

The Ruined Person

by Smiley McGrouchpants Jr.

Until I stumbled across an article about him in the paper, I never realized how much Walter Dodge and I are alike. We have the same job: insurance adjustor. We have the same initials. We have the same build — stocky, about 5'8". We have similar hair coloring — although, come to think of it, *his* may be dyed. (You can't really tell from the photograph, as rendered in newsprint — all those black and white dots.)

But — wait a minute — that watch looks an *awful* lot like the one I lost two months ago. I thought I had left in the . . . does that say “Helbros,” or . . .

Naaah. I'm being silly. “*Walter Dodge, recent transplant from San Diego—*” (Wait a minute: how did I miss *that?*) “*. . . wanted for charges relating to the recent disappearance of a Faberge Egg*” (yeah yeah yeah, shoot-out with police, nine dead, ten injured, high-speed car-chase down the L.A. Freeway, where's the part about—) “. . . *last seen boarding a plane at LAX with forged identity papers (see photo from security camera, below) with a women in a nurse's uniform, wearing the nametag 'HELGA'—*”

Wait . . . *what???*

I rushed back to my boudoir (*no no no — IT CAN'T BE!*) vaulting over the ottoman in front of the T.V. (*Jesus fucking Christ I am SO SCREWED!*) and fumbled with the keys (*dropped them — GODDAMMIT!*), picked them up, and shakily opened the door to find—

Behind the “French Maid” outfit, behind the stiletto heels, behind the—

Yup, sure enough: my “Nurse's” outfit with the nametag “HELGA” was *missing!*

I collapsed in a heap, dragging my bare feet in a semicircle

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around me on the carpet. *God, if any of my colleagues at the office ever found out I lived this "Double Life" . . .*

A thought struck me. I started pulling out drawers, looking through the bras, pairs of panties, halters, g-strings, and chastity belts to find the ones that matched with "HELGA" . . . *all gone!*

Geez, I thought, not only is this daredevil felon fellow my EXACT height and build . . . his co-conspiring gal-pal must be, too!

I exhaled what felt like a gallon's worth of air through my nose. *This is just getting too fucking weird . . .*

CAMP-town-RA-ces sing-THIS-song!!! DOO-dah! DOO-dah!
CAMP-tow-

I dropped the friggin' thing on the floor as it continued to "ring." It clicked open as it landed — just my luck — and I heard my boss's voice emitting from it on the floor.

"Roger? Hello? Hello, Roger, hello—"

"Yes, Dan, what is it? I'm here, I'm here," I added, nervously, hopping on one foot to avoid stepping on my boudoir keys and whatever else I had apparently strewn about the floor in my haste, thinking *I am so fucked. Shit, I am so fucked . . .*

"Did you see the news today?"

Oh boy . . . here it is.

Wait: did he mean the newspaper, or the televisi—

"WELL?"

Either/or, I guess . . . "Yeah, yeah, I caught a glimpse of that—"

"You CAUGHT a GLIMPSE, you say?"

Jesus, jump all over it . . . shit shit my nervousness is showing, better get it together: "Yeah, haha, I guess, um—"

"You GUESS?"

Hmm. This wasn't going at all well. Better let him take the lead.

He paused, and, hearing no more for me (I was waiting to see what he'd offered next), he cleared his throat, gathered his

thoughts, and offered me this:

"I've convened an emergency meeting with top management for 9:00 a.m. this morning," he said, as gruffly as I'd ever heard him, "Can I count on you gracing us with your presence to assist in sorting this whole mess out?"

That sort of brutal, *faux*-polite sarcasm could only mean one thing: *you're whole job's hanging by a string, pal! Time to kiss-ass and kowtow in ways you never previously imagined could be necessary or possible!*

"Yes yes — of course — I'll . . ."

"Please do."

The line cut out.

The phone was dead.

I looked out the window and immediately saw an 11-year-old girl from the apartment complex directly across the way gaping openly at me in horror.

I looked down.

My penis was hanging fully out the fly in my boxers, and, apparently, had been the whole time I was on the phone.

By the time I caught the next available bus downtown (my car was still in the shop — *shit! I should have remembered that!*) it had already reached 9:15 — as I had to learn from the display on a Citibank™ we passed soon after we boarded, owing to the fact that my watch was (apparently) long gone and in use by a daredevil felon bank robber.

Or Faberge Egg-robber.

Or *whatever-the-fuck* he was . . .

I breathed deep again, something I seemed to be re-learning how to do. (I don't think I had inhaled this much oxygen this fully and deeply since childhood.) The pit of my stomach was bottoming out, this lurching sort-of feeling one experiences when one has coasted *well over* an abyss and has no way of finding one's bearings

. . .

Shit.

I looked out the bus window, less for a sense of respite or escape (consciously) than out of reflex, my attention span necessitating I pay attention to *something*, mercilessly tracking on whatever was available, however futile.

Everybody seemed happy.

I wished I was *anybody* else.

All of them were connected to something, while, by my reckoning, some sort of meeting had taken place, futilely, with an emptiness begetting some decision made in my absence. My fate had been decided without my being there — *by* my not being there.

I felt close to vomiting.

A little boy, I noticed, as I turned my head from the window back into the bus, was staring, and appeared to have been for some time. He looked up at his mother, who was holding on to a strap while he sat near her on a seat, then nudged her, got her attention, and pointed at my shoulder.

I looked down.

My bra strap was showing.

I adjusted it, and pretended to go back to staring out the window, as though I hadn't a care in the world.

By Tuesday, my answering machine was so full of messages — the light was blinking red as insistently as a faced-paced metronome, *I thought dully* ... — that there was no real way to face them all.

By June, I was facing eviction. Everyone in my “professional” life and everyone in my, uh, “extracurricular” life were at odds with what they could offer me — moral support that counter for nil in terms of getting my shit together in the latter case, blank stares and cold-shoulders of the “even if I sympathized, *I'm* not going down with *you!*” variety in the former — so the “gaps” just kept widening, with each day, with each tentative phone call, knowing it'd do no

good, but finally marshalling yet more of my rapidly-depleting morale to goad myself into another “you *have* to try! You *have* to *try!*” effort, only to find . . .

Life on the street wasn't so bad (at first). After I'd cycled out of the semi-lunacy of trying to carry around absolutely everything of sentimental value over the period of several, repeatedly heart-breaking after heart-breaking-incident's worth of weeks, I managed to pare down my existence to what I could carry on my back, and in a bag, and keep stashed in the no place in the one park it seemed (at least *likely*) my fellow homeless denizens wouldn't try to rip me off, blind, from when I wasn't looking . . .

The scene with the woman and the purse-snatching was a *bad* one. I had drunk a bit more Pabst than I planned on, or was usual — I needed something to cope with the way my “days” went, and, as I remembered from reading Ishmael Reed's *Reckless Eyeballing*, they were called Pabst “Blue Ribbon” 'cause they'd won some *awards*, or some shit — but, as these “one thing leads to another” happenstances tend to go, her outraged resistance led to me bashing her on the head with the godforsaken thing, and then, she fell down, knocked out cold . . .

Jail was a trip. (My stuff was probably stolen by now — *fuck it!*) Immediately you become “the arrested,” a separate class from everyday folk, and the police hardly bother to insult you. Everyone's your “buddy” in there (“Hey, what're *you* in here for?”), acting like they're in *Goodfellas*, which of course, everyone's *seen* — or, at least, my fellow Caucasians were like that, especially. Overcompensating. (The racial mix in jail was, shall we say, hardly surprising, considering the “state of the world,” and all!)

So . . . everyone's treated like shit, and you become shit, and you become (if you're “me,” that is) surprised to find yourself doing six (6) months in prison for aggravated assault . . .

First day's the worst. You're simultaneously overwhelmed and simultaneously trying, desperately, despite yourself, to fit in — to figure out how to get by. Everyone has family visiting, but, since I've had a “nest” that's washed their hands of me years ago (“Good

riddance to you, too!" I had thought at the time, having outclassed all those dumbfucks *put together* in my life's accomplishment by age 22, just on the basis of where I went to *college*, I had no chance of that. No-one to talk to. Books were enticing, in principle, but depressing, in practice, since I couldn't envision any sort of ...

Getting gang-banged for the first time wasn't fun. (Apparently, I qualified — early on — as an "early mark.") Most horrifically, one of the guards glanced in at one point and incidentally remarked, "O.K., that's enough, time for 'lights out' soon," as though there were no other principle involved that "relatively" keeping the peace — a request that was dutifully honored, all activity suspended, whilst I, left there, similarly had to pull myself together and prepare for that night's "rest" . . .

"Doing time" I realized, means just that. Enforced as it is, everyone makes sure no-one does nothing but mark the days. Anyone trying to talk to me. couldn't, except through layer after layer of "Are ya hangin' in there?" interfaces — something I learned to lose my ability to despise, once the nights dragged on, and I got intermittently tossed around and turned inside and out, unable to sleep very restfully, but having to drag myself up when the noise — the *what?* — the noise came — the *noise?* — in the morning . . .

Placed outside, with a ticket for a bus and dressed in crappy clothes, I waited for it to come. Birds sang. The sunlight . . . um . . . was, *out* . . . it was . . .

The woman at the halfway house told me I had thirty (30) days to stay there, or something, and beamed at me. I was so grateful for her smile that I took special care in signing my name on the form she offered me, recalling the pseudo-calligraphy (???) signature style that was always the marvel of my teachers in high school. She beamed at me condescendingly — there was no other mode, considering the circumstances; I was like a pitied dog, or confused little boy in a "special school" — and I realized what I had done. My last piece of music-making ability. Burned out. For nothing. She put the form in a file cabinet, harshly built for aesthetics fitting only the most mercilessly functional, where it disappeared amongst

several others, signed by the mad, the drunkards, the violently criminal. I felt my heart sink, finally, away. I loomed hollow in myself.

I marched up the institutionally-indifferent stairs to the flatline-decorated door in the necessarily-non-disturbing room, and laid down, still dressed, on the non-unmade bed.

I tried to cry, but no sobs came.

THE END

