

MENAGERIE

G. Wells Taylor

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ISBN: 978-1-4357-1393-2

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Chapter 1

I had already dropped most of a bottle of whiskey into an empty stomach, so decided to eat before it got the better of me. I was just starting to think I could run on high-octane fuel alone, which was the first sign that it was already getting the better of me. I didn't mind getting that drunk—nice to cut ties with the planet from time to time—but the hangovers were killers. After a day of searing pain and nausea, I'd roll out of sweated sheets and stare around with boiling red eyes expecting the end to come. A bullet, a lightning bolt, or tsunami—I spent those days snuggled up to my mortality with my temples hammering to get in. It would end. It was going to end. Everything ends. If I listened closely, I could hear Charon loading my bags on the boat down at the River Styx Marina.

If I woke up in a body—*the* body, really. There was only one I felt comfortable in. It's a long story, but I borrow a body to do my detective work. Tommy was nuts—that's my host. He only accepted the partnership if we dressed like an oversized gothic clown. Nothing silly. Black and white makeup, worn coverall with faded spots and a huge black overcoat. I wear a matching fedora too, to keep the rain off. It's always raining. I have quite a look. Nothing you'd want at a kid's birthday party, if there were kids.

I lost track of my own body. Must have left it in my other life. I have no idea how I got this way. In fact, if not for the hangover, I had to laugh every time I contemplated the end because there was a good chance I

was dead already. But other times I woke up outside the body, as though I drifted out in dreams. Then I would come back to complete awareness, invisible, floating over Tommy—usually him snoring, sleeping off a drunk at awkward angles on the desk or out on the couch in the waiting room with Elmo looking uncomfortable in the easy chair across from him. I could usually repossess the body with ease, some sort of connection I had with his pleasure center. Then it would be back to work, quite often with a pounding headache and watery bowels. Nothing a triple finger shot of whiskey wouldn't put right. Don't mind if I do.

Elmo, my partner, usually did the step and fetch—errands, that type of thing. Getting food and supplies was one of his duties and I hated to trample on his dead toes whether he could feel it or not; but my IQ was plummeting—I was getting caught up in the moment. Thoughts were starting to come at me like medicated tortoises. If I waited much longer, I'd be reduced to some simian ancestor impossible to toilet train and unable to handle the order. I was already having trouble deciding what I wanted to eat. I'd delayed the chore by a couple of drinks already, contenting myself making up names of yet to be invented foods: the pizwich, a soul of boop, a dish fog, or an S-bone Take. Maybe another whink of driskey would help.

I wasn't agoraphobic—the air would do me good—but the longer I drank, the more I felt like I had super powers. Who needs food when all the vitamins and nutrients I needed were contained in each little shot? Whiskey could do that to me if I drank it recklessly—if I failed to provide a solid base. The amber ambience permeated everything—all I needed was a cape and I could fly. But 'getting things' was Elmo's job, and since it had been a long time between cases, I was running out of ideas to keep him busy. At the moment, he was over in Gritburg on an errand. The reason escaped me: gricking up some poceries?

Let's go detective. You're driving up on the curb—food before a car wreck. It was happening more and more these days: Happy Hours on either side of lunch, and then cocktails until Happy Hour at three—and then Happy Half-Hours until supper, if you could still operate a sandwich by then. Drink after supper until you're relaxed and then relax with a drink until you're drunk. Then drink and giggle over a pack of cigarettes as the rain beat on the windows and the gray day dissolved into a meaningless night or the black night diluted into ashy dawn—it didn't matter which. If something didn't change soon I was headed into straits that I might not be able to drink my way out of. If there was work, that was one thing. The long hours, pistol-whippings and rising levels of violence kept my mind off the Change, and the long wet twilight it had

made of life. But give a man time to think, to mull things over, and he'd have to dive into a bottle to keep from climbing up the wall and going out the window headfirst.

I'd been out of work for a couple weeks now with only a low-paying job photographing a cheating husband to make ends meet. I don't know if it was my distaste for the case or the whiskey I sampled while I waited outside his girlfriend's apartment, but I'd only managed a couple of pictures in sharp enough focus to tell my target was a man. The wife paid me anyway. I took that job after "The Murder and Death Section" of the *Greasetown Gazette* had gone quiet. That's where I usually trolled for work in the off-times. But there had been a lull in the constant gun battle that usually echoed outside my window. And none of the accidental deaths were suspicious enough to bother hiring a detective. So I drank to fill the time.

I tumbled out of my chair, crawled into my overcoat and climbed under my hat. There was a reflection in a glass-covered picture on the wall—the clown having problems with gravity was not as funny as you'd think. Especially when considering the ugly .44 automatic stuck in his pink skipping rope belt. He looked crazy enough to use it.

I swaggered out of the office, down the stairs and then walked a block south to a pizza shop. The air did me good. So did the sprinkling of foggy dew that glistened on my painted cheeks. I wasn't smoking, so I paused in front of the shop and pulled a cigarette out of a pack before I realized there was a cold dead wet one in my mouth. I tossed the pair on the dark concrete and pulled the door open. The smell of spices greeted me seconds before a beautiful woman did. Maria appeared behind the counter with a big smile. She was used to my makeup and recently inebriated state—I'd been in often enough that the secret was out and she had stopped tossing me the typical: "You eat a lot of pizza" comment.

She was Greek, her Mediterranean skin bleached by the sunless skies. Maria always shook her lovely black curls and flashed her big brown eyes when she talked. Always there were gold bangles moving and rings jingling and gleaming. Always she floated around the shop like it was brand new—some kind of fancy eatery in Old Europe—brass-railed, smoke-mirrored and anything but an all night pizza shop with plastic furniture in Greasetown. Her lips were pink. I wanted to bite them. Her angular body went well with her lean features—every inch of her moved when she talked. I wanted to bite all of that too. She just wouldn't stop moving. I set my upper thighs against the counter, and balanced through a smile and introduction. I ordered a couple of slices with extra cheese,

hot peppers and some kind of fish-sausage pieces.

I got tired of fishdogs and fishburgers sometimes—all that fishy goodness. It wasn't like I could avoid it, really. All meat sources had been replaced by fish-additives: krill or shrimp or plankton. It all tasted the same. Everything had a pinch of fish. So why not pizza? And it was too late to start worrying about my diet. I avoided a medical opinion because I knew how it felt about whiskey and cigarettes. It was getting so bad that a man couldn't drink scotch all day without feeling dirty. So pizza. I don't know where they got the flour for the crust—probably one of the corporate run hydroponic farms carved into the lower layers of reconditioned mines. They grew tomatoes, cucumbers and coffee down there and anything that would fit in the elevator. Few food crops grew without help in the constant rains in the world after the Change. And the fish-stuff, they ladled that out of enormous vats in factories on the coast. Nobody wanted to know much more than that.

“Another party, Mr. Wildclown?” Maria sang, a slight accent colored her song without distorting it. Her eyes danced and dazzled and gleamed. I'd spent three minutes watching her move: preparing the slices and then jamming them in the oven. She turned to me, handling the long wooden spatula like she was in a parked car after high school graduation. Don't mind if I do.

“Yes, a party.” I didn't waste time thinking about Maria in *that* way. Well, I *thought* about her *that* way any time I saw her—but I didn't waste time doing anything about the way I thought that way. I'd met her husband, a big burly man—older than her—from an arranged marriage in the old country. He'd talk you blue in the face about business and the fact that a man can't get respect any more, but didn't like it when men got too familiar with his wife. His reactions to that were legendary. Many a nose was broken when he had to explain his feelings on the issue. I could see him on the far side of the oven, his hairy shoulders quivering as he beat the life out of a hundred pounds of dough. I knew he didn't mind the counter talk though, so I continued: “What the hell, Maria? It's Tuesday.”

“Mr. Wildclown...” Maria turned from the oven and laughed, eyes flashing—mysterious brown centers in glittering white. “It is Thursday!” she giggled, and bagged my pizza slices.

“I was close,” I said, handing over a few bills and taking the hot slices from her slender white hands. “It has a ‘W’ in it.”

Maria slapped my hand and laughed. I chuckled, wishing I could do more than nod and turn and saunter back into the rain. It was really coming down out there again.

As I walked past a small clutch of plastic tables, I saw a man there. He had his back against the far wall. An untouched slice of pizza sat on the table in front of him beside a wet fedora. His body had a massive look beneath the charcoal gray overcoat, not big but pressurized—full of power waiting to get out, and the hands that slid off the table into his lap were corded with muscle and tendons. His heavy features gripped his skull; brow ridge like knuckles over large cheekbones. Long black hair hung over his dark eyebrows and hid a pair of gleaming eyes that glared at me. It wasn't anger; it wasn't hate. There was controlled purpose in the look. Nothing wanton there. They were hard, gave me a professional appraisal—had something else too. I knew all the local nasties, and he wasn't one of them. He was imported.

I considered asking him what he thought he was looking at. Maybe it was the whiskey, maybe the errant testosterone Maria's movements had revived in me but I wasn't interested in his professional look or the subtext. I'd been out of work too long for aggressive chin thrusts and frank glares. Speak your mind or shut your yap. I certainly didn't feel like the potential chaos and violence such a question could provoke but it was an answer to boredom. Of course, mixing it up with that one would be painful. There would be a price. Then the sound of Maria's jingling bangles reached me, and she sang a few lines from an ancient song, and it passed. No war today. I wondered about the stranger's interest for a second and then shrugged it off—why get into it? If he was curious why I dressed like a clown he could go see the movie. I was in no mood to explain. Happened all the time. If he was a bill collector, he could talk to me at the office—if he could trick me into opening the door. I overrode my impulse to respond. I didn't even feel like cracking wise. He didn't look like he was in the mood either.

I clawed one of the pizza slices out of the bag as I stepped into the night—the rain was pounding the street—made a distorted echo under the brim of my hat. I glanced back to catch Maria's slim form distorted by the steamy window. She was moving ceaselessly around the pizza shop. The first slice was cold by the time I got to the crust halfway home. The bag containing the other was greasy and transparent before I was ready for the last piece. Water showered onto the sidewalk and the bag ripped to ribbons as I pulled the slice free. I got back to the office—paused outside long enough to spit bits of colored paper onto the stairs.