Museum Story Listening

by B.D. Fischer

“See, what it is is they call it a teaser. You got to win three games. It ain't enough just to win one. But if you win it pays big. Like five to one. So I stood to win 2500 with my 500.”

“I don't understand. If we bet, you give me $500 if I win and I give you $500 if you win. Right?”

“On a normal bet, yeah, although you still got the vig and all. But this ain't no normal bet. It was a teaser. You got to win all three. The way the Diamondbacks and the Phils been playing I thought it was a sure thing. It was the Angels I was worried about but sometimes you got to risk it. But by the time the Angels blew out the Yanks the D-backs and Phils had already lost. So I was fucked. I got fucking hammered.”

“But if the Angels won ...”

“During the summer I'm just waiting until college football, but I got to have something to bide my time. But Johnson lost on an error in the ninth and the Phils played like a bunch of candy-asses. So I got screwed. Goddam teaser.”

“Who was teasing you?”

“The book. The house. Like I was saying. They screw you into all kinds of wacko bets. And now I'm out 500 bucks and I'm down to like 40 in my accounts. I thought it was a sure thing. So I'm not sure what I'm going to do.”

“‘Wacko bets'?”

“A million wacko bets. They fucking in*vent* ways to screw you. Like take this elevator: Would you bet me $10 that this elevator is going to snap cable and crash down to the basement?”

“I would bet that that *won't* happen.”

“Right. Because it's never happened before. You got evidence. But it *might* happen. You have to admit that.”

“I guess. Now you're making me scared.”

“But suppose I say I'll give you a million bucks if it does snap, and you only have to give me one if it doesn't. You might take that bet.”

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“Do you have a million dollars?”

“A book does, because plus also they've got the vig, and point spreads, and over-unders, and a million different ways to screw you. With a book *everything* gets more complicated.”

“You keep a million dollars in a book?”

“Wise guy. Now I'm 500 down, and I got to figure out what to do. I got to somehow make it up with the forty I got left. I got to bet big. My wife, she don't know how much I put into that account. She knows I bet, but she thinks I'm playing around. But I'm serious about it. One weekend last fall, I won three thousand on a teaser. Sparta State and Graham State, I think. I can't remember who. And I didn't have to tell her, see, because she didn't know. I used the money for a new outboard motor for my boat. She don't ever even fucking *look* at that boat. It's like she don't even care. But she'll notice 500 missing. She's a fucking hawk with that checkbook. So I got to figure out some way to turn 40 back into 500.”

“Golly!”

Robert was slow not stupid, got along to get along and didn't know how to try. A utility infielder in life's infield, not unliked but rarely contributing. A beneficiary of the ADA and certain changing social values. Mrs. Mendoza, the Administrative Director of the Museum, made it her business to employ people like Robert when she could, and what was her business ended up the business of those around her, usually at high nasal volume. Robert's hiring for the summer, to run the freight elevator while they replaced the main elevator, soothed a perennially disgruntled employee and made a nice flower in the University's Human-Resources hat. His IQ came in just low enough to make a nice flower.

The problem, if it was a problem, was that he performed his duties so poorly, and the staff felt so *awkward* about their interactions with him, that most of them stopped using the elevator except when they had to. The mnemonic he learned during his training, such as it was (Mrs. Mendoza spent ten minutes showing him that the elevator could go both *up* and *down*)—lean BACK and look UP, lean FORWARD and look DOWN—fetched up against and

slid right down and off his teflon memory. The freight elevator had no buttons and moved only at the will of a lever, which could be either pulled back to go up or pushed forward to go down, and then the floor of the elevator had to be lined up with the floor of entry or exit. For Robert, lining up the floor of the elevator with the immobile floors of the Museum was like parallel parking an eighteen-wheeler, blindfolded, on acid, with the rush hour whizzing by. The Museum employees spent the start of the summer in a constant sweat, as more than one of them came to the realization that, in our society, at this stage of the game, people just don't climb stairs any more. But as it got hotter outside they resolved into better and better shape, especially Reynaldo and Barbara, the exhibits staff, who ventured regularly from their office workshops on the seventh floor to the far dark corners of the old place. By August, neither fat to begin with, both had lost at least ten pounds and could climb six flights of stairs on a few long waves of their own deep breath.

For public consumption, the museum had seven floors, but the public did not know about the mezzanine hidden between two and three, teeming like a drum with the artifacts of the state's long history. It's unclear whether Robert ever overcame the conceptual stumbling block of the mezzanine, that there was somehow a floor between two and three that was neither two nor three, not even a number, when all the other floors were numbers. It was the haunt of a woman Robert almost never saw, known by what must have been a nickname, a shuffling shambling wreck of a woman between 25 and 90 given to thick cotton florals, almost nightgowns. No one knew more of their state's stories than Stoogey. To her co-workers she embodied the Museum's ambiguous virtues. She'd started as an undergrad, acquired an advanced degree, and came back as the Curator of Cultural Collections, did her mystifying work on the alchemic mez, monastic, good-natured, elliptical. She was on her fourth Director.

It was a problem though. The staff came quickly to bypass him but the visitors could not know better. Robert had but one

gambit—Mrs. Mendoza had told him to be friendly—and he carried it gamely through the summer like the Marines going into Wake Island, an awful obliviousness and the projection of constant insincerity: He'd ask the visitors what had been their favorite exhibit.

"We really liked the gems."

"Those gems sure are cool. I bet they're worth a lot of money. But I like the Indians more."

"Oh, really? We didn't see that, did we, Tom? Where was that?"

"You didn't see it? Let me take you up to six. Please, you'll love it. No problem at all," thinking this was politeness, a service, and he'd smoothly backshift toward the top of the building, shaking his head over their protestations of exhaustion, other plans, impending insulin shock. There's more than one way to make a child cry. He'd tell them how cool it was, and think certain things. With the kids, big groups of kids on Tours from area Summer Camps, he convinced or tried to convince the kids that if they didn't hold their breath, the elevator wouldn't go. He played this insane game with kids just out of diapers and young teenagers, anyone with any kind of distance to their majority. Some thought it was scarily fun, or neat, like magic. Some of them wept, or buried their heads in their mothers' pretty skirts. Some of them called him a tardo on the thin edge of earshot, in small groups in the shadows of the great blowup of the state's biotic provinces and at the entrance to the gift store, although of course he wasn't strictly speaking retarded. Probably even his tormentors, most of them, knew this. Mrs. Mendoza urged the Director to see all this is a victory, whatever his shortcomings, and although unable to express her feelings she was deeply grateful for his patience. The jerks in HR never knew the difference, never could have cared. He was just a number.

In the early days of Robert's employ, depending on his attenuation, Reynaldo could have detected the noble surge of caffeine consumption, concomitant upswings of internal homogenization and distraction. To a Catholic, it would be troubling, especially a Catholic with so meager a capacity to honor

the Church's basic sexual dicta. It would be troubling for reasons Reynaldo could not have put his finger on; he negotiated Scriptural and spiritual labyrinths like a bat caught in the bright sun. To Reynaldo, Robert's hiring, shorn of a certain literal pleasure, summoned a panoply of familiar, partially unpleasant feelings to the fore. On the coffee in the mornings it was impossible to parse these things out, and when he tried it didn't take long before his mind felt like his insides, a great unadulterated glom. Reynaldo believed strongly in sympathy, miles and shoes, the importance of a strong social contract, and the borderline-sacred nature of a good Museum.

"It's low class, how I see it," Barbara is saying. She and Reynaldo are transporting a diorama they've repaired down to its home on two. "Low class."

"Just because they're Mexican, though."

"Nothing to do with it."

"Non-whites in general."

"Like you, right?"

Reynaldo smiled.

"My second *husband* was Mexican, for Christ's sake."

"Why would you even have told me he was Mexican if that's not what you were thinking?"

"Low class."

"It's a baby, Barbara. You can't leave the food and bottle in the car when it's a baby."

"You can't bring food into a museum!"

"It was a baby!"

"It was a kid."

"You said he was carrying it."

"He could have walked. And I don't care how much cologne, how many gold chains, what kind of Hilfiger the guy's wearing, it's low class."

For Barbara, Robert's hiring became one of those reflexive interpolations of the divine that Americans are always inventing to get their lives in order. The kind that made us famous. No one

could have foreseen that she would be so pretty by the end of the summer. So slim. Barbara didn't have any babies.

The Museum's greatest draw without question was the exhibit of historic guns, including the revolver the state's founder had used in his victorious duel with a well-known Father who might otherwise have gone on to become President. Although of course who could tell, he was so young. It was also known for its fossilized exterior, native million-year-old crustacea embedded in the very building blocks. Quixotically, in a shanty on the broad northeast lawn, the largest preserved dinosaur track in the hemisphere. The moribund gift store sold stuffed animals, manufactured arrowheads, esoteric UP monographs on late Cretaceous outcroppings of smooth volcanic rock, some jewelry. It (the Museum) had recently been dubbed a museum of a museum.

For all Robert's failures, it mattered less because he spent most of his time ferrying the two fat men in charge of replacing the regular elevator. They spent a while translating it into garbage and then hauling it out. Then there was the new elevator to bring up in pieces. And a lot of wiring, great rolling bales of it. They weren't so much fat as large, thick, larger than they needed to be, layered but still fundamentally OK, and they reached their 3:30 quitting time each day covered in grease, head to toe. In Reynaldo they saw a brown orphan cousin and treated him as though he were a Mexican. Reynaldo in turn treated them as if they were dogs and he their laughing, benevolent, unloving owner, with a brown man's rare capacity for imperceptible cruelty.

In the freight elevator a naked hundred watts lit up the shabby yellow box. Reynaldo was saying something about his sister's Borderline Personality Disorder, a diagnosis he hotly disputed (Brazilian medicine, he said, not quite being the exemplar of intellectual rigor and professionalism) despite the promiscuity, unstable relationships, and wildly inappropriate attachments. They stopped on the ground floor for him to investigate rumors of a fallen shelf of quasi-rare Native American tools. The fat men passed him getting on and must have heard something because the first one

said over his shoulder in passing, “Good times, 'naldo!” It is possible to hear conversation from the landing, as the elevator approaches.

Later that day, talking about his wild days “back in school,” Reynaldo asked him where he'd gone to college. Such exploits! Reynaldo had a degree in design from a prestigious art school in São Paulo and an advanced degree from an expensive New English university

“Oh, I was talking about high school,” the fat man said, and Reynaldo nodded, understanding.

The white men's pounding in the shaft reverberated through the building:

“Fucker's wedged in there.”

“Why they pour concrete all around it that way?”

“These old elevators. Fuck.”

The docent, it should be known, had been hired by Barbara, a heterosexual woman, mostly because of her looks. She gave scripted tours to mostly kids and old people, and she *looked* as though she loved kids and could hide her disgust for the aged. That meant she was softly pretty and superficially un-self-confident, wore long skirts and long blonde hair pulled back, never seemed to know if and when to smile. Underneath, she was a fifth-year senior in aerospace engineering, loathed kids and feared being tricked into bearing one or more, smoked weed before work most days, loved anal.

“Shit piles literally up in me. I only feel good after anal.”

Reynaldo wanders himself into the meditative fugue it's going to take to redesign the third-floor exhibits. On the south wall, an array of six-by-two panels the spectrum of pastels obscures the glass in front of one of only eight complete Impetrasaur skeletons in North America. It was not, however, the draw that it might have been because it looks exactly like a Triceratops to all but the experts and every natural history museum worth its salt has a goddam Triceratops. A major re-design of the third-floor exhibits has been announced but specific plans have not. It's unknown whether the

Impetrasaur will even remain on there. That Reynaldo nevertheless goes ahead with certain plans makes you wonder just what he knows.

The Director approaches, only realizes how quiet it is after he starts to speak, regrets it, finishes his thought.

“What are you thinking?”

Reynaldo's eyes had not been open. After two beats he moves, gestures toward the panels and toward nothing, toward the infinite, the possible, answers:

“I'm liking the blue, like, sky blue.”

The Director nods.

“A sort of invocation of the open sky,” Reynaldo continues, “in contradistinction to the dark of the Earth whence came the specimens, a figurative marriage of the literal darkness of exploration and the figurative light of knowledge.”

The Director nods, touches Reynaldo, moves away.

In Mrs. Mendoza's office, the first fat man tries to explain why there's been so much noise, and why there's going to be:

“See, ma'am, when that elevator was built, the machinery”—trying not to swear—“it was a lot … heavier. And they didn't have as strong cables like we have today. So they had to secure it, the engine, the gears, the cable coupling, in the concrete itself.”

“It was set in *poured* concrete?”

“Yes, ma'am. For stability.”

“*Poured* concrete?”

“That's right.”

“That's doesn't seem right. What did they do, just jam it in there? How could they possibly do that? It was going to have to be replaced someday!”

“Well, I'm sure they set that slab in there right side up and just held her steady. And now we've got to get it out and there ain't but one way to get through that much concrete. And that's by banging.”

“*That*'s what you've been doing? Pounding away on fifty-year-old concrete?”

“Chipping away at it, that's right.”

“How long is it going to take?”

“Hard to say. At least until tomorrow, lunchtime.”

“That's unacceptable. We'd have to close three floors.”

He stands in what feels like the dead center of the office, conscious of his grease, and reminds himself not to touch anything. He fingers his baseball-style hat.

“I don't know what to say, ma'am. That's the only way we can do it.”

“Can't you do it after we close?”

“We could. Outside working hours so it'd be overtime. It'd have to be authorized. And I'd bet our estimate didn't include no overtime.”

“The estimate *should* have included it.”

“Ma'am, you get inside these old elevators, it's impossible to know what you're going to find.”

His drinking, the first fat man gave the impression, might be out of control. At least, his wife thought so. Most days, he told Robert that the night before he had “copped a sixer on the way home and then James Beam and coke until bed.” His favored term for the morning after was “riding the pony through the fog.” His wife got on his case, he said. Robert asked him why he didn't stop, and mentioned AA. Even Robert knew about AA. He said he didn't need any help. Then Robert asked him if he even wanted to stop, and he said his wife was right, their two-year-old son didn't need to see him drinking like that.

While the first fat man talked to Mrs. Mendoza Robert talked to the second down on the first floor by the wheelchair egress leading to the dumpster. They spent a lot of time together, in ninety-second chunks.

“It's going all right. We've still got a lot of work to do. I don't know if we'll get done on deadline, but most jobs aren't done on deadline. It's just a matter of how far we go over. That's how we get judged, but I know it's working out good. He's had a lot of

problems with other helpers, but I know I'm working out good. He's never put one in like this before."

Robert puzzled out the deadline that was not a deadline for the rest of the afternoon.

The first fat man had told Robert that he sometimes had to beat their dog, when it did things it had not been trained to do. In other hands, the dog might have been a credible help to a hunter. He would sometimes, he said, "beat the living shit out of it." And the night before, his son had started whaling on it with both hands out of nowhere, the dog just lying there. During a commercial. Funny.

The Docent's soft-on-the-outside/steely-at-the-core reserve of haught strongly affected the entire Museum contingent, especially Reynaldo. To the Brazilian, who had no desire to become a citizen, she became America, American freshness, the scent of spring, the honest demurity of a centerfold, the embodiment of lush American softness. He'd sit on the toilet most afternoons with a good tough length of rubber tubing tied around his forearm and think about the nape of her neck, and think about weeping. Then he'd go out onto the floor, or the workshop, look at color swatches, study floor plans, draw, think.

To Barbara, the Docent possibly represented a version of her former self, and that summer she thought about her almost constantly. In the early days on the stairs, nearly lightheaded with exertion by the fourth floor, sweating, legs starting to shake, unbidden images of the girl she'd been, and the girl the Docent might be. Her sophomore year of college, the game of Quarters she'd won over two impending alcoholics of such ferocity that one was already dead and the other waiting on a liver transplant, and then taking them both on back at her dorm room. Her junior year, drunk, stealing a vending machine and dragging it back to the apartment she shared with the boyfriend who became her first husband, the un-Mexican one, and using her mouth on him while he munched on a Clark Bar. Her senior year, cheating on him with the All-American halfback who went on to enjoy a lengthy although rather workmanlike career in the NFL, a career she'd followed with

secret delight through the Sundays of her first and into her second marriage. In the beginning, before she worked into shape, the memories grew less and less distinct the higher she climbed, as if into the airless Himalayas, and the Docent replaced the central figure of her memories, the Docent downing shot after shot, falling down laughing and struggling to get the machine onto the flatbed, on all fours, arching, lip bitten, trying not to scream.

"I think it's the Lutheran Sunshine Day Camp. She's so good with them. She reminds me a lot of me at her age. I was little more wild than she is, of course, but it was the Eighties. A long time ago. Oh, to be 21 again! I envy her, I guess I'm trying to say."

They did close down three floors for a day-and-a-half. Mrs. Mendoza's bluster and refusal backed down in the face of the Director's bureaucratic reason. They made a good team: Her penchant for outrage licensed his misleading calm, for he was every bit as nail-tough on the inside as the Docent, who, again, smoked weed almost daily and commanded the arsenal of load-bearing capacities under the acceleration curve for *g* forces of the Space Shuttle's eighteen different synthetic metals, as well as the notoriously abstract Terwilliger regression for *g*s and thrust. But the Director was always kind, and even Robert learned that when he came out of his office with a newspaper, he wanted a ride up to the employee bathroom on four. But today Mrs. Mendoza was with him while Robert rumbled the elevator to life. The old counterweights clanged, got themselves moving, and the big box shook on its rails and then smoothed out, reached cruising speed.

"I was just talking to Stoogey," the Director said. "They've closed on that house. I feel so bad for her."

"I know."

"I wanted to tell her. I almost told her."

"But you say we can't."

"I know."

"When are you going to make the announcement?"

"The time has to be right. We're going to have to raise a lot of money. If the timing isn't right, people will be angry."

“I don't see why …”

“They will. You know how rich people are.”

Mrs. Mendoza nods. They get off together on four—Robert wondered whether they were going to the bathroom together, which shocked him—and vanished into the wide-open fluorescent museum. Later that day, Reynaldo disappears into the Director's office, which Robert can see from his stool in front of his resting place on the second floor. He comes out an hour later with a cloth-draped cart Robert has seen before. It looks to him like a miniature city underneath.

“Seven, please, Robert.”

“Your office.”

“Com precisão,” he says with a smile.

“Reynaldo?”

“Yes, Robert?”

“Why don't you speak Spanish?”

His smile widens, and saddens.

“The Pope divided the world in half, Robert.”

“Oh.”

More and more he sees that cloth-draped cart. Eventually, even Robert realizes that they are not always the same city underneath; the hidden geographies differ. Robert asks what's underneath. Reynaldo tells him it's just some exhibit stuff. For the third floor. Robert asks why the drapery. Reynaldo says it's just for protection.

“Can I see?”

“Not yet. It's not ready yet. When it's ready, everyone will see.” With that accent.

At a certain point, it becomes clear that the second fat man has settled his focus on Barbara. Robert tries not to feel embarrassed when he fills their ninety-second conversations with quasi-lyrical panegyrics to her calves. How curved they are. How tight.

“She looking good. Tuned up. I like them shorts she wearing. I don't think she was wearing them shorts like that at the beginning of the summer.”

He is perhaps two years older than Robert, who had acquired a high school diploma the previous May, only two years late. After the pounding the fat men spent an hour hauling rubbled concrete down to the dumpster. The first one talked about the Docent:

“You know what I'd give for one like that? Man, if I was 25 again she'd be mine. There wouldn't be no stopping me. You wouldn't believe the shit we were into back when I was young. Back in the day. I can't even tell you.”

“Aren't you married?”

“I got to take my ring off to work. How she going to know?”

“I don't know. I think I might have told her.”

“You did what now?”

“I'm not sure. I might have.”

“Why'd you tell her?”

“I don't know.”

“Boy, fuck. Don't you be telling *anyone* that I'm married. None of anyone's business. Can't be blocking my fucking avenues. Man, that is some *bull*shit.”

And Robert, frightened by the words, nodded, and kept his pale lips bit together until they banged to the bottom with a fresh load.

Later, he told Robert that he liked to go to strip clubs, and that they should go to a strip club sometime, but that the strippers always gave you phony digits, and to watch out for that. It was always a wrong number. And then, when you went back the next time, if you mentioned it, they ignored you. Wouldn't even take your business, usually.

Stoogey spent her days, dwindling unbeknownst, on the hoary mez through the summer. What went on there is impossible to say. Barbara spent her days in a third-floor bathroom stall, sitting on the closed toilet, shorts decorously loosened, one stealth hand slipped inside, head thrown back and eyes closed, teeth tight together.

Reynaldo, eyes also closed, tied off, contemplated the Docent.

Norton, the Director, eyes closed contemplated the ways and means of institutions, and how their death was and was not like the death of people.

Mrs. Mendoza, eyes closed, swallowed hard, fighting off a migraine.

Stoogey, eyes closed and who knows.

Robert, eyes closed, eyes closed, napping. It had been a slow day at the Museum.

EXCERPT from the Museum's late-summer press release announcing its total commitment to the state's natural history, and concomitant decision to de-accession its cultural collection, an announcement picked up by exactly two publications, the local Sunday, C-11 three weeks later, and the monthly newsletter of the AMA, probably because they were mentioned:

"As we move into the future, our Museum has settled on an historic shift. Starting this fall, we will divest ourselves of our cultural history collections to focus exclusively on the geology and natural history of our great state. In so doing, we hope to fulfill a need for an outstanding natural history museum in this region, which is already served by several fine cultural institutions, many of which will grow stronger by acquiring our collections, as we have decided to limit the loaning of historic artifacts to museums in the state, preferably museums in our region, as defined by the American Museum Association in their relevant recent classification.

We look forward to your visit to our exciting new space!"

The second fat man was right: The job ran over. The first fat man daily blamed the second's incompetence, almost hourly. Robert began to worry about finding another job. Reynaldo several times saw the second fat man and Barbara passing cigarettes back and forth out by the dumpster, and talking. He hadn't even known she smoked.

Robert: "How much longer?"

The first fat man shrugs. "A couple weeks, at least. Our boss ain't had the money to order the parts we need until yesterday, so we got to wait for them to be delivered. Always happens."

“I have to get another job when this is over.”

“Fuck. That sucks.” Pause. “Look, my wife is letting me out tonight, and me and the other're going down to the Shootout to throw back a few. You want to come?”

“What's the Shootout?”

“It's a bar. Down on the Drag.”

“A bar? I don't think I'm 21.”

The Docent mostly vanished, once school started. She still worked weekends, but mostly out of Robert's sight. They crossed paths once or twice. In a semester she was sure she was going to graduate and go somewhere else and get a job and make money. No kids or old people. The graffiti in the men's restroom—much of it in a disarmingly childish hand—mostly was not true.

“We all are going to the Shootout tonight,” the second fat man said. “You want to come?”

“Who's ‘we all'?”

Thumb jerked over his shoulder. “Me and him. Have a few pitchers.”

Barbara, tanned, tightened by a summer of stairs, shrugged her spaghetti-strapped shoulders and said, “Sure.” In all probability, she didn't like Mexicans and never had.

For a while, right before the end, the fat men stopped even coming. Waiting for parts, I guess. Robert continued to come to work and run his elevator. Then they were back, and the first fat man announced proudly that it would be no more than four days. They were mostly just tinkering now, plumbing the struts on the fourth floor, for example. The new unit was in its shaft. He brought a ladder onto the elevator at eight in the morning, clearly struggling with the pony. The second fat man was tinkering down on one. Robert brought them to a heavy stop, and before he could slide open the heavy metal gate and then the outer wooden doors the first fat man hefted the ladder. To Robert, soft, it looked heavy, and it must have been because the fat man lost his balance, slipped, and the ladder swung wildly up and down. Overcompensation. Libran inequality. Robert ducks out of the way, and on the regain and

reorientation the ladder jabs at that naked hundred watts, misses, and jabs again, like a flyweight feeling his way through the early rounds. (And the fat man in fact has a c-note riding on the fight that weekend, two little Mexicans swatting away at each other.) But the third time it makes contact; the lightbulb never stood a chance and there is a senseless crushing. Pulverized, nearly disintegrated, it is destroyed with a sound that is to Robert like a door closing. Like hope ending. Instant shards, near to dust, but no one could have been hurt: In the sudden darkness and the silence no one made a move. Inflection and innuendo. Then, Robert in the dark continued the grab he'd made a thousand times before but always seen, metal on metal, and the artificial sunlight of exhibit illumination floods the elevator, hurting their eyes.