Wooden Man
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A small, nervous-looking man walked out of his dark, corner office. He stared at me as his right hand searched the left inside pocket of his suit coat. He glanced downward, briefly, as he pulled out a new cigar and started to unwrap it. He removed the band and then fumbled with the cellophane packaging. He looked up again as he crammed the crinkly mass into an outer pocket of his jacket. He carefully bit the end off the cigar and took a step closer, placing the nub in a nearby wastecan. He smiled at me, but his eyes searched mine. He turned away, lit up, and puffed back into his tiny office. Stay there, little man, keep to your own life.

I like to look through the black Venetian blinds which screen the windows of my stark, 6th-floor office — especially when they’re slanted, a little more closed than open. The top of the window is dark, and you can’t see out. But, if you look through the bottom part, really close up, the horizontal slats gape to show the world of buildings, vehicles, and pedestrians below. And all you have to do is tilt your head to make them all disappear.

I wait in line at the cafeteria. It’s far too crowded; we are shoulder to shoulder, tray to tray. Eyes follow the plastic-wrapped meals spinning slowly on the merry-go-round server. My hand shoots out, over the food and under the hot, orange lights. Necks crane, feet shuffle. My hand comes back - empty. People behind me are waiting, watching. A cup of coffee and a cigarette are my lunch.

“Honey, come and look. Aren’t they just darling children?”
I keep my head down; my eyes remain riveted to the sports section.
“Come to the door and listen. It’s ‘O Come All Ye Faithful.’ Remember when you used to sing that with the kids on Christmas Eve?”
I go to the bay window and push aside the heavy, white drapes with my wrist, my hand still clutching the paper. I peer out of the corner pane. The children sing with great feeling and compassion. They are young; they don’t see the world clearly yet. I let the curtain fall back into place.
It’s 7:27 a.m. I reach over and flip the alarm switch to “off;” no sense in waking Kaye. My toes curl as they hit the cool, white tile floor of my private bath. That’s one thing I’d insisted on when we got married—separate baths. Kaye keeps mine spotless, a sterile chamber, thoroughly uncluttered except for the necessities of soap, toothpaste, towels, toilet paper and one marble ashtray. Kind of a tile, chrome, and glass sanctuary. I turn one of the gleaming brass knobs in the shower stall. A rush of hot water pounds against my chest. I twist the other knob to reduce the heat. Then, I close my eyes and place my head under the powerful jet of water. My pulse throbs, and a light cloud of steam rises to the gold and white flecked ceiling above. I am deep inside myself. I am alone.

There’s an award banquet at the Sheraton tonight. It’ll be the same as last year’s and the year before that. Only the names of those recognized change, and sometimes not even that. Harold Flynn has got the suggestion-box award three years running. They fill you full of liquor and then sit back and watch. And listen. Just one wrong word, one slip, and they’ve got you. Boy, have they got you. I’ll have one social Martini—no olive. Then, it’s tonic water and a seat in the shadows. I won’t get caught, not this time, not this way.

I hit the brakes hard. The seat belt is the only thing that keeps my head from meeting the windshield. The middle-aged woman driver of the Dodge wagon in front of me throws an angered stare over her right shoulder. I wasn’t tailgating. She’d better not try to pull that with me. The damage isn’t bad. We can pay for our own repairs. Why make a fuss? I unfasten my seat belt and unlock the door.

I caught a half-reflection of myself in a clear, glass deli-window today. My hair is graying (well, what there is left of it). Deep furrows mar my forehead. Heavy brows knit close together over my small bloodshot eyes. What color are my eyes? I think they used to be blue, but I can’t tell now. Everything looks gray and distorted. It’s probably the supermarket lighting.

“What can I get you, sir?”

The young girl’s voice pulls me back to the outside world. My head jerks upward in nervous apprehension. I motion to the German potato salad.

Bud Keaton is dead. We used to be close. Kaye and I have to wait in
line to pay our last respects. Hundreds of darkly clad mourners file past the open box, each peering in. Some of them even cry. They don’t touch Bud, though. They can’t. He’s far beyond them—us, now. He has found serenity. I tug to loosen the knot in my necktie and glance down to see the soft, sewn-smile on Bud’s lips.

“Grandpa,” calls little Kaye, running down the porch steps and over to the car. She jumps into my arms as I open the door. Soft, curly, blonde hair brushes against my neck and collar. She hugs me tight, her bright blue eyes smiling into mine.

“I have a special secret. But I can tell you because you’re my best friend. Aren’t you, Grandpa?”

I hold her closer. Yes, my eyes had been blue, too.

Sometimes, on Saturdays, I work in my woodshop. It’s not really a full-scale work area, just a small, dark room off the north side of the garage. I take a sack lunch and spend the whole day there. Amazing how a block of hard wood can become anything. With just a few changes, a solid piece of lumber can be made into something truly useful. Yesterday, I was working on a wooden man—a toy for little Kaye. I pressed the iron tool harder and harder against the spinning lathe. It was just about perfect. But the wood was soft on the inside, or maybe it had been treated too roughly. Either way, the wooden man crumbled and fell to pieces in my hands.

I lean over my bathroom sink and cup handfuls of warm water into my face. I look up and stare into the mirror on the front of the medicine cabinet. My un-dried skin gleams in the glow of the flourescent lighting. My hair is still gray. The furrows in my forehead are just as deep. My pin-point eyes are nothing but red.