

Old Man

BY DANIEL KEYS MORAN

This is a work of fiction. None of the characters in it are real people and any resemblance to anybody, living or dead, is a coincidence – except Richard, who’s based on my father and an old friend who passed away some years ago – and both of whom were named Richard.

Though it’s impossible to tell from the text, this is set in the same fictional universe as “On Sequoia Time.”

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Old Man

“Hey, old man.”

Richard’s voice was shaky. “Hey, boy. Good to see you.”

Kevin was fifty-three and looked twenty-five. Richard was ninety-three and looked as old as death: his eyes were sunken and yellow outside the blue irises, the wild remnants of his snow-white hair needed to be combed and hadn’t been. He had liver spots everywhere, and little red and white marks where the doctors had excised skin cancer over the years. He was thinner than Kevin had ever seen him before, around 160 pounds. It was the weight more than anything else that Kevin found hard to reconcile; his father had been a bull of a man Kevin’s entire life. Seeing Richard as he descended into his last frailty disturbed Kevin.

“The doctor says you’re not eating, Dad.”

Richard had to laugh at that. A shallow laugh, to keep from coughing. “I’m just dying, that’s all.” He gestured at the chair. “Sit down. Watch the game with me.”

They watched the University of Miami beat Notre Dame for the next two hours. The final score was 57-12. Richard spent the last quarter chuckling while Miami ran the score up. At one point the announcer commented on it and Richard yelled, “Screw the bastards!” at the television set, which set him off coughing for a minute. When he got his breath back, he wheezed at Kevin, “Those boys are just out there playing ball. It’s not their fault Notre Dame can’t stand on the same field with ’em.”

The old man had graduated from the University of Miami 71 years ago. Kevin didn’t care who won the game, but it made him happy to see Miami’s thugs beat Notre Dame’s thugs, because it made the old man happy. Richard was lying in a hospital bed dying of throat cancer. Not a lot of things made him happy these days, except wins by the Hurricanes, and Kevin coming to visit him.

Kevin stayed for five hours, drinking coffee part of the time, while Richard drifted in and out. He had to leave at three — a dinner engagement planned over a month ago, before the severity of his father’s illness had become clear. He didn’t want to go, particularly.

Richard shook his head. “I won’t die tonight. Go. Enjoy your dinner.”

Kevin stood. “Want me to open the curtains?” The room was expensive — on the other side of the window was a view of the California coast — real, not a holo.

“Nah. I’ll have the nurse open it when it gets darker. Washes out the tv during the day.”

“Game’s over, old man.”

Richard grinned at him. “I’m not senile yet either, boy. University of Florida is playing Florida State at 3:30.”

“But you hate both of them.” It was true; Richard hated every team that had ever beaten Miami at anything.

Richard drawled the word with slow satisfaction: “Yeah.” The grin stretched and his eyes gleamed with wicked anticipation. “One of them’s going to lose today, too.”

DOCTOR TAN WAS a tall silver-haired Asian man who had been born and raised in Santa Monica. He had the same flat California accent as Kevin — less of an accent than Richard, who had left New York City seventy-five years ago and still pronounced “dollar” without the r.

Doctor Tan had been a cardiologist forty years ago, when Richard had his first heart attack, a massive coronary that would have killed a man less determined to live. That first heart attack had destroyed forty percent of Richard’s heart muscle, had turned almost half his heart into a rigid wall of scar tissue. Doctor Tan had saved his life then; he’d done it again a few years later when Richard had his second heart attack. Two decades later Doctor Tan had done the triple bypass that had probably saved Richard’s life for the third time. Then he’d retired.

Now Doctor Tan was himself an old man, almost 70. He volunteered for hospice work, caring for the dying. It was sheer chance that he’d been called in to handle Richard’s case — after twenty years Doctor Tan had not recognized the name, hadn’t realized who his dying patient was until he’d found himself in the same room with Richard and Kevin.

Richard found it amusing as hell. Richard found most of life amusing, and he was managing to be amused at the approach of own death, too. “You kept me in this world for the last 40 years, Doc. I guess you can see me out of it.”

Doctor Tan turned to Kevin. “You’re Mr. O’Donnell’s grandson?”

“I’m his son, Kevin. We’ve met.”

“Oh?” Doctor Tan actually looked at him for the first time. “I see,” he said. Kevin felt a little self-conscious as Doctor Tan examined him. “You’re doing well with the treatments?”

“No problems,” said Kevin. “I wanted to talk to you about that.”

“Later.” Doctor Tan set about examining Richard. When he was done he sat down in the chair next to Richard’s bed. “I don’t see any reason you shouldn’t go home. Can you afford a nurse?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Kevin,” said Doctor Tan, “can I speak to your father privately for a moment?”

“What about?”

“If he wants to tell you, he will.”

Kevin glanced at his father; Richard nodded almost imperceptibly. “OK. There’s a coffee shop across the street. You want anything?”

“Plain coffee, black with cream.”

“The lattes are good.”

“The lattes are expensive. Not buying expensive coffee is why I’m rich and you’re still working for other people.” Richard waved a hand. “Go.”

“Yes, sir.”

When Kevin had gone, Doctor Tan said, “Are you in any pain?”

“It comes and goes. They’ve been giving me drugs for it.”

“OK. I’ll prescribe a pretty good painkiller to take home with you — a couple week’s supply. You’re going to want to be careful with them. You’ll take one every four hours, no more. Some people take too many at once, that’s no good.”

“How many would ‘too many’ be?”

Doctor Tan appeared to be considering his words. "I've seen people survive taking seven, eight at once."

"So ten would be bad."

"I certainly wouldn't take fifteen."

Richard nodded. "Thanks."

"What's your son want to talk to me about?"

"He wants me to take the treatment."

Doctor Tan actually looked shocked. "It'd kill you."

Richard suppressed a laugh, almost a habit now. "Ah, he just wants me to live. I guess I can't blame him for that." Richard looked at Doctor Tan. "He says it might cure the cancer."

Doctor Tan hesitated. "You have Stage IV cancer, Richard. It's in your throat, in your lymph nodes --"

"I know all that. He says the transform viruses can cure that."

"Richard, the treatment kills almost half the people who are healthy when they take it."

"And some of them it cures."

"I don't know of anyone your age surviving the treatment. I don't know of anyone with cancer as advanced as yours having it cured by the treatment."

Richard looked Doctor Tan over. "You look pretty strong there, Doc."

Doctor Tan sighed. "Yes. I'm working out. The survival rate for men my age, in good shape, is about 2 out of 5. Asians do a little better than Caucasians for some reason. And your chances are better if you build up muscle ahead of time."

Richard closed his eyes. "OK. That gives me something to think about."

"If you decide to go home, have your doctor contact me. I'll make arrangements for the nurse."

"Thanks, Doc."

DOCTOR TAN RAN into Kevin coming back with the coffee. "I doubt your father'll need that. He was snoring already when I left."

Kevin stood with a cup in each hand. "He'll drink it when he

wakes up. The nurse microwaves them for him.”

“You’re not doing your father any favors pushing him to take the treatment. He won’t survive it.”

A faint smile touched Kevin’s lips. “My father was a terrible patient, wasn’t he? When he had that first bad heart attack, what sort of odds would you have given him to make it another forty years?”

“Yes, I see your point. He beat the odds, and they weren’t good.”

“One in twenty?”

“They’re much worse than that now.”

“When did you last see my dad before you retired?”

Doctor Tan had to think about it. “I think he came in for a checkup a year after the triple bypass.”

“He was seventy-one or so, then? Right? You ever hear about the muggers who attacked him maybe a year after that?” Doctor Tan shook his head no. “Two young men jumped him coming out of the grocery store. He was carrying hundreds of dollars on him, and he walked out of the grocery store folding it up to put it in his pocket, because it never occurred to him that anyone would look at him and see an old man who could be mugged.” Kevin grinned at the doctor. “My old man beat those muggers half to death. He knocked out one of them with a single punch, got the other in a headlock and started pounding him in the face. The guy he knocked out started moving so my dad stomped on his hand and broke it and stood there on it grinding it into the sidewalk until the police came.”

Doctor Tan laughed. “That’s a great story, Kevin.”

Kevin shrugged. “It’s just the truth. That man’s a fighter. He told me once he’d fought fifty men and had never lost a fight. I believe him.”

“Kevin ... your father might not want this fight. I would think about that.”

“HE NEEDS TO put on muscle,” said Barbara Washington.

Barbara was a striking ashe blonde in her early twenties, by outward appearance. Kevin knew her professionally; he’d been

her therapist for five years, two decades previously. She was roughly his age and was one of the best agathic doctors in Los Angeles.

Kevin said bluntly, “He’s going to be dead in two months, Barbara. He’s not going to be lifting weights again. He’s not going to be gaining any weight — the throat cancer makes it hard for him to swallow.”

“Once he swallows, can he keep it down?”

From his hospital bed Richard said dryly, “I’m right here in the room, young lady.”

It didn’t throw her. “Sorry. If I bring you a special milkshake, can you keep that down? Do you like strawberry?”

“I have trouble eating,” said Richard. “But I’ve kept down what I’ve managed to swallow.”

“Mr. O’Donnell, I’ve mapped your DNA. I’m going to mix you a 1,500 calorie milkshake, various amino acids and proteins designed for your DNA specifically, that you’ll drink four times a day. If you can keep it up for two weeks, we’ll give this a shot. It’s up to you.”

Richard nodded. “Let me talk to my son for a moment, Miss.”

“Miss?” Barbara smiled at him. Richard thought it was the prettiest smile he’d seen in years. “You are old. You’re going to have to lose that, if you hang around.”

After she was gone, Richard looked at Kevin. “She mapped my DNA.”

“You’re pissed off.”

“Boy, I didn’t authorize that.”

“I did.”

“You can’t.”

“Old man, I have the same cramped control-freak handwriting you do. I can sign your name well enough.”

Despite himself Richard had to smile at that. “Yeah, I remember some samples, when you were in high school. It was good work.”

“I’m a little rusty these days. But I don’t think anyone looked at it twice.”

Richard looked away. Through the window he could see the

bright sunlight dancing atop the waves as they came crashing into shore, just the other side of Pacific Coast Highway. “I’m tired of waiting to die. Tell that girl we’ll give it a shot.”

THEY MOVED HIM to Cedars Sinai for the treatment.

He lived.

SHORT BLACK HAIR covered his skull. The white fringe was growing out black — he had white hair with black roots, everywhere he’d had any hair.

The liver spots were gone. So were most of the wrinkles. He was even thinner than he’d been, the suite of transform viruses had knocked his weight down to 145 pounds ... but he’d gained five pounds in the last two weeks.

He could only talk in a whisper. The throat cancer had been knocked back, but it was still there and talking was difficult for him.

“How many reporters?”

Kevin shook his head. “Thousands. From all over the world. Cedars-Sinai has celebrities here all the time, movie stars ... they’ve never had a press crush like this one. You’re nine years older than the next-oldest person to survive the treatment. Someone tried to break into the house —”

Richard looked up at that.

“Alarm apparently scared them off. I have a guard on it, now.”

“What’s that costing?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Even in a whisper Richard managed to sound loud. “God-damnit, boy! That’s not your money!”

“In fact it is,” said Kevin mildly. “I’m paying for the guard, not you. I haven’t touched your accounts for anything except medical expenses.”

Richard took a deep breath. His appearance intrigued Kevin — he didn’t look young, but he didn’t look old, either. His skin and hair looked better, yes, but his ears and nose were still oversized; cartilage keeps growing as you age. His hands looked odd,

gnarled; and the skin around his throat still hung loose. His biceps and wrists had no muscle to speak of, though there was still some around his shoulders. “All right,” Richard whispered. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

ON KEVIN'S FIFTH birthday they went to the beach at Malibu, and then the Santa Monica pier. When the day was over, Richard was burned roughly the color of a ripe tomato. He spent the morning teaching Kevin how to ride a boogie board, and then in the afternoon Kevin and his older sister Celine had a joint birthday party on the pier. Celine had been born on July 10; Kevin on July 12; and Richard had been born on July 14. Celine turned 13 two days before Kevin turned five, four days before Richard turned forty-five.

Richard and Anna bought all-day wristbands for the kids and their friends — nine of them, in all, Celine and five of her friends, Kevin and two of his — and spent the rest of the day chasing the nine kids around the pier as they went from ride to ride. Anna mostly watched the three boys; Richard spent the day trailing the girls. At the rock climbing wall Celine wanted to race Richard up the wall — “I'm going to whip you bad,” she told him. She'd climbed it before, at a birthday party for another of her friends. For about fifteen minutes, standing in line, Richard watched people climbing the wall. Nobody got to the top in less than a minute. He was overweight even then — thirty or forty pounds. Still, most of his two hundred fifty pounds was muscle and when he and Celine got to the wall together, big as he was, he went up it in just under thirty seconds.

Celine was so angry she didn't talk to him for the next hour. She'd forgotten about it by dinner, though; Richard took Anna and the nine kids to the Crocodile Café across the street from the pier, on Ocean Boulevard. He had the Oakwood Burger — 1/2 pound of superb ground beef, shredded lettuce, pickles, pickle relish, tomatoes, mayonnaise, mustard, and cheddar cheese on a sesame seed bun. He ordered it medium rare and after picking it up ate it without putting it back down. It was the

best cheeseburger in the city, in Richard's informed opinion.

When they got home, Anna put Kevin to bed and read him his bedtime story. Afterward Richard came in to kiss him good-night.

Kevin smiled at him. "I know a joke."

"OK."

"Knock knock."

"Who's there?"

"The chicken who wanted to go across the street! Get it? Get it?"

Richard laughed. "That's pretty funny."

"How come I can't eat my french fries in the car? Aunt Patty lets me eat french fries in the car."

There had been a discussion about that in the car on the way home. Anna had driven the girls and their friends home in the van; Richard had driven Kevin and his friends home in the Jaguar, dropping the other two boys off at their houses. Richard had let Kevin sit in the front seat, despite the passenger-side airbag — Richard thought there were too many laws about airbags and child seats and he ignored them when it suited him.

Kevin hadn't finished his french fries when it was time to leave the restaurant and had wanted to bring them with him. Sitting next to Kevin's bed that night, Richard said, "Aunt Patty drives a Ford. Daddy drives what?"

Kevin said in a resigned voice, almost chanting it, "A Jaguar and we keep it clean."

"When you turn eighteen, that's going to be your car. Then you can make messes in it."

"When I grow up, I'm going to have a car that flies."

"Really?"

"A big car. As big as ... McDonalds."

"There aren't any cars that big, Kevin."

"Yes there are. The Power Rangers have one. And it flies and it turns into things. I'm going to have that. And I'm going to be a Power Ranger too."

"I thought you were going to play for the Miami Hurricanes when you grow up."

“That too. When I grow up --” Kevin paused. “How old are you, Daddy?”

“I’m forty-five, boy. I’m the same age you are, plus 40. You came home from the hospital on my birthday.”

“You’re going to be pretty old when I grow up.”

“That’s true.”

“Is Mama going to die? I don’t want her to.”

Richard thought about how to answer it. “Kevin,” he said finally, “Mama’s not even as old as I am, and I’m not very old. You know how long Mama’s going to live? When you grow up to be my age, I’m still going to be alive. Then you’re going to have children of your own, and those will be Mama’s and my grandchildren. And Mama will be alive like your grandma and grandpa are now. And that’s a long, long, long time from now.”

Kevin nodded sleepily. “OK. Can we go for another ride tomorrow? Just you and me?”

“Sure. Did you have a good time today?”

“Yes,” said the boy who had been to the beach and the pier for a birthday party: “I like going for rides with you.”

“I like going for rides with you too. Whose boy are you?”

“I’m your boy.”

“Good night, boy.” Richard gave him a hug and a kiss on the top of his head. Kevin lay back and drew the covers up around himself.

As Richard was closing the door to the bedroom, Kevin said, “Daddy?”

Richard stopped in the doorway. “Yeah?”

Kevin looked up at him. “When you get old, I’ll drive you everywhere you want to go.”

SOME HOURS LATER, after Celine went to bed, he got in the shower with Anna and found sand in surprising places. “I guess I went face-first into the muck more often than I remember,” he told her. “I’ve got sand in my eyebrows.”

“Tell me you didn’t enjoy yourself and I’ll call you the liar you are.”

“Oh, sure. Another couple of years, I can take down that Bill

Stewart longboard in the garage and teach the boy to surf.”

“You’re not afraid to get up on a surfboard, at your age?”

He scowled at her. “Not you too. Kevin was asking about the two of us getting old and dying, just now.”

“Most of his friends have parents younger than us.” Anna was three and a half years younger than Richard. “He notices. Let me wash your back.”

Richard stood under the hot shower while she kneaded the tight muscles in his upper back. “My hands are sore,” he admitted. “Going up that rock wall today? My hands are killing me.”

“Well, you certainly couldn’t let a thirteen year old girl beat you.”

Richard glanced over his shoulder at her. “That’s sarcasm, isn’t it.”

“And people make fun of you for being slow.”

Richard turned back and ducked his head back into the water. “I may be slow, but I got you. How many rocket scientists you date, back in the day?”

“A few.”

“How many propose?”

“One or two.”

“Mmm-hmm. I used to have a car when I was a young man, this gorgeous black muscle car, I’d gotten rid of it by the time you met me. Every now and then I’d be walking through a parking lot and I’d see it and not recognize it at first, and think to myself what a good looking car it was ... and then I’d realize it was mine, and it always made me feel good.

“At the pier today, I was standing outside the roller coaster exit waiting for the girls when this looker in a short white dress came walking by. I was admiring her legs and her ass, you know, thinking that if you came up and saw me checking out the local talent you’d be a little insulted. Then she turned around and it was you, and I had that same rush.”

He could hear the amusement in Anna’s voice. “So that’s what I am to you, a great ass on the boardwalk?”

“That too.” He turned around in the shower to look at her and said soberly, “I’ve known you almost twenty years? In

twenty years you've always been the most interesting person in the room."

"Damn," she said in a quiet voice. "Let's get this soap off you and get to bed."

TWO YEARS LATER, during the summer around the time of the three birthdays, Richard got up on a surfboard long enough to teach Kevin how to surf. It bothered his knees and made him walk stiffly for two days afterwards, but they went surfing together every weekend for almost two months. By the time the summer was over, Kevin was surfing as well as could be expected of any seven-year old boy.

Kevin surfed by himself a little more each summer thereafter; Richard's knees couldn't take the pounding of going surfing every weekend. The summer Kevin was twelve Richard had his first heart attack, and after that they never went surfing together again.

LATE IN OCTOBER Kevin drove Richard home from the hospital.

It made Richard irritable. "I can drive," he said.

Kevin thought he probably could. "Your license expired. You have to pass the test again."

Richard settled in the passenger seat. He moved like an old man — slowly, carefully. Kevin knew he was still weak; his weight was still hovering around 150 pounds — he was on six thousand calories a day and it was just barely keeping up with the changes as the transform viruses continued their wild course through his body.

Kevin darkened the windows as they pulled up out of the garage and onto Melrose Boulevard. There were half a dozen news vans parked along Melrose that Kevin knew were there for his father — Cedars Sinai had announced that Richard was going home Sunday morning. Hundreds of press were expected, from around the world; these were just the early arrivers, fighting for good spaces.

Nobody noticed them leaving.

Kevin drove up to Sunset and then drove down Sunset,

through the winding hills to Pacific Coast Highway. He drove up into the Palisades and to the street on which he had grown up. He passed two gates — the streets hadn't been gated when he was a child, but the neighborhood hadn't been so wealthy then, either.

He parked half a block down and watched the house to make sure that no reporters had gotten through the gates and staked it out. All he saw was the security guard, parked at the curb in the unmarked car. He drove the rest of the way up, pulled into the driveway and killed the engine. The guard got out of his car and came over. Kevin rolled down the driver's window.

"Mr. O'Donnell," said the man. He was speaking to Kevin. "And this is —"

"This is my father," said Kevin. "Also Mr. O'Donnell."

"You need any help getting him in?"

"No," said Kevin.

"I'll be in the car if you need me for anything."

"Thank you."

As the security guard headed back to his vehicle, Richard said softly, "I built this house for your mother. I never expected to live so long in it without her."

"Yes, sir. I know."

"Would it upset you if I sold it?"

Kevin had to think about it for a moment. "No. No, it would be OK."

"I wish you'd had children," said Richard. "I'd have been happy to have you raise your children in this house."

"Maybe I will yet," said Kevin. "I'm young again ... and so are you." Richard nodded. "Do you want me to come in with you?"

Richard shook his head. "No. Come by tomorrow. I can manage until then."

RICHARD SPENT THE night sleeping on the couch in the living room. He knew his doctors would have been appalled if he'd told them he was going to, so he hadn't told them. He hadn't slept in the bedroom since Anna died.

He had to hunt for the remote control — Kevin had cleaned

up the house on him while he was in the hospital, and Richard could never find things after Kevin cleaned. Richard had teased both Kevin and Celine about it for years, about Kevin compulsively cleaning the place whenever he visited, while Celine, who was married with three children of her own, visited less often and never cleaned.

Celine had died of a sudden heart attack while still in her forties, and Richard had stopped teasing Kevin about the cleaning after that.

Richard settled down on the couch and was pleased to see that the television had remembered to record the Miami game. He'd programmed it before the season even began, as he was going into the hospital to be treated for his throat cancer, in what he'd suspected at the time was an act of raw bravado.

The game had been over half a day already, and he had no idea who'd won. Richard thought briefly that he should call Mike and tell Mike he'd managed to go 12 hours without knowing who won the game, before remembering that Mike, who'd graduated from Miami with him, had died the same year as Anna.

That bothered him. He knew he had lapses; you couldn't get into your nineties without having lapses. But he hadn't expected to have them with this almost-young body he was wearing.

Then the game started and he forgot about it.

HE AWOKE IN the middle of the night, starving and needing to use the bathroom, and didn't know where he was at first. The television was on — he almost never turned it off — and it was showing highlights from the Miami game he'd fallen asleep watching. Miami had beaten Clemson 33 to 14 — the Hurricanes were undefeated so far this year.

He got a dreadful shock in the bathroom, when the lights came on. He'd forgotten everything, forgotten he was dying of throat cancer, forgotten the treatment, forgotten the plastic surgery on his nose, the cloned ears they'd stuck to the side of his head, the removal of the loose skin from around his throat.

He had a panicked moment as a young man stared at him out of the mirror. It jolted him bad, made his heart race. (The

transform viruses were thorough; one of them was regrowing the muscle in his heart that had been scar tissue for forty years now. Another had tightened the muscles around his eyes and refocused the eyes themselves; without his glasses on Richard saw himself in the mirror more clearly than he'd managed in decades.)

He was looking at a black-haired Kevin. Kevin's eyes, Kevin's mouth ... not Kevin's nose, Kevin had his mother's nose — not that the nose was what Richard remembered, either, from his own youth; it was what the surgeon had given him a few weeks ago. It looked OK. Kevin's ears, close enough. Mostly the hair was different — Kevin had Anna's brown hair, not the black hair Richard now saw growing from his own skull and sprouting as black stubble on his upper lip and along his jaw. The hair on his skull was still so short it was perfectly straight, but Richard knew that as it grew in it would form wiry curls. The girls had loved that, when he was young. Anna had loved it, had loved running her fingers through it.

The strawberry milkshake designed for his unique DNA was waiting in the refrigerator for him, two gallons of it. He was sick of it already but if he didn't drink it the hunger was unbearable. He went to the kitchen and poured himself a tall glass of it and drank it standing in the kitchen, then placed the glass in the sink, went back to the bathroom and shaved and showered and brushed his teeth.

None of his clothes fit him. He dressed in the most recent of his clothes, purchased after he was diagnosed with terminal throat cancer. They hung loosely on him. He had to cinch the belt down to its last space to hold his pants up.

The first gray of morning had touched the sky when he went into his office and turned the computer on. He'd cashed out all his stocks after the diagnosis, put them into CDs with Kevin as the beneficiary. It annoyed him to see that the general market, including several of the stocks he'd been in, had climbed steadily during his illness. He checked his mail and was at first startled and then annoyed again; even after the spam filters had fired, there were so many thousands of messages waiting for him it

was going to take him hours to wade through them and see if anyone he wanted to hear from had written him.

He got himself another milkshake, a smaller one, went out onto the porch and sat in the wicker chairs, and watched the sun rise while he drank it.

He couldn't think of anyone with whom he felt an urgent need to get in touch. He'd outlived all four of his sisters. Anna had one sister, Patty, and a brother, Don; they'd both been dead a decade as well. He supposed he'd get in touch with Celine's children at some point; they were on the East Coast, though, and had only called him a couple times during his illness. It was unkind of him to assume they wanted his money, but he knew they did, so there was that.

He sat on the porch for a while. From his back yard he could see the beach, could see Pacific Coast Highway. When the traffic was starting to get busy, he went back inside and called Kevin. He could tell he'd woken the boy up, from how groggily he answered the phone. "How you doing, Dad?"

"Good. You work today?"

"It's Sunday, Dad."

"You're not working, then? If you had your own practice you could make those decisions, you know."

"I don't work on Sundays."

"Good. Come take me shopping. I need new clothes." Richard hadn't used the holoset; holding the handset to his left ear, he held his right arm out, watched it shake as he tried to hold the hand level. "And I want to find a gym that I can go to."

FOR THE NEXT month, Richard went to the gym every day. He was astonished and pleased at how quickly he bulked up. What was left of the fat he'd carried around for the last fifty years was almost gone when he left the hospital; six weeks after leaving the hospital his body fat was at eight percent, and he'd put on almost ten pounds of muscle. He'd taken to driving down to the gym in Santa Monica every morning around 10 a.m., when the traffic died down. At first he'd walked on the track for ten minutes at a time, then twenty, followed by weight work, followed

by the sauna. Within a month he was working out an hour a day: running on the track, followed by weight work, followed by swimming. He hit 180 pounds two days before Christmas — the weight he'd boxed at, three quarters of a century previously, growing up in the slums of Corona.

MANDY TAUGHT TAI CHI at the gym. She caught Richard's eye almost immediately; she taught the course in a white gi. She didn't wear a bra, or need one, and after she'd been sweating for a while Richard could see the black g-string she wore through the white cloth. She was the first woman he'd been attracted to since Anna died — it didn't surprise him: he found himself being aroused by women on tv, lately.

She had short black hair and looked Latina except for her eyes, which looked Asian. When Richard asked her what race she was, she smiled at him and said, "Golden People" — Richard wondered if that was a polite way to tell him to mind his own business, or if she meant something by it; he'd never heard the phrase before.

He'd been taking the Tai Chi class three times a week for nearly a month before they'd spoken other than casually: one day Mandy said, "You learn fast."

"I've studied Tai Chi before," Richard admitted. "I'm just rusty."

"Where'd you study?"

"The Zen House."

She looked at him oddly. "They tore that down when you were a little boy, Richard."

Richard hesitated. "No, not that one. I used to live in, Chicago. There was one in Chicago called that."

"Oh. Well, you're re-learning quick, then."

THEY HAD DINNER together the first time a Friday night a few days after New Year's. She was a vegetarian so he took her to the Inn of the Seventh Ray, in Topanga Canyon, and had a table outside under the heat lamps, next to the creek. It had been raining and the creek was high, rushing past them only a few

feet away from their table. Richard had hesitated about it; the last time he'd been there had been with Anna, and she'd been sick at the time.

It went well enough. The place was as Richard remembered — he was pretty sure he recognized the middle-aged woman inside the New Age bookshop as the young waitress he and Anna used to ask for. The menu seemed different to Richard; he recognized no single item on it, though the sort of food they served had not changed, lots of vegetarian dishes, a few meat dishes served for committed non-vegetarians. Richard had the filet mignon and put up with Mandy's polite disapproval. She had a Portobello mushroom dish in a plum sauce that was, he was forced to admit, better than his steak, when he tried it.

He took her home, to the apartment she shared with a friend, on 10th street in Santa Monica, and kissed her good night.

THEY SLEPT TOGETHER for the first time the next Friday night. Mandy made a point of telling him that her roommate wouldn't be home until Sunday. Richard took her out for the evening; they went to dinner and a play, a revival of "A Chorus Line." She'd wanted to go dancing; Richard had refused, saying he didn't know how to dance ... which was mostly true; he certainly knew none of the dances Mandy knew.

Richard surprised himself by being nervous. It vanished though, once they got down to it, and afterwards he was lying in her bed, drifting off to sleep with Mandy curled up against him, her head on his shoulder, their sweat drying on them, when Mandy said, "Are you married?"

It brought him instantly awake. "No."

"Were you?"

Richard took a long time answering. "Yeah. She died, though. A while ago."

"How long?"

He knew what she was asking. "She died seventeen years ago — it'll be eighteen years, end of March. We were married forty years before that."

He could tell it didn't surprise her. "Yes," she said softly. "I

thought so. You're that guy, the really old one who survived the treatment. The oldest one to survive."

"Yeah."

He could hear her breathing, in the darkness of her small bedroom. "You don't seem old to me."

"I'll be ninety-four this summer."

She sat up in bed. "How rich are you?"

He sat up next to her. "Why?"

"The treatment, how much did it cost?"

Richard shook his head. "I don't know. My son was managing my accounts while I was sick. He paid the bills, I don't know exactly what it came to."

"I mean, hundreds of thousands of dollars?"

It had been in the millions, Richard knew. "I don't know," he repeated. "I didn't pay it."

"My dad died," she said. Richard knew she was looking at him, but he couldn't see her dark eyes at all. "The year before last, on August the fifth. About a year and a half ago now, I guess. He couldn't afford the treatment, not even by selling everything he owned. So he died. He was only sixty-two."

"THERE'S GOING TO be a war over this," Richard said.

"I know," Kevin said. "There have been murders, though they're being kept quiet."

They were having breakfast together at Gogie's on Santa Monica Boulevard, before Kevin went into his offices in Beverly Hills, where he provided therapy to men and women, mostly women, who were richer and more neurotic than he was.

Richard sipped at his coffee, black with cream. "Not one person in a thousand can afford it."

"It'll get cheaper."

"How fast? Fast enough?"

"Fast enough to prevent war? Probably not," said Kevin. "You broke up with that girl, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Too bad. I'd have liked to have met her. I think she was good for you."

“I had to change gyms. I’d bought a year’s membership in advance at that gym, I barely used 4 months of it.”

“It was hard for you to see her?”

Richard shook his head. “Hard for her. She was good about it, but it was bothering her.”

“For a cheap bastard, you do the right thing often enough.”

“A year in advance!” Richard marveled. “I felt damned optimistic the day I did that. I figured I might cheat myself out of it by dying from the throat cancer — it never occurred to me I’d fuck myself out of it.”

“How’s that going?”

Richard shook his head and didn’t answer.

A DAY CAME in late March, eighty degrees with eight foot swells at Malibu State Beach. Earlier that month a storm in Tahiti had stirred the waters. At Malibu Beach, a week later, the waves were coming in at eight feet, some higher than that. Normally the water off Malibu was cold from the southbound Arctic current; today it was warm, sixty-five or a little better.

Kevin called in the morning. When Richard answered the phone Kevin yelled in his ear, “Surf’s Up!”

RICHARD BROUGHT HIS longboard and met Kevin at the beach. “I’m not sure I’ll be going in the water,” Richard said.

“I brought you my spare wetsuit,” said Kevin. “Try it on, it should fit you.”

“I haven’t done anything like this since the treatment. My bones —”

“Are fine,” Kevin said. “A lot of old people suffer from osteoporosis, but you didn’t.”

“You sure? I just assumed —”

“Old man, I know more about your medical condition than I ever wanted to. You have bones like steel.” Kevin popped the trunk of his Mercedes and pulled two wetsuits out. He threw one at Richard. “Suit up.”

AS THE DAY wore on, Richard thought that it was one of those days you tell your children about when you get old. There were forty or fifty surfers in the water over the course of the day; Richard was one of only two with a longboard. At one point a young girl, a tight bodied cliché on her shortboard, paddled by him and stopped long enough to say, "Hey, guy. That longboard's a Bill Stewart, right? My uncle used to ride one of those."

"Yeah," said Richard. "A Bill Stewart Classic. This ... this was my father's."

She smiled at him and paddled on, sixteen years old and sun-blond and unconcerned about getting old, about people who had more money than she did, about anything except the next wave.

The sets were superb. Richard couldn't remember having seen a better day at Malibu, not even sixty, seventy years ago, when he'd been surfing daily. The kids around him were catching rides that made them look like pros on the circuit. The waves were coming in hard enough, Richard knew most of them would have sore shoulders the next day, from paddling their way out past the waves.

One moment etched itself into Richard's awareness: sitting on his board, a sharp wind turning the water choppy and the sun turning the points of the choppy waves into diamonds. Sitting out sixty yards from shore, Richard watched Kevin ride a wave in. He could remember sitting on this same beach, on the sand that time, forty years previously, having difficulty catching his breath after his first heart attack, and watching a much younger boy ride his shortboard over rather smaller waves in to the beach, aware of the boy making sure that his father was watching him as he rode.

Sitting there in the water, watching Kevin ride the eight-footers in, Richard watched Kevin's head turn, saw his fifty-three year old son looking to see that his father was watching him as he rode the wave into shore.

THEY WENT TO dinner together at Gladstones, at Sunset Boulevard and Pacific Coast Highway. Richard had put on a gray sweater and pair of pants as the day cooled; Kevin was still

wearing the shorts and t-shirt he'd had on under his wet suit, now thoroughly dried by the afternoon sun.

Richard ordered a scotch and soda with his sand dabs; Kevin looked at him curiously, but said nothing. His father had given up drinking, at his mother's insistence, when Kevin was still a little boy. As far as Kevin knew Richard had not had a drink in fifty years or more.

"I've been thinking about what you said the other day," Kevin said. "About the war. It's all about population pressure. People can't live a very long time, and have children the way we used to."

The one drink had made Richard's lips go numb. He remembered the feeling well, even after all the years of sobriety. "This an excuse for you to give me no grandchildren?"

Kevin shook his head. "I may yet. But there are too many people on this poor planet already. Something needs to change or the cost of our long lives is going to be bloody short lives for an awful lot of innocent people."

"I expect you're right," Richard said. "But —"

"Hey!" A tall blonde man, one of the surfers Richard had seen over the course of the day up at Malibu, was sitting in shorts and t-shirt and sandals over at the bar, with a couple of his friends. "Hey! You! Yeah, you, the black-haired dude!"

Richard looked at him. "What?"

"You say that fellow with you was going to get you some grandkids?"

Richard thought back. "I think," he said, carefully, smiling a little, "I said he wasn't going to." He focused on the blonde surfer and suddenly Kevin could hear New York in his voice: "Not that it's any of your goddamn business."

The surfer got down off his stool and ambled over toward them. Kevin watched Richard turn slightly in his chair, to get his feet out from under their table.

The surfer's buddies, neither as tall nor as wide as their friend, were sliding down from their stools to join him. "How old are you?" the blonde demanded.

Richard was still smiling. "That's not your business either,

champ.”

The other diners around them were becoming aware of the situation. Kevin heard raised voices, back toward the kitchen.

“I think you old fucks should die when it’s your time, dude.”

Richard sat in his chair and didn’t move. Instead he started to whistle in a low pitch, somehow managing to whistle and look amused at the same time. Kevin recognized the tune, Mack the Knife, and he heard the lyrics in his head as Richard whistled so well: “Oh, the shark, babe, has such teeth, dear, and it shows them pearly white —”

The big man kicked at Richard’s head without any windup. Richard brushed the flying foot aside, and Kevin leaned back as the foot passed inches from his face. Without even getting out of the chair Richard kicked the surfer in the side of the knee, and Kevin heard the crack as the joint broke. Richard got to his feet as the big surfer fell. Kevin pointed to the man’s friends: “Uh-uh.”

The surfer was on all fours and looked up and saw Richard coming for him and said, “Don’t,” meant to say “kick me,” but the kick took him in the face before he could finish. The kick flipped him over onto his back, spitting teeth and blood, and Richard knelt down and put a knee on his chest and started punching. The man’s nose vanished in a smear of blood, three straight right-handed punches to the mouth shattered what was left of the front row of his teeth, and then Richard leaned back and swung a long roundhouse left down to break his jaw.

It didn’t take thirty seconds end to end.

RICHARD WAITED PATIENTLY for the police to get done with them. There was no shortage of witnesses to testify that the surfer, one Maxwell “Mack” Schneider, had started the fight. The senior officer responding, a middle-aged man with a gut on him, looked at Richard’s driver license, reissued just last December, looked at the address and then, closely, at the holographic birth date, turning it side to side under the lights to make sure it was real. After that it was pro-forma; Schneider was arrested and taken off in an ambulance.

“Did you have to beat him so bad?” asked the cop.

Richard didn’t answer the cop, and Kevin knew why. Though he’d rarely seen it come out, there was murder in his father — Kevin thought it was lucky his father had never killed anyone, all the years he’d lived with that temper.

“He came at me while I was sitting there with my son,” said Richard. “What would you have done?”

The cop looked at Kevin. “He looks able to handle himself,” the cop said sourly.

“He’s my boy,” said Richard quietly. “While I’m in the room, he shouldn’t have to.”

THEY WALKED OUT to their cars together. Richard’s Jaguar was parked next to Kevin’s Mercedes. Blood was spattered on Richard’s gray sweater and there were a few dots on Kevin’s legs. They stopped at Richard’s car.

“We’re going to have to find another beach to surf, for a while,” Kevin said.

Richard looked amused, a little distant. “No, that won’t be a problem.”

“You think he’ll be afraid to come by?”

Richard shrugged. “Some men get whipped bad enough, they’re never the same after. Some you whip over and over, they’ll keep coming after you until one of you dies or leaves town. I don’t know what kind our friend Mack is.”

“Did you know his name?”

Richard looked puzzled. “No. Why?”

“You were whistling Mack the Knife right before you took him apart.”

“Was I?” Richard thought about it. “That’s funny. Just coincidence, I guess.” He looked off at the beach, at the sun setting across the water. He hummed a second under his breath ... “Yeah, that’s a good song. Could it be our boy’s done something rash?” Then he laughed. “Ah, hell. Kev, this has been a great day. I wouldn’t have missed this for the world. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For talking me into ... you know. This. Into being young

again.” Kevin looked him in the eye, standing there almost exactly the same height together, blue eyes looking into blue. Richard’s grin softened, became something gentler, a smile, a little wistful. “Ah, well. I love you, boy.”

“Yeah, I know that.” Kevin nodded. It was only the third or fourth time in his entire life his father had said so. “I do know that. Good night, Dad. I’ll see you in a day or two.”

HE CALLED RICHARD on Tuesday, but Richard didn’t answer and didn’t call back. The next day Kevin drove out to see him in the early evening, after rush hour had ceased.

The security service had been cancelled a couple months back. The press had long since moved on to the next four-day wonder, and even Richard’s email had died down to a manageable flood.

He knocked and then opened the front door using the combination pad. He was only a few steps inside the house when the first intimation touched him. The house was quiet — Kevin had been born in this house, and it had never been this quiet before, not with Richard in it.

Richard was lying peacefully in the bedroom, on his back in the bed he hadn’t slept in since Anna’s death. The little container of painkillers next to him was open and empty.

After a while Kevin wandered into the living room, sat down in front of the phone and called Doctor Tan.

“My father’s dead. He, uh, it looks like he took the painkillers.”

Doctor Tan didn’t respond for a second, then said, “I’m sorry to hear that, Kevin.”

“He wouldn’t talk about the goddamn cancer. How bad was it?”

Doctor Tan’s eyes dropped off-camera — for a second Kevin thought Tan was looking at Kevin’s image in the screen beneath his camera, but then he remembered seeing the holo setup in Tan’s office — Tan’s camera was on the other side of the one-way holo, behind Kevin’s eyes. Then he knew Tan was looking at records, something to do with his father.

It took a bit before Doctor Tan said, “Kevin, your father’s cancer was cured. The transform viruses knocked it out.”

“Oh.”

Doctor Tan looked back up again. “I’m sorry for your loss. Do you need any help?”

Kevin shook his head. He’d been a therapist most of his adult life; he knew what to do with a suicide. “No. I’ll be OK. I’ll call the coroner. I’ll, uh ... yeah. I’ll handle it.”

AFTER RICHARD’S BODY had been taken away, Kevin sat on the couch in the living room, watching the television set. It was tuned to the sports channel that was nearly the only thing his father had ever watched. Two men were playing tennis.

After a while he got up and started cleaning. His father was neat enough, but the old man left glasses everywhere, wherever he’d been when he finished drinking whatever was in them. Kevin walked through the bedrooms, picked up the glass at the side of the bathtub, picked up the two glasses in his father’s office and took them into the kitchen to wash them, along with the half-dozen dishes Richard had left in the sink.

The note was struck to the refrigerator with a magnet.

“Think of me sometime when you’re surfing. I’d like to stay, but I miss your mother bad.”

The End