

"LaSalle Street"

Brian Spicer

The man who had authorized the building project that could be seen from Jeffcott's farm was rather vigilant now, several years later. He had been, and would be for a long time. From that point on the farm's boundary someone who had been told what to look for might actually see a corner of the house built by the newcomer. Then if he climbed a tree he could get the more spectacular view: a good-sized clearing that contained the full form of someone's enviable residence. Ed Githens took steps to make sure his home would remain more or less a secret. Along with his vigilance, though, was a playfulness that often seemed hard to defend. It was one of his experiments to give his new cell phone number to just one person outside his family. This would be a complete stranger. The question was, how long before additional strangers would be using the number? He'd subject these people to some longwinded greetings.

The first example was heard by Bill Burkheimer, the man who got the number directly from Ed Githens. Bill heard the entire message.

Ed proclaimed, "There's good news from a coalition of medical research groups who care about the citizen's right to enjoy the longest life span possible. These experts have done more than laboratory miracles. They've secured favorable decisions by judges, and these decisions have bolstered the markets in thirty seven states." He paused long enough to produce tension in the listener. "Unfortunately, Congress and its pharmaceutical cronies have no tolerance for these innovations. That being the case, you're invited to a confab that's held on the last weekend of June in Kelso, Washington. This event is the best of its kind. You'll meet the activists who really stand up to the corporatocracy." Ed gave the address for the confab and the website of its promoters. "Do yourself a favor. Get to know the ideas and the products that make a longer life not just possible, but inevitable."

"I stay in condition," Bill said.

He didn't give up on the man who had approached him, even though the man wasn't answering his calls, and even though Bill had no clues about Ed's financial standing. He could have seen the man's name if he had ever studied registers of the fabulously wealthy. Ed's profile had been as low as possible. It was as if Bill sensed by intuition that the contact with Ed would be opportune. He wondered how serious the Kelso meeting would be.

"I might as well hear their promotional stuff," he told a friend.

"I'll care about medicine someday," was the friend's answer.

"I care now, as long as I can take it to market."

In fact Mr. Githens had the ability to exaggerate a business prospect without committing fraud. But it was more grating than that. He held the entertainer's – not the activist's – pose about waging war against fascism, and there were times when he made sure people had to be uncomfortable. He suspected that Bill would call once more, sometime after the meeting in Kelso. His opinions about the event would be amusing.

To begin with, Ed knew that the closest residence to his own house was the one at Jeffcott's farm. He had bothered to learn some things about their family. It seemed that Bill Burkheimer's relatives had been associated with the late Cynthia Jeffcott. Learning about this woman, he learned about the Burkheimers, who had lived in the state since 1925.

Cynthia's friends knew that she had never lived on the farm, the place being property of her eldest brother. She was known in southwest Washington State as an inspirational civic achiever as well as a marginal mystic. By making what he thought was a trivial donation to her philanthropic legacy, Ed increased her posthumous name-value, and this had some unexpected results. He could be clumsy about such things.

He could also be friendly with different social elements, but he wanted to choose the time and place. He exerted himself in doing that. He considered a person's repute, sought more opinions and then reconsidered, having learned more of the repute. He then decided whether to make the acquaintance.

His channels of information were the kind available to anyone of his plutocratic standing. Accurate descriptions of them could be terse, with plain language. Even in these times there was such a thing as information so confidential that its disclosure would only be to one person. It was almost never about private relationships, but rather about points of high-level corporate strategy. His phone conferences were done with useful, indirect statements. He'd be perched outside on a balcony as he spoke. This, the southern side of the house, was the busiest. For some reason it was the best place to concentrate. He almost never noticed the display of the herbs that were maintained with planters along the railing from one end to the other – his wife's cheerful task. Now and then, though, he'd perceive activity or some other surprising feature beyond the clearing. Some hills, farther away than the forest he could see, had their signs of human purpose. But nothing there would interrupt his work. Neither would his residential extravagance. And for him work amounted to privileged options which, in theory, could usually be enforced by prosecutors. He always got more messages from subordinates and colleagues, day by day.

Though he continued to be pleased with business, not everything he heard was pleasing. The reports that annoyed him right now pertained to a mildly wealthy

character named Glen Robertson. The man had gained the attention of some leaders in Congress. Ed feared that Robertson would be able to profit excessively from the situation. He thought no one should profit excessively as a favor from Congress. With everything he'd heard about Robertson, Ed's view of the man was understandably jaundiced.

After a phone conversation about this, Ed lurked with a sullen demeanor in the house. But he was thinking about something else. Janet, his wife, noticed the peculiar mood.

"Having to deal with a difficult colleague?" she asked.

"Maybe not so difficult," he said. And he's not really a colleague."

"But he wants you to help him."

Her husband frowned. "It's just that guy in Sanderlin. The guy at the motel. He's been getting some odd visitors."

"And he's worried about it."

"He's puzzled and he wants my opinion," Ed replied. "I agreed to listen to him, but I'd rather do it there." He recalled the motel proprietor's most emphatic statement.

"They're not government people," the man had said.

Mrs. Githens hardly ever inquired about her husband's reasons for leaving the house, even though his departures were unpredictable and not especially frequent. She didn't worry about his motivations or safety. But right now she was mystified as he walked along the hallway towards the bedroom.

After he put on some clothes that were less casual Ed went to the garage and got into the driver's seat of the oldest vehicle. Sanderlin was reasonably close. From the mansion it was a ten-minute ride to the southwest. On the way there he tried to come up with a crushing gibe he would send in some email. The target was a detested celebrity. Humiliation is more legal than homicide.

Poor Janet Githens – not really knowing the monster she slept with.

Sanderlin boasted a motel, a cafe, very few houses and not much more. Its origin was quite recent, caused in fact by one of Ed's decisions. The route he was taking to get there had only existed for a quarter century, and its terminus – three miles beyond Sanderlin - presented nothing more than a campground with a modest barrack. This was the only road on which he drove more slowly than he had to. Scenic value, he told himself, using that to partly account for his introspection. He somehow associated parts of the landscape with persons or anecdotes he remembered. As always, looking to the southeast, he noticed the distant rampike.

Was it supposed to be the average rampike, not worth mentioning? That was hard to believe. As for the matter at hand, it might be hard to care about. He'd know in a few minutes. The man running the motel was rational. He wouldn't exaggerate the problem if there was one, and he had more to gain by being honest instead of dishonest with the man who was about to meet him. Ed smugly recalled the bits of advice he had chosen to ignore at various turning points in his life. Now, with his destination coming into view he told himself that no matter what, he wouldn't be wasting his time. He drove into the parking lot at the motel.

The proprietor was always attentive when Ed Githens talked to him. He answered Ed's question.

"No one's come in within the last two days," he told him.

"Any special phone calls?"

"No, sir."

Ed looked through the wide window, with its outside view of landscape and some buildings.

He commented, "They see a place that has potential. Anyone who drives through here has his own vision for the future."

Corey, the proprietor, assumed that Ed would have legitimate reasons for being curious. He'd been telling Ed about the men who seemed to be scouting the area recently. Most of them were dressed as if they might be close to the top rung of leaders in big business. They had avoided Corey and the motel, but he'd seen one man talking to a homeowner near one of the houses. On one afternoon several men had been walking through the fields. Now Corey pointed out the directions of their movements.

"They walked over to the ridge," he said, "but they didn't climb it. They moved quite a ways along the base of the ridge before they came back to the signpost where they were parked. The next day some different men came out and were talking to some residents."

"Did they talk to everyone?"

"I saw them over at that one house, and I'm told they made some other visits around here. They couldn't care less about the motel."

"Even though they saw you with your camcorder."

"It didn't bother them, I guess. Of course, it was only two days ago. They might still be thinking about it."

The situation couldn't be frightening, could it? Was there an indication one way or the other?

"No reason to assume the worst," Ed remarked.

"I called because I couldn't tell what it meant."

The financier would play almost anything down. He said, "I can find out what they really want."

"You mean what they're trying to do?" the other man asked. "I get the feeling those people are well organized."

"And they're traipsing across my land," Ed muttered. "Like you say, probably not government people. Businessmen, but not ones we invited." He said to Corey, "Nothing comes of it."

Ed spent the next half hour chatting with the proprietor. No one else came to the room. This man running the motel thought he could learn something from Ed, if he could only be alert for the crucial sentence. He honestly thought there was something virtuous in the man's confidence.

Finally Ed told Corey, "Keep up the good work," and walked out to his car.

He returned home.

Ed wasn't really that confident. Such explorers of his land could stoke his phobias. His kernel of a fear was that these were men who represented, somehow, the variety and chaos of the difficult social elements – the community – from which he had relocated. It wasn't just a family situation that formed the problem. Conspirators working against him would have substantial resources. But his reason for moving was about dignity as much as about safety. He believed that the most convincing and comfortable way to flaunt one's independence was to become established in such a region as this. He shared the impressions of so many fellow citizens arriving here. He saw what they meant, 'virgin soil.'

Along with the chance to relocate so expensively, there was something else going for him. He showed some skill in talking to journalists. He dealt with criticism in such a way that the arguments against his work and lifestyle had to be revised. Journalists were usually willing to make the revisions.

As for his family right now, the problems were tame. The day after the Sanderlin conference Ed's wife began talking about their two daughters in a way that she never had before – expressing a deep psychological study. Their son was kept out of it. All three children had started their own families and would come to the mansion once or twice a year, spending a few days. The son admitted that he'd be glad to live here decades hence. But the daughters lacked affection for the place.

This was prompting the psychological study. Janet displayed for the first time some sort of empty nest maladjustment. The glazed look in her husband's eyes was authentic instead of satirical. He kept his mouth shut. Ed always tried to be generous to the acquaintances he spent much time with.

It became undeniable, during the summer, that his business concerns were being investigated. He was contributing to the massive development efforts underway near Mineral Cliffs, a place in the Rocky Mountains. Ed perceived it as the closest thing he'd ever know to the ideal project. He'd first gotten useful information about it three years ago. The region centered on the cliffs had value for manufacturing as well as telecommunications, and the National Security State preferred the area's topography for some reason having to do with continuity of government. The trouble was crime. There had already been a prosecutor's move against more than a dozen workers at the central site, most of them charged with industrial espionage. These men were being held in a private prison maintained by a corporation that Ed thought highly of. Ed, hearing the reports about trouble, was briefly distracted. He felt secure, at least in regard to Mineral Cliffs.

The summer was how he thought summer must be according to its nature – lethargic. That is, he found himself taking it easier than he would admit. And for some reason his wife was discouraging any continental travel he might have in mind. Apart from three sluggish days on the Olympic Peninsula, they didn't leave home.

At some point in the summer Ed observed, with wisdom he was adding to a memoir, "The combination of power and fame is quite rare." He'd been working on the memoir since early June.

His addition at this time was the one sentence. He'd have serious challenges to meet before he could come back to the survey of his past. Until then it would be less than a survey. His decisive experience predated by four years his relocation to Washington State. The change was the beginning of his deals with certain power brokers. He knew the deals would continue as long as he was ambitious.

One morning he finally answered a call from Bill Burkheimer. He had some explaining to do. Bill had gone to the meeting in Kelso. But the experience was less galvanizing than he'd been led to expect. He complained at length.

"It sounds like they weren't very specific," the rich man said, after listening for a while.

"That could be my summary of it," Bill agreed.

"I'm told not many people showed up."

The young man seemed to hesitate in replying. "About a dozen of us at 2 P.M."

"Real dynamic outreach," Ed inferred, with gentle mockery. "Did you hear the main speaker?"

"Yeah, but he was a substitute," Bill said. "I can't even remember his name."

"A smarmy kind of guy with pockmarks?"

"That's him."

Ed supposed the man would be a poor choice, at that. "I've seen him a few times, but I don't know his name, either."

It seemed a good idea for the older man to steer the discussion – somewhere. He asked Bill a few questions about relevant details. Bill answered quickly and sharply.

Ed continued, "Well, the event was intended to provide help for anyone having the right attitude. I was thinking they would give advice on how to organize. Did they do that?"

"They covered some ground, but it seemed pretty thin."

Ed gave a show of indignation. "I've already been hearing some bad things about what happened in Kelso. I think the main guy behind the confab deserves to be put through the wringer. I'll see to that."

"Yes – thank you, sir."

The call ended without Bill hearing much that he wanted to hear. Young people could be pathetic, but Ed wasn't feeling remorse. Compared to some other way that Bill might have spent that weekend, Kelso wouldn't be bad. Bill had learned something, just what the older man had no idea. That brought to mind Ed's new cell phone number.

He thought that Bill was probably keeping the number to himself. Through that number he wasn't getting calls from anyone else, including Cynthia Jeffcott's organization. On the basis of this call and a message left earlier by Bill, the tycoon began developing esteem for the young man. He thought he might even give some autobiographical data, next time around. He kept thinking about some of the data.

He'd grown up not far from New York City, but his most useful connection had been established in the Midwest. In a sense this puzzled him, not that he was complaining. The geographic reference was kept from being obvious. At times in conversation with businessmen he'd make some enigmatic statement about his 'helpers on LaSalle Street.' It was ridiculous how many Americans had never heard of that neighborhood. But they always got the gist of it when he told them, "LaSalle Street is to Chicago what Wall Street is to New York."

His critics had solved some of the mystery about the plutocrat in question. For example, his influence on a group known as the States Development Authority wasn't the best kept secret. To exist, each group of this type – interstate compacts – had to be recognized by Congress. Polemicists made the vague insinuation that the Authority was a puppet for the likes of Ed Githens. But this charge didn't seem to be much of a problem. No one really bothered him about it. He liked the idea that he belonged to the managerial sovereign class, with its bloc of corporations, policy institutes and the National Security State. On the other hand he thought his life was too sheltered and he wanted to change that, but he wasn't sure he knew how to leave the shelter without doing something stupid. He received advice from plenty of people. He was visited one day by two such coaches, men who came to the guesthouse. These men had done some clandestine work that was supposed to benefit the SDA. They prided themselves on the fact that they only used weapons when there was no other choice. They hadn't been here before, and they walked slowly towards the guesthouse, wondering what to expect. Ed looked amiable as he greeted them from the porch.

They stood there outside the house for a while. They spoke in a fitful manner about a well-known organization. The weather was pleasant. Finally, for the more serious talk, they entered the house. The building was expensive but no bigger than it had to be, and situated a hundred feet from the edge of the forest. Before they went in the visitors naturally glanced more than once towards the center of attraction, the object at the center of the clearing. Ed might have looked, also, if it hadn't been his own residence.

Inside the smaller building the men quickly took their places. Mike Prather, a man still in his thirties, was seated by the basalt hearth. His peer was on a couch across the room. Ed occupied a chair at a table. They were still talking about the well-known organization.

"Their committee can't do that much," Ed asserted. "It defers to the SDA. You agree?"

"No question about it," Mike said.

"Which means that elections are beside the point."

Darren Tellock was amused, for some reason. "And you think that philosophical depth is more important than the will of the people. It's easy to say, but I wonder if we can do something with it."

"I suppose it would look unfriendly," Ed suggested, "if the entire panel was replaced."

Mike laughed.



"That we can actually do," Darren said. The claim caught the wealthy man off guard. Mr. Tellock wasn't just a guy who enforced the managers' directives. He also knew something about managers.

"Then so much for the will of the people," Ed replied. He was intrigued. "I like the sound of a clean sweep, philosophical or not."

"A clean sweep shouldn't be necessary," Mike said.

"I agree," Darren added. He believed what he had said about replacement, but that didn't mean he'd be enthusiastic.

Mike expressed bewilderment about the SDA's relation to Congress. Its own committee's work wasn't just hard to predict. It was unpredictable.

Ed saw the problem as something different. "I think the Authority's been there long enough. Anyone can see what happens now and then: they change their methods for appointing new members. No one complains about the charter being violated."

"Your point is," Mike said, "that their freedom is what helps us gain our objectives."

"Pretty much."

For a half hour the conversation dealt with pros and cons, mostly the pros. One of these – according to their mindset – was the informal partnership they cultivated. They had little, if any, fear of betrayal. But sometimes the partnership needed maintenance. In this regard they mentioned the most qualified specialists, and the adverse possibilities were dismissed in less than five minutes.

In his perception of the two men, Ed was more impressed by Darren. He always proved to be better-spoken, making recommendations that Ed could usually accept. This time the final choice of agreed upon plan was what each had expected.

"I'll take my turn like the other sponsors," Ed concluded. "You guys make your presence known where you have to. The components have a way of falling into place."

Darren said, "If there's a first time when they don't, I'm in trouble."

Mike answered, "You wouldn't be in trouble."

Ed was used to dealing with the States Development Authority. He had no experience with the other group he had just mentioned – the lesser group. In any case the lesser group would be reasonable. He wouldn't have any member of their committee killed or falsely accused. But he'd manage to induce a change in their policies.

This little conference was held on the fifth day of October. Ed knew he was likely to question, in the gloom of the coming season, the statements by these men. But so far there was no disagreement. Like him they accepted the Authority as a fact: a collection of states extending from Wisconsin to Connecticut that had some influence over the rest of the nation. Darren Tellock, a man good with narrative related to his work, told some anecdotes before he left. These were instructive though they couldn't be enjoyed. In this case Ed's hirelings were tactically shrewd but not filled with idealism. As the operatives left the guesthouse and then the clearing, Ed was glad some things didn't depend on this meeting. He compared the two men's advice with what he was told by several worthy performers on LaSalle Street. Those performers came across as relatively encouraging. They went so far as to allay his fears about the corporation agents who were having a look at Sanderlin. They informed him that the agents were employed by an eccentric filmmaker to scout the location. Ed welcomed this news. The brigade on LaSalle Street had never let him down.

Still, some things were bound to go wrong. The leaders in Congress denied that they had granted a title of nobility to Glen Robertson. They'd never admit they had violated a principle established by the Founding Fathers. Their defensive argument sufficed without being sound. Few people could see how a title might be granted, and the controversy about this didn't last very long. The West Coast representative making the accusation knew that he had to shut up. The journalists making the accusation found other topics to investigate.

Despite his power, Mr. Githens failed to prevent this conferring of unique status on the obscure gentleman – the man being identified in the newscasts as Glen Thomas Robertson.

“The Hutchman File”

Brian Spicer

A backyard having a swale to one side and loose thicket to the other might be plenty of space for someone's abiding presence. It'll have to do. A stricken man in his fifties will be here for the rest of his life. He tries to remember the decisive things that happened in the past three years. The story's available to him in a few fragments that he has trouble with. He knows it took place in a distant part of the country. One question is, does it have anything to do with the murder of the

journalist Nathan Keefe? It's hard to see how. Nathan became too famous because of his blog, and he was trying to stay virtuously independent when he rejected the offer of employment as part of a radio talk show team. His body was found in one of the storage buildings behind a house in Skamania County. Now the fifty-something man has the idea that he should be able to relate this to a fragment of memory, so he's at this again. But he looks over at his cottage when he hears the back door opening. Shelly, his wife, walks out to where he's resting at the picnic table. She tells him something about their planned visit to Battle Ground, set for the next morning. Soon she walks to the front yard, leaving her companion to drift back in thought towards Nathan. There's the problem of how to evaluate the dead man's influence on a certain corrupting movement. It's been denied by his friends and relatives that Nathan agreed to the contractual obligations of those who take part in the movement's vile practices. And as far as the television commentators would care, it's only in the last five days that these practices have become worth mentioning. When he begins to feel more discomfort, Leonard Hutchman arises from the bench at the picnic table and somehow begins to stagger towards the back door. He enters the house. In the afternoon and evening he keeps trying to remember the fragments.

The next day Shelly takes him to Battle Ground. They spend some time in a coffee shop, occupying one corner and listening a while before they talk. It triggers a fleeting response when she says something about the accident. He doesn't remember the accident or much of anything about the following two years of 'convalescence,' – a time in which he never saw Shelly. His wife had told the authorities that someone abducted or killed her husband. She'd gotten one message that claimed Leonard was unharmed and would soon be released. When he was finally set free two years later, she wasn't able to learn anything else. Now, instead of talking about the accident Leonard talks about something he can remember. He liked the way the coffee shop was furnished the last time he was here. Why did they have to change that? Eventually he notices a solemn gentleman entering the shop. It's Don Minoli, a person he first met after being released. Shelly had informed the man where they'd be this morning. He called a week ago, trying to reach Leonard, and she told him the man in her care sometimes conversed better in a public place. Don comes therefore at the right time, though to Leonard it seems like happenstance. Is it just as well that his thoughts would be interrupted? He makes a typical esthetic judgment right before Don gets there. A young man who works in the shop opens the door to one of the back rooms. He leaves the door open when he goes in and Leonard sees a portrait on the wall in the room. It's the standard portrait of the most famous man in history. Leonard has his recurring thought about this. He'd prefer that the Messiah was clean-shaven.

Don goes to the person at the counter, places his order, then goes to the chair on Leonard's right. His jacket shows traces of late winter weather. Unlike yesterday, this morning makes a return to the slop of March. But the rain doesn't bar

pedestrian traffic. In fact the nearby commercial firms are more enticing to Leonard's wife than any discussion the two men might have. She leaves the coffee shop. Obviously Don's order won't get there in time to share the table with Leonard's cream cheese-and-bacon sandwich. In the meantime Don has his coffee. He's thought about the story that Leonard has trouble remembering. Here in the shop he begins their meeting with light conversation, and it's a few minutes before he seems purposeful .

Finally he says, "You talked to Fred Parks a couple of times, didn't you?"

"Yes," Leonard answers, "now that you mention it."

"And I think you said that was before the injury."

Leonard recalls the transition. "Two weeks, maybe three weeks before the injury. He described himself as 'company spokesman' for that firm I'd never heard of. Naturally I've wondered if there was a link between him and my captors, but nothing tells me there was. I can't pay someone to look into it."

"And for that matter, you wouldn't trust any kind of investigator. Correct?"

"I could change my mind," Leonard says, "depending on circumstances."

Don's after something new in terms of considered opinions. He states, "The esoteric treatments you received, including hypnosis - you don't sound very impressed."

"I'm not."

Don's plate of food is delivered, and the conversation slows a bit. He lets the other man talk. Don's been speculating about a subject he has an inkling of - the data that someone gathers in regard to Leonard. Now and then selected comments from the file have been revealed to certain interest groups. It's possible that Fred Parks maintains the file. This matters to Don the bureaucrat, who was a key factor in getting Leonard released. He has to consider the likely consequences. It isn't that the interest groups would attack the former prisoner, but they could manipulate his associates, or they could do something else...

"We still don't know where they were keeping you," Don says.

"I'd like to know the reason more than the location."

Don glances at the other customers. "I agree with your idea that some respected person in senior management was behind the abduction. It would just be a matter of identifying the person. I wish I could make promises."

Leonard's a bit skeptical. "Investigation isn't your job," he says. "I understand that, but you still care about my history. How come?"

It takes a while for Don to state the suspicions he has regarding Fred Parks, and he admits that his department would be indirectly concerned, at most. He thinks Fred is a dunce who lives a charmed life. The crime wouldn't have been Fred's idea, but he would know the perpetrators. Leonard's reaction is cautious.

He tells Don, "I guess those things could be true. Maybe something will come to light."

"Maybe, if we can get some help from the right people. I'm not sure we can."

"Because," Leonard says, "you're not law enforcement as such."

"Right," the other man acknowledges. "But we can do some things the cops can't do."

"Including," Leonard points out, "some things I used to be able to do, myself."

Both men have finished their breakfast. Wanting to learn more about Leonard's mentality, Don suggests various items for pondering. Before he leaves, he might even talk about Nathan's unpleasant ritual. If he does, he might hear something candid.

Leonard isn't suffering from his lack of employment. Given his age and his condition, there's no pressure about it. There'd been a time when he was doing very well, but three years before the accident he'd had quite the setback in his business affairs. Calculations told him to sell the expensive house. He and his wife adjusted well enough. The location of their cottage has them less than a hundred feet from a calm, substantial stream at the edge of hill country. Infirm as he is, he likes the location.

For Don the shop's a little too public, and he goes easy here, talking to Leonard. The oft-reviled bureaucrat is able to believe what he's been told about the other man's ordeal. It's a medical expert instead of the victim who has told him. Few of Don's acquaintances have the nerve to ask him about his own desperate experience – that of being falsely accused by a woman. It's true that he handled the problem adroitly, and he can testify that there's life after nightmare.

Leonard's experience was passive rather than desperate. He says, "One of the memories gives the impression that there's a lot more to it."

"And what's the memory?"

"I'm lying in what seems like a hospital bed, and two other persons are there, talking about me. But they're not talking about my medical treatment, that's all I know."

"Still," Don replies, "they're probably doctors. By the way, did you give up on that high-powered specialist?"

"I gave up. It's just the way he does things - "

"Makes everything too complicated," Don says. "I know what you mean."

They have a subject that's always close to the fore. The onetime prisoner in a 'secret facility' makes a few assertions and gets a mild response before asking what he really wants to know.

"I guess you won't tell me much," Leonard says, "about how you got me out of that place."

Don's body language makes it clear he won't.

Leonard isn't too disappointed. "Fair enough. Is there anything else, now that you've told me about Fred?"

"Yeah, something else - " Don hesitates.

A torrent of rain suddenly splatters the window. People keep moving past the shop. Don continues, this time referring to a sheriff's department and its problem with a minor celebrity.

"They've changed the official version on the Keefe case," he says. "They were calling it murder, but now they claim it was death according to the suicide pact. Nathan told his dad he was coming down from Seattle to see a friend who lives near the Columbia River, but the friend insists he never saw Nathan. So there was some other rendezvous, and that's what killed Nathan."

This example, unlike that of Leonard's earlier plight, concerns Don's organization directly.

"It sounds like the movement's a cult, after all," the broken man replies.

"That word doesn't tell you much," Don says. "And they don't have the group structure a cult has. There's no central, presiding official. Each group with a contract has its own arrangement."

But Don's still asking himself a question: how big a problem is the file? So far he hasn't revealed that he knows Leonard was preparing, sometime before the accident, to help a prosecutor. Data from the file had somehow come to the prosecutor, who got in touch with his witness. The accident changed their plans.

Leonard comes up with several questions about Nathan, most of which the other man can answer. Naturally the Keefe case was given exposure in the mass media, with most of the leads pursued by investigators near Puget Sound. So the facts

have already become clear to some of these investigators. Nathan was targeted by the corporate elite, for unknown reasons. The highest-level managers have studied the psychological development, including the liberation concept, of those persons who accept the mortuary practice. As they move on to a presumed paradise, the group's members leave behind a system of benefits for survivors. And before their departure they deeply antagonize the social system. One of the corporate officials' late recruits has been such a person. Who says that fascists can't believe in liberation? The woman they recruited was motivated to establish the pact with Nathan and she finally got his consent. He submitted to the procedure. His body was discovered by someone coming to the place for the first time – a man renting the storage unit behind the house in Skamania County. Nathan, espousing the movement, has fallen victim to the fascists.

This will be Leonard's way to relate his memory fragments to Nathan's demise. It occurs to him that his own views about the sovereign class were publicly expressed long before his accident. He feels that the same social element had kept him prisoner, and his final talk with Parks could have shown the need for wariness. The man had told him that the ruling class is directed by an occult, superhuman being – one who flouts the Almighty. The fiend's willing servants are lavishly compensated. If that point was supposed to be public relations, it was lost on Leonard. Good job, Fred.

"Our department shouldn't have been brought into this," Don says.

"Your people seem capable enough," Leonard teases.

"That's not the point, and you know it."

Something else Don isn't telling this man is that he's actually met Nathan and talked politics with him several times in the last year and a half. That fact would only give Leonard one more excuse to blame things on most of the officials he's dealt with. Don's resources abound within the world of agencies, but his informal alliance with this or that person can sometimes be the most productive. And the people involved in Nathan's death? Some inferences could be made. They knew about that property in Skamania County. Though the same person has owned the house for almost half a century, it's been vacant since last August, when the tenant – the owner's daughter – moved out. Don asks the other man what he makes of the scenario.

Leonard says, "It's a test conducted by the grandees. I think they're trying to anticipate the changes in civil rights."

"You mean because of the proposed regulations about the transfer of estates."

"It makes sense, doesn't it?" Leonard replies.

“It might to the experts.”

Don thinks that Nathan’s death ties in with Leonard’s hypothetical court case. The ones to be prosecuted would be members of the sovereign class or they’d be adversaries of that class. If Leonard doesn’t inform him, there’s no way to tell which. Not that Don sees it as a practical problem.

Shelly returns to the coffee shop, without any new possessions. The timing is pretty good. She stands there looking at the men, who happen to be finishing their conference.

Here at the table they’ve encouraged each other’s intuitive sense that there’s a social background of collusion. This marks an advance over their first meetings. Don’s rather dull nature as conveyed by TV and radio has no resemblance to what he’s like in person. He surprises Leonard with assertions that are implicit or merely incidental.

After several months of knowing him, Don still tries to help Leonard. He asks, now that they’re about to leave, “Is there anyone else in the department you’d like to get in touch with?”

Leonard can’t think of anyone.

He’s troubled by this on the way home – regretful that he’s turned down an opportunity given by Don. The misgiving is no less conscious when Shelly drives the final stretch before turning onto the road that arrives at the cottage. On the final stretch he looks at the concentration of mobile homes that flank the stream right before it runs into the acres of thicket. He sees the historic, dutifully maintained pioneer’s house on the other side of the stream, and then Shelly turns in towards the cottage. He’s still frustrated about the opportunity, despite his lack of trust in the officials.

Inside the house they spend some time reviewing his plans for gaining a sense of what was done to him. Shelly thinks he should rely more on this improbably helpful bureaucrat. Leonard doesn’t admit that he’s tempted. He’s considering the full range of his options.

Time works on Leonard as it works on others. A vigorous example of the process is the fragment he described to Don in the coffee shop. For a while the change is scarcely noticeable. It may just be a matter of the broken man reaching a point where he admits that he should tell someone the remarks contained in the fragment. In this way the fragment becomes whole and becomes available. Despite that, the weeks go by monotonously. Leonard wants to call Don even though Don isn’t the first man he should confide in. It’s as if he’s harboring a secret that must be impermissible. The recollection’s been fully developed.



In the recollection, Fred Parks and his young assistant can be seen, but not constantly. The subject of their interest – the aging man – lies in bed. He's unable to speak, unable to move. The other two men don't seem to care if he knows what they're saying. Or maybe they have reason to think he'll forget. Fred talks as though he's reading Hutchman-related information from the screen of a laptop. But Leonard can't see the laptop.

"This is worth something if it's true," Fred tells the assistant. "They've got their names on the list that specifies 'compelling reasons of despair.' The source appears to be trustworthy."

"Do I release that information?" the younger man asks.

"There may come a time for that," Fred answers, and then says some more things about the document.

The flashbacks recur to Leonard now and then, with subtle differences. One evening as he sits in the swivel chair in the small room he calls his study, he begins to speculate. It's people such as Nathan who keep the list of reasons for despair. Leonard wants to know why someone claims that the Hutchmans accept the suicide pact. The claim is inaccurate.

In the remembered sequence Fred sounds pessimistic. He says to the younger man, "I'd suggest that we co-opt the movement, but we'll probably give in to accommodation. In other words, conforming to it. That's the way things are done in this country."

The assistant replies, "Here's the judicial reference you wanted." Evidently using the Internet, he reads aloud two sentences.

"Gotcha," Fred says.

There follows a series of comments that might as well be gibberish to Leonard. Then it clears up.

"I forget who first heard about the accident," Fred says. "It really was an accident, but guess who wanted to make use of the situation."

"I never guess about those things."

Leonard supposes the deception could come from Fred's associates or superiors without Fred knowing it.

Fred looks at the captive. "I think we're done with today's little exercise. The medical people can have him again."

Not inclined to think highly of his place in the social order, Leonard isn't very startled by the sequence. He was regarded as cattle by Fred, but the important thing is that even such regaining of knowledge is possible. The medical and psychic treatments have been productive, after all. He doesn't know the sequence verbatim, but now it's clear that a criminal – Fred himself - really does maintain a sneaking file on Leonard Hutchman. It isn't that Leonard should worry about this when he's having supper. He's brought back to the present. All during the time he's been in the swivel chair, noise from the kitchen has told him Shelly was busy.

He enjoys the meal and then he watches the only TV show he can care about. He had seen some episodes of the show's first season prior to having his accident. But by now there have been some unfortunate changes in casting. The reason he still watches the series is that the story happens in a northern city, and the crimes referred to – all commissioned by the elite – are never shown on the screen or described in detail. This time the show can't hold his attention as completely as usual. At some point in the episode Leonard repeats a thought he had at supper. He decides he won't inform Shelly about his memory of Fred reading from the laptop, at least not yet.

In the morning he makes a phone call to a law enforcement officer. He's talked to this man previously. Of course there's no guarantee of results, but he has to make the attempt. He can finally identify one of his abductors.

The officer says, "That's a long time before having the recollection."

"I know," Leonard answers, "but I'm sure it was him."

They consider some details thoroughly. When the call is finished, the man that Leonard spoke with walks over to the office of a co-worker.

He likes the news he just received, and he tells the co-worker, "We have an allegation about Fred Parks." The man at the desk finds this interesting.

"You remember Fred Parks," the first man suggests.

"The promoter," the second man says. "He's the one who does that lecture circuit on ETs running the government."

"Promoter," the first man adds, "official spokesman, something like that. I think we have more evidence this time."

The man at the desk admits, "I'll have to brush up on my VIP conspiracies."

"I won't have to."

Leonard, after the call, wonders about the person he just now spoke with. Once before, the man expressed interest in Fred Parks. If that suspicion gets rekindled by

these comments, Leonard might be seeing various officials in the near future. He tells himself that he has no regrets about spouting his social views.

Later that day Don Minoli stands on a hilltop from which he can see vehicles going along the I-5 corridor. He likes the scene, but that isn't why he's here. Before long he gives up the distraction, comes down from the hill and walks through a verdant, secluded graveyard. He comes to a flat-lying tombstone that shows the inscribed name of Nathan Keefe. Also inscribed, above his epitaph, is a diagram. The information on the marker is dangerous. A relative – perhaps his brother – could supply this knowledge if he knew that much about Nathan's personal associations. It would take some courage to put it on the marker. True, the dangerous people might never come here and read the epitaph. Don stands there at the grave much longer than a stranger would be expected to. He recalls the sporadic sanity of Nathan's opinions. The table talk they had more than once at that roadhouse in Federal Way was informative, but only now does he realize Nathan was preparing to help a prosecutor. He should have been better informed all along, especially concerning Fred's involvement. There's still some of that data reaching the abusive interest groups. After Don leaves the graveyard he keeps thinking about the file.

In the next week Leonard begins to take one more kind of medicine. He's at a lower point than the previous week. He has a unique encounter one day when Shelly's gone from the house on some errand. A man comes to the cottage to see him. The man's an attorney, one with a strong reputation even though his manner is diffident. Sure enough, as the conference goes on he proves that he knows what he's talking about. He says the legal prospects of the movement are quite limited. Their activism will soon be defeated. That's easy to believe, but this meeting frustrates the disabled man. He wants information about the sovereign class, even if the attorney thinks it's off subject. The meeting had been scheduled after the two men exchanged emails about Nathan Keefe and his ilk. The attorney wants to learn something, too. He's always assumed that the bastards never slip up. The rumors that Nathan was their victim seem outrageous, but they might be confirmed. And now the disabled man gives him a name he can use. Though the attorney's never heard of this Parks character, the initial comments are promising. As for Leonard, he has an unrelated thought during the dialogue: if he were to die, what would his wife do? He doesn't think she'd keep residing at this location. His mind wanders a little more. He thinks about his brothers and his in-laws. But then he becomes aware that the visitor, having asked a question, waits for an answer. Once again Leonard assures the man that he rejects the suicide pact mentality.

More days go by before Don and Leonard have another talk, and Leonard knows this won't be their last one. In his private reasoning he's tried to explain why he was a prisoner. Don, with a similar view, finally mentions the court case. Prosecutors wanted Leonard testifying against a high official, and it had to be done by a certain deadline. That didn't happen. This is one result of being a prisoner.

Leonard senses another: he's had a sigh of relief that makes up for something, somewhere.

Anyway the new medicine is working. He starts to feel better.