gavel. Underneath the picture was the caption, *Most likely to succeed*. She glanced at the picture and still felt sorrow even after 30 plus years.

Where and why had everything gone so wrong? The answers still eluded her. At 51, how could she have ended up here in a run down two-flat on Badura Avenue in Las Vegas?

She rose from a creaking rocker and walked over to the bathroom, not pausing to turn on a light. Reaching into the rusting medicine cabinet over a stained basin, she extracted two items: a brownish vile filled with green, round pills, and a blade from a safety razor she used for shaving her legs.

With one item in each hand, she turned and headed back toward the rocker, her slippers shuffling against the tiled flooring. The ragged robe dragged along behind her, silently mopping up the accumulated filth.

The unexpected noise from the kitchen caused her to stop and stiffen. The light and hum from the microwave was unmistakable. Subsequent popping sounds continued, and the smell of cooking popcorn filled the apartment. There was one small problem—she wasn't cooking any popcorn.

She moved the few paces from the living room towards the kitchen while grabbing a vase from a coffee table and raising it above her head. The outline of a person was framed by the light from the microwave. A stranger had entered the house.

As she approached, the intruder kept his face turned to the expanding bag. Yet, without seeing her, he held out an arm with his palm raised upward in the universal sign for stop. "Don't you just love the smell of popping corn," he said. "Microwave popcorn is ok, but nothing tastes like the kind they make at the theater, don't you think?"

"Who— who are you? How did you get in here?"

He turned. In the glow of the bulb she saw him smiling. Pasty, pale skin and teeth so white and perfectly straight that she thought they must be ceramic or porcelain. He wore a 70's-style, white leisure suit and a wide brimmed fedora.

"Get out— get out or I'll call the police!"

"Maybel, Maybel, Maybel," he said while shaking his head. The smile grew even wider. "Ah, the irony. You're getting ready to off yourself, and you're concerned about me assaulting you?"

"How did you get in here?"

"That hardly matters does it?" The last few corn kernels finished popping, and the microwave shut off abruptly. The room plunged back into darkness.

The woman moved toward the nearest wall switch and flicked it on, which lit up the kitchen and gave her a clear view of the antagonist.

"Awww, Maybel, now you've gone and ruined the mood." His smile stretched to grotesque proportions as he came forward, opening the bag of popcorn as he approached.

Maybel Downey set the vase down and edged back toward the far wall. Her eyes found the front door, which was still locked securely. She turned back to his penetrating gaze. "How do you know my name?"

He spoke between mouthfuls; his voice was muffled by the food. "Go sit down Maybel, and we'll talk."

"I'll do no such thing. If you don't get out, I'll call the police." She sprinted towards the phone, but when she arrived he was inexplicably blocking her path.

"I told you to sit down." For a moment his smile faded and was replaced by an expression of sadistic ugliness. His eyes widened and burned coal black, and she reflexively recoiled. Walking slowly, she

made her way to a sagging couch in the far corner of the living room. He sauntered over to a wooden chair adjacent to the sofa and took his place directly across from her. "You have any Merlot?" She looked surprised at the question but only shook her head.

"Damn, I only drink Merlot. I can hardly stand anything else."

"Who are you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, where are my manners?" He picked at his teeth for a stuck kernel. "Call me—Mr. Cox." He looked back over into the kitchen. "I'll drink ginger ale if you have any."

"Tell me who you are and what you want."

"You know, I love popcorn, but it makes me so dry. Do you know what I mean?"

She slowly lowered her head and began to sob.

"Crying, very nice. Sorrow feels so good...All right, all right. I told you my name is Mr. Cox."

"What is it you want with me?"

He shrugged. "I want to watch."

"What? Watch what?"

"What do you think, Maybel? I'm here to watch you kill yourself. I have a front row seat." He gestured with a sweeping motion. "So get on with it. What are you going to use, the pills or the razor blade?" He swung around and looked back to the kitchen spotting a distinctively shaped bottle. "Ah, I see you do have some red wine." He got up, walked over to a group of cabinets, and rifled through the drawers for an opener. "Cheap stuff, but I guess it will do."

"How did you know?"

The cork squeaked and then popped as he removed it from the bottle. He grabbed a glass and filled it to the brim. "Ugh, tastes terrible," he said as he returned to the chair. He saw her slump even further, shoulders heaving. "Look, it's kind of slow, ok? I mean, we can't have a 9-11 event every day, now can we? Even though I'm a busy man, I always try and make it to as many of the suicides as I can. I wish I could see them all, but some of you are, well, just not important enough.

"But I love their faces, especially the ones that have regret after they realize there's no turning back.

It's just priceless. So go on, do it. Just do it."

"Please, get out of here."

"Why? I would think you would want company at a time like this. After all, everything has been so horrible for you with the bill collectors and the husband that ran out..."

"Stop it, just stop it! You don't know what I've been through. You don't know..." She lowered her head and cradled it into her open hands. "Now, I'm hallucinating. Oh, sweet Jesus."

His expression instantly hardened. "Awwww, poor Maybel. It's so much harder for you than everyone else, right? Nobody has ever lost a job or been in debt or lost a husband. People have babies dying of cancer, but I'm sure you think you're far worse off than they are. What a pitiful self-indulgent mess. But no matter, I like you better this way. C'mon, slash those wrists; I want to see the blood."

He moved up on the edge of his seat and the smile returned. It was wide and sick in its malevolence. His eyes flashed and he licked his lips.

"Do it Maybel, just do it. You have nothing to live for. Look at this pathetic slum you live in. You could have had it all. Girl most likely to succeed with scholarship offers to Clemson and Stanford. An engineer, isn't that what you wanted to be? Look at you now, you loser."

"No, no," she shook her head and picked up the razor blade, pressing it against her left wrist.

"Yes, that's my girl. Now slice it. One pull ought to cut the veins just so. Make the pain go away; just a little tug. Come on, you can do it—please." The last phrase grew assertive and compelling.

"I will—I swear I will..." She pushed harder on the blade until it punctured the outer layer of skin. They both watched as the blood bubbled up from beneath the wound. He rubbed his hands together and squealed with delight.

“That’s right. Now just pull it hard. Slit your wrist; you can do it.”

Maybel’s breath was ragged, and she found herself shaking uncontrollably. She put more pressure on the blade, reminding herself of why she was doing this. Still, her hand seemed frozen; she couldn’t will the muscles to make the deep slash needed to finish the job.

She chastised herself for this weakness. Maybel Downey could not find the strength for either solution. Maybe the stranger in front of her was right after all. She was too weak to slash her wrists and too cowardly to face life. She was the worst kind of human spirit. There seemed to be no way out. As though sensing her doubt and utter despair, Mr. Cox examined his perfectly manicured fingernails while saying almost absently, “You know, May, there is an alternative here if you can’t bring yourself to do it.”

Maybel relaxed the pressure of the blade on her wrist just a bit. “An alternative?”

“Yes, I can give you another way. That’s what I said.”

“And just what would it be?”

“Actually, it’s very simple. You come join me.”

“Join you? You’re a monster who enjoys the suffering of others, a figment of my psychosis. What kind of job could you offer – mass murderer?”

He chuckled. “Excellent May, very funny. Look, I’m ok either way. I’m just offering an easy way out to a sniveling wretch like you. You want a nicer place to live? You want a better job? Money and power, perhaps? I can make it all happen.” She didn’t say a word, and he took it as a sign to continue. “All you have to do is join me – us. It’s simple really. You’re responsible for carrying out some small assignments on our behalf.”

Her face contorted and her head tilted slightly. “What kind of ‘assignments’?”

“Do you think you ended up in this place by sheer circumstance? A lot of hard work goes into ruining people’s lives. You don’t really believe that all those investment bankers on Wall Street were that dumb, do you? Have you any idea how many lives were ruined by their bad advice in the 2008 crash? The nasty ones with the huge bonuses; you think any of that was random?” Sensing her confusion, Mr. Cox sighed. “Look, I’m only asking for your loyalty. You work for the government. Every once in a while we may ask you for some information. State contract proposals, tax records, nothing particularly complicated.”

She moved her hand holding the razor blade away from her wrist. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Look, it’s an open invitation. You won’t believe how much better your life will become and how quickly. I’m like the insurance company. I have a whole lot of different plans. Maybe you’d like something bigger. That’s fine. We’re always looking for the ambitious ones to help eliminate the inconvenient. The more you help us, the better your life will be. Chaos is what we’re after, and a large amount of suffering wouldn’t hurt either. There’s lots of profit for those who get on board. But Maybel, the train is leaving, don’t wait too long.”

“Get out!” she screamed. Unable to grab something heavy, she threw the razor blade out of frustration. He grabbed it from the air and closed his whole hand tightly, shutting his eyes in a moment of pleasure. She looked back, and his grin had returned.

“Ok, I get it. You bipolar, manic-depressive cowards are all the same. You can’t even kill yourself with dignity. It’s pathetic.”

He rose from his chair and moved toward the front door. When he reached it, he stopped and rested his hand on the knob, his back faced the woman still sitting on the sofa.

“You know May, call me a pushover, but even though you disappointed me today, I still kind of like you.” He paused and appeared to be deep in thought.

“I’ll tell you what. Come tomorrow, you’ll find your rent is paid up for three months, and \$1,000 has been deposited into your account. Take my generosity as a token of good faith. Should you decide you want more, just call me and maybe we’ll do lunch.”

He opened the door and stepped through the threshold, "Oh, and Maybel, life is never going to change as long as you rely on yourself. One way or another, I'll be seeing you again."

He turned around, and in a motion similar to flipping a coin, tossed the razor blade across the room so that it landed precisely in the woman's lap. With a wink, he walked down the hallway. Mr. Cox was running late for his next appointment.