

A MAN'Z A MAN WHO LOOKS A MAN
RIGHT BETWEEN THE EYES

Frank Werner

John and Thresha were both standing at the large, plate glass window when the long limousine pulled up to the curb. They had received a call from her father a few minutes before. He wanted to come over at lunch time to talk with them, and they had agreed to see him. John looked questioningly at Thresha.

"Who else?" she replied to the unstated question. She turned and began making a wide path from the door to the rear of the office where there was a large, round table.

"I think we can all fit in here, don't you?" she asked.

"Yeah, that'll do fine."

Outside from the driver's side of the car, a huge, hulking man rose from the shiny black surface of the car's roof. His face was knitted in a menacing scowl, with dark eyes that stared thoughtlessly out from under two busy eyebrows. The man turned walking toward the rear of the limousine. His chest appeared to be the size of a whiskey barrel. When he reached the rear of the car he stopped and opened the trunk, taking from it an expensive looking, collapsible wheelchair. He set this on the sidewalk and then stepped around to open the rear passenger door. From out of the car the huge man gently lifted a small, older man whose legs swayed lifelessly as the huge chauffeur turned and set him carefully into the unfolded wheelchair. The pair slowly began advancing toward the door. John opened the metal framed glass door as they reached it, and they advanced just inside.

The old man's small face broke into a smile as he greeted his daughter, "Thresha darling, it's good to see you."

"Hello Dad, how are you feeling?" she asked as she bent over the seated figure, giving him a polite kiss on the cheek.

"Oh, you know me, I'm always ready and raring to go."

"Why don't we move back to the table. I think I've cleared enough space for your chair."

"Yes, that'll be fine," her father said. "Won't it Mike?" The hulk grunted affirmatively and began to push the chair toward the back of the room.

"And you, John, how have you been? It's been a while since I saw you last. Just a little before the two of you went on that trip east I think."

John glanced at Thresha, whose head seemed to lift, but she did not turn around. "I'm doing fine, Mr. Fischel."

"Mr. Fischel, what's this Mr. Fischel stuff? Call me Harry. After all, you and my daughter are practically married."

"Dad, we've been through this before. John and I live together because that's the way we want it, without marriage."

"I just hope you're ready to pay for any consequences."

"Look Dad, I'm really not in the mood for this discussion."

"Yes, you're right. It's none of my business to interfere with your private life. Besides, that's not why I'm here."

They all situated themselves around the table, the broad shouldered chauffeur a few steps behind Thresha's father.

"Why did you come—Harry?"

"To talk a little politics, John."

"Whose?" John asked as he closely observed the older man's face. Thresha's father leaned back in his wheelchair, his eyes said nothing of what he was thinking, but he appeared to be sizing up everything and everyone.

"Ours, son, ours," said the tight lined mouth.

"I didn't know we had the same politics."

"You're running for office in this state, so there's a connection. I have to admit, I admire what you've done. You've taken a tiny independent party, put some life into it. You're getting quite a lot of attention in the press."

"I've geared my campaign to a heavy media exposure."

"I've noticed, and that's quite a trick." The small head turned, surveying the cluttered and crowded office. "Especially on what I imagine to be rather limited funds."

John looked at him blankly, hoping not to betray the truth of this statement.

"You know, this room," Harry said, "this room brings back a lot of memories for me. Back in the thirties, before the war, the union movement was like this. Those were tough times. A lot like today, a good deal of violence. I was just a volunteer then, didn't get a dime for my work. The movement couldn't afford it. But I was healthy then, and I was lucky because I had a job. A lot of us didn't. If they knew you were a union man, out you went. That was all before the accident of

course. There's something a little tragic about a man becoming crippled by his work. Well, when I came out of the hospital, I swore I was going to make all job sites safe for the workers. And I've been lucky at that. There's been progress. Seeing you working here, it makes me think we do have common political interests."

"I'm not sure I can agree with that."

"John, I've been paying close attention to your campaign—Human Social Justice—that's the theme isn't it? Well I believe

we both have the interest of the average man at heart.”

“I’m concerned with all peoples, the weak, the strong, and the average man, as you call him.”

“But you are concerned with protecting his interest.”

“Go on.”

The old man’s eyebrows moved closer together as he stared intently at John. “You’ve been coming down pretty heavy on the incumbent.”

“You mean I’ve been coming down pretty heavy on your man.”

“He’s the party’s man.”

“It’s your party.”

“Now you see, John, that’s where you’re wrong—a little naive about the real situation. He’s not my man and the party is not in my hip pocket. You’re relatively new to this area; you don’t understand that what we have is a fragile coalition of certain groups.”

“I imagine I understand more than you think I do.”

“Do you? I hope so. Because, you see, with the last reapportionment, certain pressures have been put on that coalition. And while you have no chance of winning, you’re drawing votes from a man who can serve the majority interest.”

“So what are you leading up to?”

“Well, what I’m going to my hand by way of my elbow for is this—I want you to drop out of the race.”

John looked at the small, wrinkled face for a moment, then he began to laugh. “You surprise me, Mr. Fischel. I thought these sorts of deals were worked out in smoke-filled backrooms. Aren’t you from the old school? If your candidate can’t take the heat, he should get out of the kitchen.”

“John, I’m trying to logically appeal to your desire to help the people who need help the most. There is absolutely no way you can win this race—even come close.”

“Winning isn’t everything. We’re giving ourselves a platform from which our ideas can openly be discussed.”

The old man’s face contorted in anger. “Oh, don’t give me that free expression rhetoric. What you’re selling is just watered down socialism, and as long as it has that label, it will never succeed in this country. But you’re damaging a man who does have a chance to continue the progress of the last few years. Why him? You haven’t even touched the opposition. Why not go after the real enemy?”

“I don’t see either one of them as the enemy,” John said coldly,

“but there are some important principles on which your candidate and I disagree.”

“You’ve got to set aside your idealism and think about the practical consequences at stake.”

“For six years your man has consistently supported a war, a police action, an atrocity of human effort and life and that is a practical consequence I cannot ignore.”

“No one likes this war, John, but sometimes they are necessary. Necessary to protect the national interests, to protect the very lifestyle which can assist those here at home with whom you’re most concerned.”

“If you mean to measure the cost of our lifestyle by the human life destroyed to maintain it, then the price is too high. If that’s the cost of our standard of living—only that—then we need to reevaluate the way we live.”

“I doubt whether the majority of people would agree with you. What you are suggesting would destroy the very dreams of the people you say you want to help.”

“You and your party have been treading water on those dreams for years.”

“No! No, John, I’ve helped them. I’ve given them a better life than they ever hoped for.”

“You’ve given them nothing. False hopes and empty promises. Oh yes, they may have a new car to park beside their new home, but what happens when they wake up one morning and find their neighborhood has become a battleground. When they realize that your dream has led them to mistrust the man next door, the man down the street, the man on the other side of the city. That dream you’re pushing around reduces life to avarice, acquisition, and waste. Because of what? Because you went through a depression, and times were tough? Times are tough all over the world—now!”

“What do you know about the Depression? Did you ever have to live in one or two small rooms with a dozen other people? Did you ever experience the weight of not being able to provide for yourself, let alone a family? You don’t even know what real hunger is, and why? Because today someone’s there to provide a meal if you’re onto hard luck. Well, where do you think those programs came from? It certainly wasn’t from all those ivory-towered intellectuals you’re so full of. We had those in my day too, but they sat around crying about the damage to human dignity, and the demise of true beauty in the human spirit. You’ve

learned some very inspiring ideas, John. You've learned how to emotionally incite a man with words, maybe even incite him to fight, but I've progressed beyond that. I've built. By putting a hot meal in a man's belly, I've taken away his urge to destroy, and made him want to build too. By giving him direction and goals I've kept the stability . . ."

"Stability! At what cost to the individual? You've reduced him to a consuming automaton, insensitive, unthinking . . ."

"There's too much thinking being done by those who can't do so correctly."

"You hypocrite! You're nothing but an elitist snob who sneers at the human potential."

The old man leaned back, obviously exhausted by this unexpected argument. "No, John, I'm a realist. I've lived too long not to admit the reality of mass judgement. And I don't think I'll have too much longer to try to accomplish the things I feel are important. I'm trying to persuade you to be practical."

"Don't be condescending with me."

"You're like a child who has strayed into something he doesn't understand, and you don't realize the damage you're doing."

"Damage to what? Your ego—your memorial before you die?"

"This has obviously strayed from the main issue."

"A dead issue."

"Will you withdraw from the race?"

"I intend to do everything in my power to prevent you from winning—everything."

"I'm trying to reason with you—think logically."

"Your logic is that of the snake to the sparrow."

"There are other ways to eliminate you as a factor in this campaign."

"If you're implying some sort of smear, I'm not terribly worried. There's nothing about my personal life of which I am ashamed or embarrassed."

"Perhaps not, John." The old man reached into his suit jacket and withdrew a clean white envelope, setting it in the middle of the table.

"Very dramatic! What's supposed to be in there?"

Thresha's father looked at his daughter for a moment, then turned back toward John. "Those are photostats of the New York hospital papers, signed by you, and assuming financial responsibility for my daughter's abortion, dated a little over three months ago."

John looked over to Thresha with her mouth drawn tight. She was

staring at her father, but she said nothing. He stared icily at the old man. "A lot of people are changing their minds about abortion."

"That's true, but unfortunately, those are not the people whose support you can claim. You may not have studied the demographics of the area. I have. You're drawing very heavily on the young vote, college students, and newly-married blue collar workers. Your anti-war stance and call for individual dignity appeals to them very much. But most of those come from ethnic Catholic backgrounds, like Thresha. Oh, they may be a little rebellious, youthful, but that's what's politically in vogue. It gives their new vote a sense of power. But when this comes out, and I have the ability to release it through the credible media. When this comes out, that background is going to cause them to look at you with different eyes."

"But you won't do that, will you, Daddy?" Thresha spoke up. You see I'm not very proud of that, and I don't think I could stand having other people know."

"Think about it, John."

"You would do this, wouldn't you? You know it won't affect me at all, but what about your daughter?"

"I'm practical, John. I have to solve problems the best way I can."

"Daddy?"

Thresha's father reached his hand across the table to hers. "I'm sorry, Baby, but it's all in John's hands now." She pushed his hand away and turned toward the wall. The old man looked behind himself. "Okay Mike, let's go." The huge chauffeur stepped up to the wheelchair, gripped its handles and turned it toward the door.

John looked at Thresha. She was staring at the wall, but he could tell that a tremendous rage was boiling inside her.

At the door the wheelchair turned back toward the table. "You said, John, it didn't matter whether or not you win as long as I lose. But in this race you can't defeat me." The chair turned around again, and the small man and the hulk departed through the open door.

John sat looking at Thresha for a long time in silence, then she turned to face him.

"John, I don't think I could stand it—having other people know. Maybe someday, but not yet."

"I know," he said.

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know," he answered, "I just don't know."