

RADICAL MAN

A novel

ONE...

Gary Johnson was furious with his bedsheets. Apoplectic, actually. The sunrise leaking through cracked plastic blinds lit up dust motes that seemed to be fearfully scrambling out of his way. It was barely six a.m. and Gary, who'd seen sixty-seven years worth of days, was already over this one in a big way.

"Friggin' Batman," he mumbled. "Screwed it up for *everyone*."

This was not the first time he'd uttered this thought. In fact, Gary Johnson was plagued by it. But his immediate problem was with a well-worn fitted sheet. It turns out the AARP left quite a few things out of the handbook, not the least of which was how infuriating making the bed could be when you live alone. Gary was tall enough...a shade over six-one...to do just about everything he needed in his well-kept, double wide trailer. But the degenerate who designed the bottom sheet must have done it with Kareem Abdul Jabbar in mind because there was no earthly way a normal person could stay on top of four mattress corners at once.

To be fair, Gary wasn't *normal*, but that didn't help with this. On his third attempt, with the trepidation of someone setting a rusty mousetrap, Gary pulled the sheet carefully from one tucked corner at the top to its opposite at the bottom of the queen-sized Spring Air. Whether from frustration or the unseasonable July heat, he was sweating buckets and winced in anticipation of the elastic snapping back in his face. Which it did spectacularly. He bunched up the sheet and thought about shredding it to pieces with his bare hands...which he could have done with a little effort...but the nearest Target was an hour and forty-five minutes away and the thought of driving down the mountain was too much to bear.

So Gary punted. He threw the linens into a corner and left the mattress as naked as the day it was stuffed. He needed coffee, and really shouldn't have attempted *anything* before he'd had a cup. Only now he was too impatient to wait for the ancient Mr. Coffee machine to hiss and gurgle its way to a mug of passable joe. So he shrugged into a faded flannel shirt, laced up his Redwings and headed out for a walk to the general store. The coffee would be old and probably a little burnt, but caffeine was caffeine as long

as it was ready *now*. Anyway, the sunshine and the scent of pine sap would be good for clearing his head. Gary stepped outside and was...if only for an instant... grateful to be up and around.

Camp Wilson, population 173, was neatly tucked into the western slope of the Sierra Nevadas, a stone's-throw from Sequoia National Park and the famous giant trees that are its namesake. Forty miles west and fifty-seven-hundred feet below lay the vast farmland of California's San Joaquin Valley. But up here, everywhere you looked mature douglas firs, sugar pines and massive white oaks stretched to the sky. The wind was thick with their aroma. And wild sweet peas were blooming everywhere. Gary walked down the rutted dirt lane that served as his driveway thinking that of all the places you could go to disappear, this one was actually pretty stunning. At Wilson Drive, he turned right.

The one-lane blacktop was already hot and spongy throwing up a convincing mirage where it dropped out of sight and down into the village. On the left was Wilson meadow, still thick and green from a late snowmelt. On the right was the granite face of Wilson ridge. And dead ahead was Camp Wilson General Store. Pretty much everything you could see or touch was titled by the pioneer who founded the area in 1920: Garret Elsworth III...who named everything after his dog Wilson...who was named after Woodrow Wilson. Or so it was said. Which made a distant kind of sense since President Wilson *did* create the National Park Service in 1916. But Gary thought the whole thing was probably made up.

As Gary crested the hill into what passed for 'town' in these parts, a breeze picked up which lightened his mood a little. A mother quail and a dozen chicks crossed the road and disappeared into a wild blackberry bramble and Gary's mood lifted a little more. By the time he hit the wooden sidewalk in front of the store he was feeling downright chipper. That would change. Gary opened the squeaky screen door and walked in. Camp Wilson General Store and Sundries was scarcely bigger than a good-sized living room and, like most of the buildings in town...lodge, diner, bar, hardware store...hadn't been touched since the 50's. Back then, Camp Wilson was *the* summer spot to be with a public pool, horseback riding, cabins and campsites, a sock-hop every Friday night, even a three-par golf course mowed into the meadow. The architecture stayed. Sadly, the crowds didn't.

It was no Whole Foods, but for the locals...and for an old recluse like Gary...the general store was just fine. They always had at least a supply-of-one of the essentials. And what they did carry was well

planned out by the proprietor and sole employee Jeffrey M. Sanderson, D.D.S. (retired) who sat on a creaky stool behind the counter and looked up as the screen door clapped shut.

“Well, look who’s up and about. What happened, Dorothy, did a tornado finally blow you into town?”

Gary didn’t rise to the bait. Instead, he made a beeline to the coffee pot and poured himself a large, old-school, styrofoam cup full. Clearly they didn’t get a lot of environmentalists up this way. Not in the morning, anyway. He added two sugars and a dollop of milk then slurped a taste of the heavenly liquid. Not burnt at all today. Amazing.

Sanderson persisted, “I see you put on your Esquire best for the occasion.”

“Nice to see you too, Jeff.”

“Seriously Rem, you haven’t been by for weeks. Everything okay?”

“It’s *Gary*. Just Gary, and you know it. Been that way since the last time you were good-looking...which was what, three decades ago?”

“Old habits I guess.”

Gary took another sip. “I guess.”

“You know, back in the day, you tried absolutely everything you could to be famous. Almost killed yourself in the process as I recall.”

“Multiple times.”

“*Exactly*. Multiple times. Now you’re trying everything you can to be *un*-famous.”

“Yes. And imagine my disillusion when I moved to Camp Nowhere only to encounter one of the last people on Earth who knew me in the ‘glory’ days. What are the odds? I mean, I should buy a lottery ticket.”

“I got new Scratchers, want one?”

“I meant metaphorically.”

“I know what you meant. And the odds were 1-in-173. That’s not a stretch.”

Gary let that sink in. Honestly, he’d grown to like Jeff over the years they’d both lived in Wilson. Counted on his companionship as much as his discretion, really. It was kind of nice knowing somebody who knew the truth. And the guy had a point; Gary had tried, *desperately*, in fact, to be famous back when he was exceptional. But everything that used to make him a potential a-list hero was now a

parentheses-compliment. He was fit (for sixty-seven). He looked good (for sixty-seven). It bothered him. In reality, he was still fast. Faster than men half his age. Just not *exceptionally* fast. Not by today's internet-cultural standards. He was strong. Just not *exceptionally* strong. His mind was sharp. Just not *exceptionally* so.

"Penny for your thoughts," Sanderson interrupted. "Buck and a half for the coffee."

"Oh, right. Sorry," Gary said as he went to his pocket. "And gimme a Recorder too."

There was a short silence. Which was odd because Jeff never missed an opportunity to fill a comfortable silence with chatter. He was like a little old lady in that regard. Gary looked up from counting wadded up dollar-bills. His friend was wearing the worst poker-face in the history of bad poker-faces. More importantly, Jeff was burning a poker-face over what? A request for a copy of the Porterville Recorder, a four-page daily which consisted primarily of obituaries and box-scores? Something was amiss.

"What gives? Dodgers lose yesterday? Don't tell me. One of the starters is hurt. Good lord, it's not Kershaw is it?" Gary asked.

"Um, no. Nothing like that. They won actually. 6-4. Paper's sold out is all."

Gary leaned over and peeked at the ancient metal shelves behind the counter. There, among the coveted last pack of cigarettes, last can of tennis balls, and last jar of Powerbait, was a stack of freshly-printed newspapers. Gary could practically smell the ink. He didn't need psychic powers or even his glasses to see Jeff was lying.

"All out of papers, huh?"

"Fraid so. So just the coffee then?"

"I guess I missed the truck."

"What truck is that, Rem..sorry, *Gary*?"

"From Verizon. The truck that must have been here to finally put up a cell tower. The one that came in the middle of the night providing the miraculous new signal you used to check yesterday's baseball scores. Or did you call someone on the land-line at...Gary checked his watch...six-ten a.m.? C'mon. Hand it over."

"You don't want to see it."

“Au, contraire. I do. I really do.”

With the demeanor of a condemned man, Sanderson slowly turned and grabbed a Recorder. He held it momentarily behind his back.

“Sorry, but you’ll have to pay first. I’m not responsible for what happens next, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to lose three bucks on top of it.”

Gary handed over the money.

“And don’t read it until you’re *outside*.”

“Wow. Okay. Should we *pinky-promise* Darlene or should we do each other’s hair first?”

Jeff made a face and gave the paper over.

“Outside.”

With his coffee in one hand and the paper in the other, Gary used his elbow and pushed his way back out through the screen door and on to the wooden walkway. Normally, he’d wait to read until he got home and put his bifocals on. Instead he sat down on the plastic Adirondack chair just outside the store, set down his coffee, and thwacked the Recorder open. And there it was, in bold 48-point type:

Radical Man 3 Has \$64 Million Opening Weekend. Shatters Own Record!

Camp Wilson, population 173, vanished from Gary’s field of vision. The wave of rage surging through him had dilated his pupils to the point where all he could see was the paper, and that was an effort. The article itself didn’t really require much reading as the headline made it pretty self-explanatory. Gary skimmed it, and then, despite himself, let his eyes fixate on the photo. Ryan Moss. Hatable even in black and white, the actor beamed smugly for the paparazzi from the red carpet dressed in the latest (wrong) iteration of the Radical Man costume. With his blue eyes (wrong) and shock of perfect blonde hair (wrong), he held up the Radical Man salute (wrong, wrong, wrong).

The suit and cape (wrong) had been radically redesigned (again) probably by some millennial Hollywood graphic designer who *parents* weren’t even born yet when Radical Man first hit the scene. The summation of the plot (wrong) confirmed what Gary, and millions of grade-schoolers could already guess. It was Radical Man 1 with different CG effects. But, apparently people...sixty-four million dollars worth

of people...didn't care. Gary had been through this twice before, and the third time was really not a charm. Not at all.

He exploded. "Frig! Friggin', friggin', friggin...*FRIG!*"

Gary clenched his jaws a few times, and waited for his heart and lungs to catch up to his adrenaline. He looked at his coffee cup...now, an unappetizing afterthought...and watched as it flew twenty yards, landing expertly in a bear-proof trash bin. He stood and started back up the hill. He knew he wouldn't stop until long after he'd passed his trailer. Probably not until well above the snow-line. His mind raced. Jeff was right to try and keep the paper out of his reach. Good old Jeff. Jeff who knew the truth. Who still called Gary *Rem*, a nickname coined from his initials thirty years ago when he was at his...albeit anonymous...peak. R.M. Radical Man.



TWO...

Gary had walked for hours without even noticing. To the end of Wilson Road. To the end of Wilson Trail. Then he'd bushwhacked his way from one unused forest-service road to another before finding himself nearly all the way to Pine Slope. The day had gotten away, and the shadows were getting awfully long. Luckily for Gary, it was still too early in the summer yet for mosquitos. But he'd had to swat swarming gnats out of his face the entire way home. On the whole, the ridiculously long, terribly planned 'walk' hadn't soothed his mind much at all. In fact, the only conclusion he came to is that no matter how far he tried to run, no matter how remote, certain thoughts always found him. Always.

Back in his trailer, still covered in brick-colored dust and wheezing a little, Gary was immersed in the one extravagance he still allowed himself. Wifi was a godsend on days like today and worth every penny he paid DirecTV...which was, let's face it...a metric-ton of pennies. The eerie, blue-white light of the MacBook lit the place up like a beacon, which wasn't hard in the mineshaft-blackness of night in the Sierras. He was so engrossed, Gary had neglected to turn on a single lamp once the sun had gone down for good and the cicadas on McIntosh creek had long-since shut up their *irritating* whine. The carefully framed photos on the wall, photos he'd never shown anyone...*couldn't* show anyone, not even Jeff...stared down like so many ghosts.

It goes without saying that the internet is history's greatest distraction. The ultimate shiny bauble. But what Gary loved most about it was all the *actual* facts you could find. If you knew where to look. There, in the sub-Reddits of the sub-Reddits, the Twitter-threads of the re-Tweets of re-Tweets, was the proof of just about everything people ever wanted to know. The real things. In Gary's day it had been the *National Inquirer*, now it was the world-wide-web. Truths were buried in such an *avalanche* of crap...Shiggy-dance videos, Pinterest photos of buttons, *noodling* instructions (Google it), likes, follows, reposts, and comments...that they could hide in plain sight and never upset the status quo.

Was there a Bigfoot? Yes. Was the government hiding things in Area 51? You bet. Is the Illuminati real? Of course. Is Beyoncé part of it? No. String theory? Yes. Bermuda Triangle? No. Loch

Ness monster? Not anymore. Do superheroes exist in real life...*yes*. And there it was. Once that veil was lifted, it was impossible to see life the same way again. And while currently the dark corners of Gary's browser search weren't showing any new activity or fresh evidence on the supe front, he didn't need a computer to tell him what he was, or what he...and many others...*had* been. That knowledge was more curse than it was blessing. There was an unwritten rule among supes: you never *directly* confirmed or denied the existence of yourself or others. But *indirectly*? That was another thing altogether.

The explosion of comic books as popular media and the arrival of superheroes on the cultural radar was no coincidence. Of course, most people thought publishers like DC and Marvel came first and that they created the legends within their colorful pulp pages. In reality, the legends...the supes...came first, and...for a few decades at least...comics were by and large *biographies*. Sure, the fantasy was stretched here and there and writers like Steve Ditko, Jack Kirby and the great Stan Lee added plenty of catchphrases and origin stories that bent the truth a little to fit the times and sell more titles. But the narratives were real. Most of them.

It's important to remember that iPhones and Google and social media "influencers" didn't exist in the 40's or 50's...the golden age of superheroes...so the exploits of crime-fighting crusaders with remarkable abilities were largely unknown outside major cities with big newspapers. Radio sets were still out of reach for a lot people and television was only theoretical, but everyone had a dime for a comic book. At the height of their popularity, it wasn't unusual for a single issue to sell a million copies. Gary wasn't alive much less working as a supe when it all started. But like most of the world, thanks to Action Comics, he *felt* like he was there. He'd trade anything to travel back in time and meet the godfather of them all: Superman.

If Kal-El had landed anywhere but America he would have gotten a greeting befitting what he truly was...an *alien*. And it wouldn't have been good. After two World Wars and with the Cold War rapidly building, planet Earth was exhausted, paranoid and universally terrified of monsters invading from space. Luckily, the being who became Clark Joseph Kent crashed in *Kansas*...the absolute heart of a nation swelling with patriotic optimism after destroying the Third Reich. So instead of being killed and dissected in some dark foreign lab, Kent became the darling of the good ole' U.S. of A. Superman wasn't the first alien to touch down here and he certainly wasn't the last. But his timing was beyond impeccable.

By the time Superman starting operating in New York...no, it wasn't *Metropolis*...stories of his well, *superness* were already causing a stir. Most people wrote them off as tall tales...fever dreams spread by crackpots who wore tin-foil hats to keep the government from reading their minds. But on the island of Manhattan it was impossible for a man in blue tights and a red cape who clobbered bad-guys to remain completely anonymous. The comic book writers simply took police reports and eyewitness accounts, drew them, inked them, and printed them. Superman did all the hard work. The publishers got filthy rich. And the public ate it up. The superhero industry was born.

Some supe details were fudged, of course. In the comics, Kent worked for the *Daily Planet*. The writers had to make that up as to not offend any of the *thirty* daily papers operating in New York at the time who gave them hot tips. In the comics, Kent had a love interest named =Lois Lane. In reality Superman was just *too busy* to have a girlfriend, never mind the fact that the kind of mob bosses he routinely kicked the crap out of would have used a 'Lois' for bait or leverage. He never went on a single date. Nor was he able to change the rotation of the Earth to reverse time. With all his not-from-this-galaxy powers even Superman couldn't change Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The rest, however, was based firmly in truth, and it felt that way to readers for a long time. Almost a decade.

By the time Superman left Earth for good in 1951, the Big Apple was lousy with supes and the one-upmanship necessary for comic-book publishers to compete started to make it impossible to tell the 'fudging' from the outrageous lies. In professional supe circles, it was often said Superman had departed for universes unknown in disgust, due in large part to the greed and commercialism he felt responsible for starting. Because of his famously-strict personal code of ethics, Superman had never killed an adversary, uttered a swear-word, nor....to Gary's horror...ever taken a piece of the profits generated by his fame. Not one red-blooded American dollar. And the profits were *substantial*.

Truth, it turns out, *is* stranger than fiction. After Superman left, the comics continued, of course, but the writers, left to their own devices, had to start weaving stories from thin air. They introduced powers the real Superman never possessed: laser eyes, inter-planetary flight, ice breath, x-ray vision...it just got goofier and goofier. The character eventually became so invulnerable the writers had to invent Kryptonite to give him a weakness. Anyone with an eighth-grade level of science knowledge knows that when stars (suns) go super-nova, they create black holes with so much gravitational pull even *light* can't escape, much less glowing green chunks of former-planet.

In the mid-80's when Gary was working as Radical Man, the Superman franchise was in steep descent. The television show...*brought to you by Kelloggs Cornflakes!*...had been a financial success but was terrible even by stilted 50's standards. It was so bad George Reeves, the actor who played Superman, was driven to drink...a condition which reportedly led to his mysterious and untimely death. The series of Saturday morning cartoons was better, but lacked the graphic punch of the comic books. The first film *Superman* was a hit, but *Superman II*, *Superman III*, and *Superman IV* were as unimaginative as their titles and the world just...*moved on*. More movies, graphic novels, spin-off shows and merch kept coming, but even with the help of the Justice League and increasingly mind-blowing CG capabilities, the whole Superman franchise never seemed to quite *stick*.

Not like Batman.

"Friggin' *Batman*," Gary mumbled for the second time today. "Screwed it up for *everyone*."

It was well past midnight, and Gary was physically and emotionally wiped out. He shut the laptop which was going to run out of charge any minute now and stood to go wash up and brush his teeth. He knew full well he wouldn't get any sleep with his head swimming like it was. And worst of all, he'd still, as yet, not made the bed.



THREE...

For the last twenty-five years...give or take...self-imposed exile had served Gary well. What money he'd managed to sock away stretched further in a year than in a single month living in Los Angeles, where he'd worked until the mid-90's. Though, 'living' and 'working' were both pretty rubbery ways of putting it. The solitude of the mountains kept folks from feeling like life was always crowding in on them. Camp Wilson's simple lifestyle, nature's simple pleasures and Gary's simple trailer, allowed him to establish a rock-solid daily routine which kept his demons at bay. Until something happened like yesterday's article. Then, cabin-fever set in like a plague. Gary hadn't slept a wink all night...the couch was no kinder than the linen-free mattress...and at 5 a.m. he decided he needed an escape from his escape, so he'd fired up the Explorer and started driving.

The hypnotic sensation of tires meeting tarmac instantly allowed Gary to do what hours and hours of hiking couldn't: *concentrate*. When the cerebral cortex is busy handling menial tasks...like steering, braking, and navigating...the rest of the brain gets to flex a little. Thoughts normally bunched up in a gossamer tangle start to separate, and for Gary that created an opportunity to cleave emotion...especially anger...from assessment. Once he could assess something, he could move past it. Sometimes only for a day or two, sometimes for years. So, as California State Route 90 rolled past on auto-pilot, Gary mulled over the Batman conundrum for the millionth time. Like Dustin Hoffman in *Rainman*, he had to get past it before he could deal with Radical Man III, and he had to get past *that* before he could formulate some kind of response he hadn't already tried. *I'm an excellent driver Charlie Babett*.

Since its inception in 1939 the Batman franchise had pulled in more than 40 *billion* dollars world-wide. More than Captain America, an actual super-soldier who, after being engineered by the US government to defeat the nazis, turned his considerable talents on the criminal underworld. Cap's story had arrived a little late on the civilian scene as his military missions were highly classified and had not been released to publishers until well after the war. Batman was more famous than the Fantastic Four, a real group of honest-to-god rocket scientists whose cells had been altered by near-fatal exposure to gamma rays giving them unprecedented abilities. Among other things, Reed Richards and his team had almost single-handedly kept the Soviet Union from world domination.

Batman was more enduring than the very-real Flash. More valuable than the very-real Daredevil. Yet Batman had never taken a single punch, dodged a single bullet, or put one bad-guy behind bars...or in the grave. Because Batman never existed. If you thought about it, even among supe stories, Batman was quite a stretch. A billionaire who spent his money *fighting* crimes instead of committing them? An orphan whose rich, picture-perfect parents had been gunned down in front of him, with no witnesses...in a seedy alley behind...*the Opera House*? Because, you know, billionaires *walk* home *alone* all the time, don't they? A boy raised *anonymously* for years in a *mansion* on the edge of New York City...no, it wasn't *Gotham*...by an elderly butler who miraculously never aged? The origin story strained credibility to the point of imploding on itself.

He had no powers. No abilities. Just a fat trust fund and a bad attitude a mile wide. That's what the writers had gotten so very *very* right. Batman was dark. His moral compass was...*flexible*. He relied on gadgets...top-of-the-line billionaire gadgets, sure...but things not dissimilar to those available at an above-average surplus store. And he was flawed. Like the greatest gunslingers from the greatest westerns, he was a self-appointed vigilante who operated outside the law...*screw the Man*...filled with rage and hellbent on revenge. People saw more than just a hero in Batman. They saw themselves. Throw in the cave, the sidekick, and the boats, planes and cars...not to mention the iconic cowl and scalloped cape...and the *Dark Knight* was literally pop-culture gold. But that gold was spun from the *real* efforts of too-often unsung and woefully-underpaid supes like Radical Man. And that's what gave Gary Johnson the fits.

Almost without thinking...well not *almost*...Gary found himself wriggling uncomfortably on crinkly exam-table paper at the office of Dr. Robert Goldenberg, M.D. Gary didn't have an appointment, he hadn't even intended to stop in Summerville at all. But the miles had passed by like a quiet breeze and before he knew it, there he was, wincing as the blood pressure cuff tightened around his left arm. The smell of antiseptic and the bright, even lighting were unusually reassuring. Dr Goldenberg released the air in the cuff and looked at the readout on a portable monitor.

"One-twelve over seventy. Perfect. As is your temperature and your weight. The levels from your latest blood tests which we reviewed...let's see...last *Tuesday*...are still, surprise, surprise, *perfect*."

"You're sure it was Tuesday huh? Seems longer than that."

"I'm sure. See, I remember patients under 85 who drop by every other week... without making an appointment, mind you. I especially remember when there hasn't been a single instance of anything being remotely wrong. Not *medically*, anyway.

Gary perked up at that. He was wide awake now. “Well don’t dance around it doc, if you have something to say, spit it out.”

“Mr. Johnson, why are you here?”

“Just getting a check-up. What happened? Your great remembering skills start slipping?”

“Mr Johnson, don’t get me wrong, I appreciate getting the office-visit fee. I do. But why are you here? Did something happen? Some kind of physical trauma? A headache? Poison oak? Anything?”

“No nothing like that.”

“I see. Are you eating? How’s your sleep?”

“Let me think. Sometimes. And crappy.”

“Well, that’s not completely unexpected given your age...”

Dr. Goldenberg who was not a day over forty, and who...judging by the extra twenty pounds around his middle-aged waste...was obviously eating and sleeping *plenty*, had a tone that was quickly rising to a place of condescension. Gary knew where this was going. And he’d already decided he was going to fudge his answer, which wasn’t hard after a lifetime of hiding a secret identity.

“...also, it’s not unusual for someone like yourself to be, well, contemplating their own mortality. For some it’s merely worrisome, and for others it can be a little terrifying. That would certainly explain this...*tendency*, to drop like you do. Completely understa...”

“I was in the neighborhood. Just popped by to take a look under the hood. That’s all.”

“Mmm hmm. Have you considered, maybe taking up a hobby? You live up at Camp Wilson, right? Perhaps give fly-fishing a whirl...or, or, maybe *photography*. It’s beautiful up there. It might be very healthy to do something that keeps your mind occupied.”

Gary had plenty to keep his mind occupied. And it didn’t seem healthy. Not at all. But he damn sure wasn’t going to live out the rest of his days like he was in a Geritol commercial. He was under no illusions about being on the back-nine of life. What he cared about was getting credit...and a few bucks...for what he did while he was here.

“Well, there is one thing.”

“Oh good. What’s that?”

“Sometimes, I like to take a Gen Y-er, especially one who has a lot of ‘sage advice,’ and sort of bend them in half you know? Kind of squish ‘em down like Silly Putty and then stuff them in a big mason jar. It’s sort of like canning peaches if you think about it. That’s a hobby, right?”

Dr. Goldenberg took it on the chin and smiled. He knew this song-and-dance pretty well by now, and, anyway, he routinely saw much snarkier curmudgeons than Gary. Snarkier by far.

“Touché, sir.”

“Why thank you.”

“Truth is Mr. Johnson, you’re probably going to outlive us all.”

That’s what everyone used to say about Peter.

“Well, doc, now *there’s* something terrifying.”

On that note, Gary hopped up and walked out. He got in the truck and thought for a hot second about heading west out of town and peeling off at Highway 65 north toward Visalia. He’d come this far, a Target run was inevitable and way overdue. But he thought better of that. In his heart, he knew hadn’t floated down the mountain for dish soap and dvd’s. Instead he drove a half-mile...staying under 30mph to avoid the speed trap...to River Run golf course. There’s another hobby he hadn’t picked up, but plenty of his contemporaries had. One in particular lived in a condo on the seventeenth fairway. Gary hoped Len was at home and not in the pro shop on his first martini. But you just never knew.

For a public course, River Run was magnificent. It was lush and green and manicured. They’d designed the whole thing around the natural lay of the foothills. Dinky Creek...which, when your were trying to drive a golf ball over it, was more than a creek and not so dinky...wound its way over a bed of brown sand and round, white granite stones, and flowed year-round. Massive oak trees had been left where they’d stood like sentinels for hundreds of years. They made for great hazards but even better scenery. The grass of the surrounding hills was baked golden by the summer heat. All in all, it was a picture postcard...the kind worthy of sending to Arnold Palmer himself.

Len Dawson had been a hard-boiled LAPD officer for over thirty years and had retired as a decorated captain. Between his pension and a number of vocational...*gratuities* he’d socked away, Len was able to buy a handsome split-level duplex smack in the middle of River Run. He’d left every part of his professional life behind him except for the mustache and a pack-a-day smoking habit. He’d put on some weight and lost some hair since his time on the beat, which included more than a few days spent with Radical Man. But Len who was an avid...though not terribly good...golfer, was happy, comfortable, and completely unprepared to find Gary sitting on the veranda as he opened the sliding glass door.

“Hey, Cap.”

Len, nearly spooked out of his skin, drew his service pistol out of a holster clipped to his belt. When he realized who’d spoken he lowered the weapon. But he did it slowly.

“Rem?! What in the hell are you doing here? Jesus, man. I could have shot you.”

Gary raised one cocky eyebrow and gave him a deadpan look.

“Okay, I could have shot *at* you. Where the...how did...they didn’t stop you at the gate?”

Gary cocked the other eyebrow.

“You mind-tricked Tito into letting you in.”

“It wasn’t hard, Len. The kid is built like a stack of bricks, but if I’m being honest, he’s not the brightest bulb on the tree.”

“I thought you weren’t supposed to use your powers when you’re off duty, much less *retired*.”

“I make exceptions now and again.”

“Still with the dry wit. It’s never been charming, Rem. Have I ever told you that?”

“Yes.”

“What do you want? And this better be good.”

“Holster the hand-cannon, would you? I need a favor, Cap. A big one.”



FOUR...

Since its inception, Los Angeles has been an incredibly lawless place. No amount of time in the Hollywood civic make-up chair could change that. Unlike other cities though, L.A. was vain enough to shove its ugly history right in people's faces and not give a damn. In fact, the more lurid the story the better. In the thirties, when water was being illegally diverted to what was then essentially a desert, it was the Mob (*Chinatown*). In the forties, it was rampant police corruption (*L.A. Confidential*). In the fifties, the cruelty of the studio system (*Sunset Boulevard*). There have been so many Oscar-Nominated films about sex, greed and violence in Los Angeles (*The Player*, *The Graduate*, *Shampoo*, *Magnolia*, *Boogie Nights*, *Boyz n the Hood*, *Nightcrawler*) it's easy to wonder whether crime inspired the movies or the movies inspired crime.

In the decade-and-a-half between the Watts Riots and the OJ Simpson trial...when Gary and Len were both in their prime...New York City boasted about thirty-thousand active police officers in the five boroughs alone. In contrast, the *entirety* of Los Angeles had fewer than eight-thousand, which made fighting on the force a nearly-impossible and thankless task, and fighting *alongside* the force even more so. To make matters worse, for a rising superhero anyway, the crimes that were *prevented* never made the headlines. The crimes that weren't stopped *did*, and they got more grisly and more sensational every day. That only left room for sports scores and real-estate listings. *Behind* that, occasionally, there *might* be a small paragraph about a super-strong, super-fast, telepathic adventurer named Radical Man who'd stopped a runaway bus or averted a liquor-store hold-up.

Len knew there was a lot more to it than that. He and Radical Man had worked numerous cases together over the years, at times very closely. But Len's loose interpretation of *his* duties...much more controversial than duping a country-club security guard...led him up through the political ranks to increased prestige and a fat 401K, as dubiously-funded as it might have been. Despite everything he'd had to do in order to survive thirty years in the LAPD, Len was a good cop, respected by his colleagues and admired in the community. He and Gary started circling different professional orbits, and soon lost touch altogether. Once in a blue moon, Gary would pop by unannounced and uninvited. Until recently, Len had

been pretty good-natured about it, willing to swap war stories from days-of-old over a cold beer. Today, not so much.

“I don’t recall owing you any favors, Rem.”

“I didn’t say you owe me one, I said I *need* one.”

“Ah, I see...”

“You *do* owe me one, though.”

“Please tell me you’re not going to say 4th Street bridge...”

“*4th Street bridge*. You were in the middle. No place to run. A thirty-foot...”

“A thirty-foot drop on either side, yeah, yeah, I was there, remember?”

“I stopped a ‘78 Gran Torino seconds before it smashed you to bits. With my *mind*.”

“Lem, what you leave out is...every time...that Gran Torino was careening down 4th street in the first place because you’d pulled the getaway driver out of the car without putting it in park.”

“Pffft. You don’t need a superhero to pull a bank-robber out of a *parked* car. I did it while it was going thirty-five. That’s the part *you* always leave out.”

Len let out a tired sigh. “Do you want a beer?”

“It’s 10:30 a.m.”

“Suit yourself. I’m having a beer.”

Len walked back inside, opened the double-door Viking fridge and cracked open a cold Miller Lite. All this talking made him thirsty...so what if it was still breakfast time? He’d been up since before dawn as usual. In retirement-hours that was well past lunch. He took a long sip. Gary was right. He *had* stopped that car. He *had* caught all the crew. And returned the stolen money. The fact was, as much of a pain-in-the-ass as the old guy on the porch was now, Radical Man and others had helped out the cops in LA quite a bit in the day. And 4th Street wasn’t the first scrape he’d personally been saved from. Not by a long shot. Len decided out of strained-to-the-breaking-point loyalty that’d he’d hear Rem out one final time. Then, he’d take his Callaway clubs and go home...so to speak. He walked back out on the veranda and this time, sat in one of the redwood Adirondak chairs.

Len took another sip. “Well, go *on*. It’s your dime.”

“I’m sure you saw the paper yesterday.”

“Can’t say I did, why?”

Gary winced a little, then blurted as quick as he could, “Radical Man Three came out and...”

“Oh *Jesus Christ*, are we going to do *this* again!!?”

“Len, it made over fifty million in *one* day.”

“*So?*”

“You *know* what so. I didn’t see a dime.”

Len leaned forward. “Did you see a dime from Radical Man One?”

“You know I didn’t.”

“Did you make a stink about it?”

“Well, yeah but...”

“How far did you get?”

Gary’s cheeks reddened. “Nowhere.”

“How about Radical Man Two? How far’d you get then?”

“Len, no one would listen to me, but...”

“Now, I’m no detective...oh,wait, yes, I *am*. And I’m seeing a pattern here. Are you seeing a pattern here Rem? Please tell me you’re seeing a pattern.”

“Cap...it’s just...*dangit*, it’s just not *fair*.”

“You’re old enough to qualify for the early-bird senior discount at Denny’s now, and you still believe life is supposed to be *fair*? You have to stop this nonsense. I mean it. You have to stop this right now, Rem. Enough is enough.”

“Easy to say from your private veranda overlooking the 17th fairway. I’m sorry, is it the 17th, or the 16th? I always forget.”

That stung. Len took the last swallow of his beer and thought hard about getting up to grab another. He decided to keep his head and ride this out. Rem was right, of course. It *was* unfair. But so were taxes. And the height requirement to ride Autopia at Disneyland. And the fact that when you hit middle-age and finally had free time to read, your eyes went bad. The list went on and on. You couldn’t fight Uncle Sam, Walt Disney, or God or any of the rest. You *really* couldn’t fight Hollywood. And you *really really* couldn’t squeeze a nickle...much less a dime... from a movie studio with an army of lawyers whose sole purpose was to make sure no nickles went anywhere except the pockets executives said they should go. Ever. Hell, you couldn’t get a position on a studio lot running overpriced coffee to egotistical *extras* unless you knew someone who knew someone. And even then, you’d have to do it for free.

“Okay. Let me ask you this. What would you do with the money? Even if you could get a piece, which you obviously can’t, what would you do with...a million dollars, let’s say?”

“What kind of question is *that*?”

“The kind you should be asking yourself, Rem. You live in the middle of nowhere, you have no kids, no grandkids, you don’t travel, you don’t even have any interests that I know of...are you going to take that million and stuff it in your mattress? And then what? Leave it all to the Forest Service when you check out? This obsession, it isn’t healthy.”

“How comfortable would that be?”

“What?”

“A million dollars stuffed in a mattress. Better than a Serta, you think?”

“God, there’s just no talking to you. If you insist on looking backwards, why don’t you try setting things right with Milly? I heard, she’s still in Pasadena, not married...never got over you apparently, for some *unknowable* reason...have you ever...”

“No.”

An uncomfortable and unusual silence passed between the two old allies. The cop and the supe. Both men ran hands with swollen knuckles through salt-and-pepper hair. Soon, it would be too warm to continue this outside, and neither man wanted to carry it on in Len’s well-appointed living room.

“I’m sorry. That was out of line.”

“It’s not just about the money. It’s about what’s right and what’s wrong, it’s about credit where credit is due, you know? My legacy...I just don’t want to...I don’t want to die thinking...what I did...what I gave up...I don’t want it to amount to nothing.”

Len replied, more gently now, “It wasn’t for nothing Rem. Think about all the others...War Eagle, Swashbuckler, Explosive Man...”

“*Explosion* Man. Johnny Alpha, Zephyr, Shockwave, Thrill Devil...I know the list, Cap. Heck, I barbequed or played poker with most of them at one time or another.”

“Then you of all people should know none of them got rich or famous. All of you made a difference, I saw that first-hand. Only *you* ever even made the comic books, at least you had that.”

“It was six issues, which *I* wrote. I paid about a thousand times more to get it illustrated than I ever saw from selling it. Then, Ryan Moss and Whoever-The-Heck-Else Productions stole it out from under me...they stole *my* life story...which they changed and misrepresented and plain got wrong. They ended up with a franchise that prints money. Radical Man got famous. But *I* got neither. You see?”

“I do see.”

And Len really did. He disliked how things had gone down even more than he disliked being a lifering every time there was another Radical Man summer blockbuster. Or lunch box. Or t-shirt. He hoped Gary steered clear of Target for awhile. The merchandising would give him a panic attack before

he got past customer service. Then Gary gave an audible sigh of near-defeat...the closest thing to a genuine emotion Len had ever seen from him before.

"I miss him, Cap."

"We all do."

"He was a mentor to me."

Now it was Len's turn to cock a perplexed eyebrow.

"What? He was. We talked shop many times."

Len switched eyebrows.

"Okay, we emailed mostly. But he gave me a lot of solid advice. I worshipped the guy..."

"I know you did."

"That's why I'm here. I need to get ahold of Mary Jane."

"Now, Rem, you know I can't do...she didn't *like* him talking shop. Good lord, it scared the hell out of her for the longest time. She hated the *pull* of it. Not just from other pros. From the press, from admirers...*anyone*. She kept him happy and out west and focused on family. It was her life's work...how could you...why on earth would you want to bother her *now*? What could possibly come of it?"

Gary stared at Len intently with no impending smart-alec come-back on his face. His green eyes, red around the edges from exhaustion, radiated only sadness and deep sincerity. His voice became tight.

"She's the only connection I have left to the old-school. The A-list old-school. Everyone else is...*gone*. This might be my last best chance. Please."

Len fiddled with his mustache and clenched his jaw open and shut. It wasn't hard to see the young, street-tough rookie patrolman still in him. After a solid two minutes of this, he grabbed his empty Lite bottle and went back inside. After a solid five minutes, he reappeared with a sticky note on which a phone number was scrawled in Len's authoritative handwriting.

"It's the last number I have for her. Burn it when you're finished. I like you Rem, an awful lot, but I hope you understand this is the end of it. I'm done. 4th Street or no 4th Street."

"Thanks. So do I have to...you know, do the mind thing on Tito to get *out*?"

