

## Odd Couple

It was a pleasure to burn. Donald held the cardboard match to the tip of his Salem, pulled the smoke deep into his lungs and released, watching it stream from his pursed lips. Well, really, it was a pleasure to smoke.

The nine-thirty cigarette on the sidewalk in front of the Central Street entrance had become his favorite of the day. That first one was all about waking up and feeling jittery; he didn't enjoy it as much as need it. The one before he walked into work felt more like a bulwark than a pleasure. Later in the day, the cigarettes were routine responses to his body's cravings, timing determined by opportunity. But this one, this one felt like a ritual and a celebration. He would finish his cigarette and cap it off by getting a second takeout coffee before heading back upstairs to his desk, refreshed and renewed.

Raynelle was late, but then she usually was. Donald didn't mind. He knew she was a

busy gal, and he considered their time together as a pleasant bonus, an amuse-bouche. Low expectations, as his mother used to say, are the secret to a happy life. Standing a few inches from the building, he watched the pedestrians hurrying past, alone or in pairs, everyone with somewhere to go. He was soothed by the underlying racket of the traffic that flowed in front of him, three lanes, right to left, surging and ebbing and surging. He enjoyed the view of the Old State House cupola framed against the rectilinear glass of the '60s office towers.

“Good morning, Felix.”

Donald turned toward the smooth voice and smiled. “Hello, Felix,” he responded. “How are you today, my dear?”

“Harried,” said the tall, thin woman dressed in a teal skirt suit, her dark straightened hair pulled back in a tight bun. Raynelle was an assistant VP, the first black woman to reach that level at Heritage Insurance, and the thought that she and Donald would meet for morning cigarette breaks was so unlikely that they had taken to calling themselves the “Odd Couple.” Early on they had decided that since neither one was remotely a slob like the Oscar character, “Felix” would be their sobriquet for one another.

“Harried?” Donald raised his eyebrows. “That doesn’t sound good. And on such a lovely spring day, too.”

“It’s the usual. Pressure from above.” Raynelle lit her cigarette and blew out a line of smoke. “They want to know when my team will finish testing and recoding. I give them a best-case estimate. Not good enough, they say. Do it faster, they say. Same as it ever was, right?”

“I smell overtime for the troops,” said Donald.

Raynelle nodded, inhaled and tilted her chin up, closing her eyes before jutting out her lower lip and blowing the smoke straight up in the air. “You ushered at the Stage last night, didn’t you? What’s the review?” She tapped ash off with her index finger, red polish flashing in the sun.

“I pronounce *School for Wives* fabulous!” Donald swept his arm in a wide arc. “It’s the Wilbur translation—so very clever.”

“Well, Moliere’s always clever. And pointed. I’m not sure if I read this one in school. Synopsis?”

“Oh, just another powerful man trying to keep someone ignorant so she won’t give him any trouble. Same as it ever was.”

Raynelle smiled. “And how! Power and control. Fodder for all the drama in the world.”

Donald pressed out his cigarette on the marble-trimmed window ledge. “Speaking of drama, Koop—you know, C. Everett, the Surgeon General?—said this morning that nicotine is just as addictive as heroin! And cocaine! Can you imagine? I guess that makes us a couple of junkies.”

Raynelle tossed her head back and laughed. “Aye-aye, Surgeon General. Oh, Donald, how I needed that laugh. C. Everett Koop—I think the C stands for crazy.”

“Well, addict or no, I’d best return to my duties. Wouldn’t want any eyebrows raised about the length of my break. A couple of the nonsmokers give me the hairy eyeball as it is.”

“One of my reports actually said he might take up smoking so he could get paid for

taking breaks.”

Donald nodded. “They didn’t like it when we smoked at our desks, and they don’t like it now that we can’t. Well, Felix, I wish you a wonderful weekend. Don’t work too hard.”

“Not likely, but thanks, Felix.” Raynelle tossed her cigarette onto the sidewalk and pressed it flat with the toe of her pump. “See you Monday.”

Donald walked a half block down the street to the Pillar for his coffee, then retraced his steps back to the arched stone entrance and the brass doors of the Heritage. They were an odd couple, all right, he and Raynelle. They had started meeting for cigarette breaks several months back in January, when Heritage went non-smoking. Before that, they had worked together on a high-profile eighteen-month project, Raynelle managing the programmers and Donald, the most senior writer in his unit, overseeing the documentation. They quickly found a shared love of theater and eventually developed a routine of finishing their meetings with a cigarette in her office.

Oh, that office, Donald thought. It was unlike any other at Heritage: she had transformed it—“the double-wide,” as he called it, since it was twice the size of non-officers’ cubicles—into her own little oasis, with brass floor lamps, an oriental rug, and here and there, paintings and figurines of birds in flight. She always offered him tea, brewed in a hotpot on a little marble-topped table set between two Queen Anne chairs. Walking into her office the first time, he had noticed that even the quality of the light was different, more golden. He looked up and saw that several of the fluorescent ceiling panels were darkened. He wondered how she had managed that; she must have requisitioned maintenance, since Donald could not imagine

her clambering up on her desk—in those heels!—to pry the tubes loose.

Back at his own desk, under the harsh fluorescence, Donald greeted his cubicle mates:  
“Ahoy, fellow writers! I return with the wind in my sails.”

“Heya, Donzo,” said one, without looking from his monitor; the second nodded and smiled at him but said nothing; and the third didn’t respond at all. Donald sighed. He sat back down, pulled his chair squarely to his desk and got back to typing on his PC, sipping his coffee until it grew cold.

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“Happy Montag, Felix,” said Donald as Raynelle approached him outside their entrance.  
“Montag is Monday, you know.”

“In Germany, Felix.”

“Ever read *Fahrenheit 451*?” Donald asked. He lit his cigarette and held the match out for Raynelle. She leaned down and touched her cigarette to the flame. He shook the match out before it burned his fingers.

“Sure, back in seventh or eighth grade,” Raynelle answered.

“I keep thinking about Bradbury for some reason. I used to love him—devoured all the wild stories when I was a teenager. Anyway, this Montag, he’s the main character in *Fahrenheit*. The fireman who starts fires.”

“Yes, I remember that. I never really liked Bradbury, though. Maybe he was just a little too weird, too hysterical for me. Not my cup of tea.”

“To each his own,” Donald said. “Or her own. Me, as a kid, I could picture myself up on Mars or Venus. It seemed about as strange as Earth to me.”

“Poor Donald. Did you have a lonely childhood?”

He smiled. “Who didn’t? No, not lonely. Just, I don’t know ... apart. Other. Maybe that’s the word. Maybe that’s what everyone feels.”

“Hard to say.” Raynelle stared at her cigarette before touching Donald’s arm. “Well, I hope you’re not lonely now.”

Donald smiled thinly, but said nothing. They smoked side by side for a minute, watching the cars and people passing in front of them.

“I can’t stop thinking about something I saw in the paper this morning,” said Donald. “A man, dead on his lawn, right outside of his condo—did you see it?—beaten with a log from his fireplace!”

“I didn’t see that. When did it happen?”

“Last night. In Wethersfield. Not many details in the article, but that log---” Donald grimaced, then continued quietly. “It’s upsetting. I saw the aftermath of a bad beating when I was in the Navy.” He shook his head. “Anyway. Sorry to be so unpleasant on such a beautiful day.” He took a last drag on his cigarette and stubbed it out against the building.

“Stop apologizing, Donald. You do that too much.” Raynelle gestured with her cigarette, burnt almost to the filter. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“Oh, darling,” said Donald, raising his eyebrows and forcing a grin. He reached for her

cigarette, eased it out of her fingers, and held it to the wall until it was out. “We all have something.”

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Donald’s task for the afternoon was to prepare an input-output manual to be photocopied and placed into binders. It was rote work, but he enjoyed this part of the job, the orderliness and precision, because it left his mind free to wander.

His co-workers liked to make niggling jokes about his need for order, his picky perfectionism, but it didn’t usually bother him. It just showed, he decided, a lack of understanding. As a boy, he had loved to follow rules; he sought out that look of approval on his mother’s or father’s face. And in the Navy—well, that was all about following the rules. Rules and tidiness and structure.

As he worked, though, Donald kept thinking about that beating in the paper. And he thought about the other beating he had mentioned to Raynelle, about how the sailor had been hurt for just one reason. He thought about how it could have been him instead.

He supposed he had known, back in high school, deep down, but he didn’t have the words then, or the self-knowledge, or the courage. He dated some girls and enjoyed their company, but it always felt like something was missing. But the Navy, well, that was where he first felt so much: the shock of recognition, the thrill of knowing there were other men like himself, the first frightening, exhilarating tugs of love, and always, the cold fear of being discovered and the desperate need to hide.

He was careful, and even hired the occasional prostitute while on liberty. They would sit

in the girl's drab room, with its smell of old perfume, of bodies, cigarettes and booze, and he would explain. The girls were grateful for a break and wanted to talk; the hour passed quickly. But he found the girls' stories to be so sad that sometimes he felt like crying; he supposed it was because under their makeup they were not that much different from his own sisters. Emerging from the room, he would feel an aching aloneness, and as he met up with his shipmates back in the bar, he tried to laugh along with them, tried not to appear different.

Szczepanik wasn't as careful. Donald's minesweeper crew was on liberty in Palermo in 1967, toward the end of his hitch, when Zep, drunk and laughing, walked arm-in-arm out of a bar with a gorgeous local man. Several hours later, three of their shipmates returned to the sweeper with bloodied knuckles, bragging about cleaning up the town. The next morning, Zep was carried back to the ship, one eye swollen shut, his face looking like red and purple steak. His wrist, jaw and several ribs had been broken. Nothing at all happened to the sailors—the thugs—who had done it, and Donald started counting down the months until his discharge. He kept to himself as much as possible, doing his duty, discouraging conversation.

Evenings in San Diego, while he waited for his discharge to be processed, Donald walked past the bars where his kind gathered, but he couldn't bring himself to go inside. He supposed he was afraid of who or what he would become if he went in. He would stand under a palm, smoking and casually glancing toward the entrance. He felt he must look as blatant as one of Bradbury's Martians with those huge yellow coin eyes glowing in the soft dusk, but he was just there, looking like a human, and no one noticed him.

Back home in Hartford, he started a clerical job at Heritage Insurance, thinking it would only be for a while, and began taking classes at the local college. Because his father had died a



couple of years earlier and his sisters were both married, it made sense to stay at home with his mother. It took him six years going part-time to earn a degree in English, and by then, he had become a tech writer. He liked the orderly documentation process, and progressed steadily through the salary grades.

There was the occasional man, but never at his home, always at someone else's apartment or a motel on the Pike. For a while, he had an understanding with a man who belonged to the same Italian social club. Donald supposed that he loved the man, and he sometimes dreamed of how it would be if they didn't have to hide, if they could go to the club together and leave together. For three years they pretended to be casual friends who enjoyed bocce, but then Donald's mother mentioned that the man was engaged and moving to Long Island. He never saw him again.

Over the years, Donald went on dates with women—his sisters' friends, workers in other departments—always making sure not to lead anyone on. He enjoyed going to the theater or movies or museum with these dates, and talking over coffee or wine about what they'd seen. Eventually, his mother and sisters stopped asking him about settling down.

And that's how it was, at least until his mother died four years ago. He felt so lonely then, and he knew there was no real reason not to bring someone home. He started going to Chez Est. His first few times there, he resisted the come-ons, but soon enough, he began taking men home and for a few months, he guessed he went a little crazy. Making up for lost time, he told himself.

But he found it became more difficult in his own head to keep that part of him separate

from the part that loved his job and the part that went to Mass and the social club with his neighbors—the people who had known him since he was a toddler in a sailor suit. He was terrified that one of his sisters would stop by the house unannounced. And, with AIDS always an invisible, prowling presence, he knew he wasn't being as careful as he should be.

One day at work he overheard a couple of the twenty-somethings joking around: "What do you call a man who goes to Chez Est?"

"What, bud?"

"Your homo away from home!"

As they guffawed, Donald felt an iciness spiraling inside him. He didn't want to be that guy who was laughed at: not the flamy, wild one; not the pathetic, sick one; not the one who had his ribs broken at the toe of someone's boot.

He rededicated himself to his work and began taking his nieces and nephews to bocce. He made sure he took out women regularly, but never, of course, let it get serious. He started volunteering at Hartford Stage and took over the newsletter at the social club. And he cut way, way down on Chez Est, going only once a month or so, and only rarely bringing anyone home. Over the intervening months and years, he had achieved a sort of stasis, with his old fears held at bay and his desires reasonably contained, and his days were buttressed with the modest pleasures of art and theater, witty conversation and a well-timed cigarette.

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Donald pulled his car into his detached garage. The inside walls were adorned with scattered tools and dusty parts left over from his father's tinkering: the rusty saw blade wedged

behind one of the vertical two by fours, the old wooden tool box still perched on a shelf. Funny how Papa had been gone so long—decades, now—but was still so present that Donald thought of him every time he entered the rickety structure.

As he carried two bags of groceries out of the garage, he brushed by the triumvirate of spade and hoe and cultivator leaning in a corner. He nodded and smiled to himself, remembering now his mother, and thinking that this would be the year he would get her garden going again.

He climbed the back steps and, pinning one paper bag between his hip and the doorframe, unlocked the door. He put the groceries away and sat down with a small supper of reheated minestrone and crackers. He wanted to know more about the log attack, but he'd missed the six o'clock local news, so he re-read the *Courant* article while he ate. "Man Found Dead on Lawn," said the headline, and Donald was a little chilled to think this grotesque act—the victim's mouth was bound with duct tape—had taken place just a few miles south of where he now sat.

Upstairs, he changed into his pajamas and slippers and checked his lightweight cardigan for stains and odors before hanging it back up in the closet. He did the same with his trousers and tie, then dropped his shirt and undershirt and socks into the hamper. Before going back downstairs, Donald knelt down to the bottom shelf of his bookcase and eased out a thin paperback.

Settled in his wing chair, next to the gooseneck lamp that was perfect for reading, he reached for the pack of Salems he kept on the side table. He rested his head back against the

tweed and enjoyed his second-favorite cigarette of the day. After a few minutes, he tapped a long ash into the cast-iron floor ashtray and opened up *Fahrenheit 451*. The pages were yellowed at the edges and the glued binding was fragmenting into hard little crumbs.

“It was a pleasure to burn.” What a way to start a book! When he had first read it, so long ago, he had loved that inversion of ideas—the fireman who set fires—loved the way language could be a game: sometimes hiding, sometimes illuminating. He flipped through the novel, reading a page or two here and there, reminding himself of the story. The awfulness of the society, the undertone of panic: that was there as he remembered, but what struck him now was how completely alone the fireman Montag was: isolated from his pathetic wife, holding no genuine affection or bonds, needing to mask his thoughts and beliefs. And no one, no one at all to trust. But the words: they tumbled and frothed and lunged! Idea darted crazily after idea, and Bradbury’s love of words—of books—bled through every page. That’s what he hadn’t understood as a kid: this was one long, feverish love story.

As he read, he occasionally jotted things down on a pad he took from the side table. Finally, he put the book down, made a cup of tea and cut himself a slice of lemon cake before lighting up the day’s last cigarette.

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Donald stared at the newspaper on his desk. Without realizing it, he uttered a low moan, but because his co-workers weren’t at their desks yet, no one heard. Finally, he shoved his chair back, and gripping the front section of the *Courant* in one hand, left his coffee and walked swiftly down the hall toward the stairs.

Three flights up and breathing rapidly, he hurried to Raynelle's office, keeping his head down. Peeking inside, he could see the lamps were still unlit. He paced a few steps past her office, then turned back and slipped inside; Raynelle's assistant, busy at her computer in the adjacent cubicle, didn't notice. He sat down in one of Raynelle's chairs for a minute, tapped his foot rapidly, then stood up and crossed to the window. He leaned his forehead against the glass and stared at the cars and buses flowing through the streets below. He still held the paper in his fist. A few minutes later he heard rapid footsteps behind him.

"Donald? What are you doing here?"

Raynelle stood in the doorway in a seafoam green suit, holding two binders in the crook of one arm and a briefcase in the other hand; over her shoulder dangled a large gold purse. She took a few steps, put the items on her desk and stood there, slight frown on her face, and gazed at Donald. "What's going on?"

Donald stayed by the window. "I'm sorry to barge in." He paused. "I knew him!"

"Knew who?"

Donald suspected his eyes looked wild. Well, he felt wild; his mind tumbled. "The man. The one who was killed."

"On the lawn? With the log?"

"Yes!" Donald crossed his arms, still gripping the *Courant*, and just as quickly uncrossed them. "I don't know what to do." He gestured with the paper, looked directly at Raynelle and said in a soft voice, just above a whisper, "He was gay." Then, a little louder: "They think that's why he was killed." He took a step and dropped the paper on her desk.

She nodded. "And you knew him?"

Donald nodded back. "The police think he went home with someone from Chez Est." He paused and, leaning on the desk with both hands, stared down at the *Courant*. "A gay bar." Another pause. "I knew him from there." He hesitated again, then looked up at Raynelle. "We talked sometimes. That's all."

She pressed her lips together, but at the same time, softened her posture. "Well, I'm sorry, Donald." She pointed to one of her chairs. "Sit down. I'll make some tea."

She stepped out of the office with the hotpot and Donald heard her tell her assistant to fill it. When she returned, he was leaning forward in one of the Queen Anne chairs, holding his head in his hands. She put her purse into a drawer, set her briefcase on her credenza and straightened the binders. The assistant returned, plugged the hotpot in and turned to Raynelle.

"Take my calls, please. No interruptions." The assistant closed the door and Raynelle sat in the chair next to Donald.

"I didn't know him that well, really. It's just---" Donald rubbed his short hair with both hands. "I don't know, you go about your life and you mind your own business. You don't make a problem for anybody. You don't hurt a soul. And they still find a reason to hate you. And you know what? The hating is fine. They can hate me. But to get killed for it?" When he looked up he had tears in his eyes.

Raynelle shook her head. "It's a terrible thing, Donald. But I think we both know by now that life is anything but fair."

"I am just so tired of being afraid! Afraid of AIDS, afraid of people knowing about me."

He met Raynelle's gaze. "I'm tired of hiding."

The water bubbled in the hotpot. Raynelle filled two cups, dropped tea bags in them and placed them next to the sugar bowl on the little table between the Queen Annes. Then she reached across the table and touched his sleeve. "Ah, yes, the hiding. That part I do know."

Donald pulled his arm back, wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and sat up straight. He crossed his arms. "Sorry, my dear, but I don't think you do."

"Don't I?" She sighed, shaking her head. "I hide in plain sight. Do you ever wonder what all this"—she gestured to the lamps, the artwork, the carpet—"this stagecraft is for?"

Donald shrugged, arms still crossed.

"It's my scrim. It's me telling them what to look at, what to talk about. A misdirection. 'Oh, that Raynelle, doesn't she think she's something? Look at that office! Look at those shoes!'" She lifted a foot, sheathed in a high gold pump that came to a sharp point.

"Well, I still don't--"

"This way, I set the stage. I direct the action. Power and control, right?"

"But you have power! What do I have? Nothing. I'm invisible. And the moment I'm not invisible ..." He shook his head and they sat in silence for a minute, a silence buffeted by the ringing of phones and the ephemeral, one-sided conversations of a world at work.

Donald leaned forward to jerk the teabags out of the cups and drop them into the trash. Raynelle pivoted smoothly to add sugar to each cup, the spoon chiming softly against the rims as she stirred.

“You’re right about me being visible, Donald. They can’t ignore me or the fact that I look the way I look. Believe me, I’ve heard the comments, things I wasn’t supposed to hear. Or maybe I was.”

Donald nodded at this. He blew on his tea and took a drink.

“Ultimately, you only control yourself. How you act, who you are. What you choose to show the world. I think that’s where your power lies.” Raynelle sipped her tea and leaned back in her chair.

“But this”—he pointed to the crumpled *Courant*—“this still makes me feel sick. And scared. What do I do with that?”

“Good Lord, Donald. You can feel scared, but stop acting scared! You get precisely one life, my friend, so you’d better live it. No dress rehearsals, no revivals. Once the show’s over, it’s over.”

“But to be killed, Raynelle.”

“Same as it ever was,” she said somberly. She held her teacup out and Donald touched his to it.

“So, what do I do? Shout it from the rooftops?” He shook his head. “I can’t imagine that.”

“Well, I don’t know what your stand is, my friend, but I think you need to make one. More for yourself than for anyone else. This office, this is where I make my stand. I make sure they”—she gestured to the hallway—“are so dazzled by the scenery that they forget how



upsetting this is"—she made a circle around her face with one hand. "We're not like them, never will be. We'll always be the other. Like it or not, you and I, we have to wear masks."

Donald was nodding. "And I'm just saying, don't let them choose your mask for you. Build your own façade."

They sat quietly then, drinking their tea. Outside, the dull growl of cars and buses was punctuated by the muffled honking of impatient drivers.

Finally, Donald spoke. "I read more Bradbury last night. I had forgotten how lonely and desperate that *Fahrenheit* is. But listen to this: 'Stuff your eyes with wonder.' How do you like that?"

Raynelle laughed. "Something to aspire to."

"Another writer would have said 'fill your eyes,' but not our man Ray. One of a kind."

She smiled. "You too, Felix."

He raised his cup in a little salute to her. "Two of a kind, then." Donald drained his tea, rose, smoothed his hair and took the *Courant* from her desk. "Cigarette at nine-thirty?"

"I'll be there. I'm an addict, remember?"

He smiled, then paused. "Thanks, Raynelle." He considered hugging her, but thought better of it, and held out his hand instead. They shook, holding on for an extra few moments.

Settling himself back at his desk, he gave a subdued greeting to his fellow tech writers and placed the now-cold coffee into his wastebasket. Surrounded by the low buzz of conversation in the nearby cubicles, he began writing his list of priorities for the day.

After a few minutes, he heard a bark of laughter. A male voice said, "Seriously? A log? Talk about a phallic symbol!" Donald froze as more laughter erupted. "He got more of a log than he bargained---"

Donald shoved his chair back, took the few steps to the next set of cubicles and slapped his hand on a desk.

"You know what, guys? It's not funny." They stared at him. "A man is dead and it's not a joke."

He didn't wait to see their reactions, the same old reactions. He strode back to his workstation, sat down and squared his chair to the desk. Waiting for his breath to slow, he reached into his sport coat pocket and ran his shaking fingers over the pack of Salems, then pulled a project folder toward the center of his desk and picked up his pen.