

Noel B. Searle, M.D.

The background of the cover is a stylized illustration of a city at night. On the left, there is a silhouette of a building with several arched windows, some of which are glowing with a yellow light. In the center, a large, bright full moon is visible against a dark blue, starry sky. On the right, a tall, ornate street lamp stands on a dark rectangular base, with its light glowing. In the lower-left foreground, a small black silhouette of a dog sits on a dark horizontal line, looking towards the right. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, blacks, and yellows.

The Visibly
Invisible Man
and Other Short
Stories

The Visibly Invisible Man

*and
Other Short Stories*

by

Noel B. Searle, M.D.



STRATEGIC BOOK GROUP

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Dedication

This collection of short stories is dedicated to all those individuals who, during the course of my life, have filled my memory bank with so many magical events that I could call upon, when needed, to add color and history to my stories. Friends, relatives, casual acquaintances, patients, are all, consciously or unconsciously, recorded here in one guise or another.

The most sincere dedication is, of course, to my wife who tolerated so many hours of neglect while I was at the word processor, or reaching over her shoulder to retrieve “Webster” to check the spelling or exact meaning of some long un-used word that seemed appropriate to the phrase or sentence I was writing.

To those who may come by these stories I say, enjoy!

Noel B. Searle, M.D.
May, 2010

Acknowledgments

These stories were the outgrowth of thoughts and imaginings I used to divert my mind from the fact that I was enclosed in a plastic tomb, during the course of an MRI examination. Being a long-time member of the medical staff of the hospital in which I was to have the examination, I did not want to be embarrassed by a claustrophobic reaction that would terminate the exam. As I was rolled into the tube, I closed my eyes for fear that I might see that “quilted satin” lining the lid.

During the forty-five minutes to an hour that I was in the tube, I took a lesson from Paul Newman’s character in the movie “The Prize”, and watched movies on the inside of my eyelids. By the time the study was over I had the outline for “The Visibly Invisible Man” and “The Marionette Man.”

I was encouraged by my nephew, Steven Nowlin of Nachodoches, Texas—a former English teacher and novelist—to complete the stories. I enjoyed the writing and, over time, I wrote the other stories in this anthology.

Several friends read some or most of the stories, and were enthusiastic in their recommendations that I submit the stories for

publication. Mrs. Dorothy Yarbrough and Mrs. June Motheral, both of Harlingen, Texas were the most encouraging. I am also indebted to Mrs. Irene Van Winkle, who read and edited the stories, apparently without being put into a long nap. Mr. Robert A. Murphy III, of Austin, Texas, did a very real service for me, by editing the snippets of French in one of the stories.

I must also say that these stories are all fictional. The characters, and times are fictitious, but two of the stories were inspired by incidents in the news. The tales, and the characters of those two stories are also fictitious. I suppose any writer calls upon his experiences, his culture, and his education to inspire and enliven his writings. Much of some of my stories came from long summers I spent on my grandfather's farm in Votaw, Texas. Not a familiar name? The hamlet may be found deep in the "Big Thicket National Forest."

For one of the stories I did borrow a character from a popular comic book of a prior generation. The character, who is nameless in the story, should be readily recognized from his appearance in movies, television, and his universality, as a champion of good over evil, in American life.

I hope that those of you who may read the stories will enjoy them as much as I enjoyed writing them.

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The Visibly Invisible Man

He rolled into town in a dilapidated, 20-year-old, 1980 Ford Sedan. It had once been powder blue but had oxidized to an unnamed shade of gray. The damaged left front fender was still that shade of gray matte that is usually referred to as primer. In this case it had been on long enough to assume a degree of permanence. The left front headlight was still un-repaired since the accident; a mute witness to the fact that many a state inspection station was more interested in the few bucks they could chisel out of someone, than they were in the state Motor Vehicle Safety Laws.

The town, Pembroke Mills, was named for the cotton mills that had once provided much of the income for the community. They closed many years ago because they could not compete with China, Bangladesh, and Guatemala for the domestic or the foreign market. The mills in turn had been named for the Pembroke family. Like the mills the family members had all left long ago. The last Pembroke had wasted his financial reserves and died penniless.

It was a pretty little Kentucky town nestled in a bend in the Ohio River and hard by Beaver Creek, a large tributary that had provided the power to turn the wheels of the textile mill and now generated electricity. The surrounding terrain was too rocky for commercial agriculture. A few hardy souls found enough flat land in the valleys to grow a little tobacco and others a little corn. Mixed in the right proportions with sugar and water the corn produced a fine illegal whisky. When the mountain laurel and wild flowers bloomed in the spring, and in the fall when the trees seemed to be on fire, it was a beautiful sight to behold.

In past years the steamboats stopped to off load the cotton bales and pick up finished goods. A few small furniture factories took advantage of the local hardwoods, and the ready availability of iron and steel had given birth to a manufacturing plant that made a very good “Franklin Stove” and another that made cast iron cookware. They had all closed one by one in the years since the mill closed. The principal occupation at the present time was unemployment and the people were very good at it.

The only viable source of revenue for the town, other than the Social Security and Retirement checks of the senior citizens, was a large military installation. Fort Rodney Reed was named for a local hero of the “French and Indian” War who, reportedly, took trophy scalps of both the French and the Indians he killed. Those exploits made him a fearsome adversary to the enemy and, with the stories cleaned up a bit, a romantic hero to his allies.

Each month the Federal Reserve deposited the payroll of the Fort in the local bank until it could be dispersed to the soldiers and employees of the fort. They, in turn, banked the money to live on and pay their debts until the eagle flew again the following month.

The driver of the ‘80 Ford made his way slowly down the cobbled streets, now looking down at a piece of paper on the seat beside him and then up to the house numbers and street signs along the way. Finally, reaching his destination, he pulled to the curb in front of a frame Victorian house that was the showplace of the block in its hey-day. Now the steps were rotting, the paint peeling and the screen door was loose on its hinges.

The windows were covered with the elegant lace curtains popular in another era. Being summer time, the windows and wooden doors were open. The musky odor that came from within was a combination of old carpets, old furniture, old furniture polish, years of tobacco smoke and an un-identifiable something simmering on the kitchen stove.

Two strides carried the man across the porch to the front door; his gloved hand muffled the knock. A second knock brought a late middle-aged lady from the back of the house.

Cheerfully she called, "Yoo-Hoo, I'm coming," but on reaching the door her mood changed abruptly. He could easily see the reflex actions that always occurred when he first encountered someone new and often when he had encountered someone on multiple occasions. The slight drop of the lower jaw and the short, quick, audible intake of breath, a reflex that extended back over millennia to prepare man, the primitive animal, to fight or flee.

'Oh my gawd what have we heah,' she thought, but managed an almost apologetic, "Yes?" She was a little reassured when with a practiced movement his right hand brought up a speaking device that he applied to the neck in the general area of his voice box.

"My name is Wellington Jones," he said in a voice that was a tinny monotone like the voice of a television robot. "I have come about the detached apartment you advertised for rent in the Courier. Is it still available?"

Turning half away from the man, she called, "Sonny, there's a gen... gentleman here about the apartment, would you come and show it to him please?" There must've been a plaintive note to her voice because as he approached the door, he replied, "Aw hell Ma, he ain't gonna...rape you". The break in his voice was reminiscent of the changing note of a passing train's whistle. "Pardon my French, sir," he continued, "I'll show you the place, it's out back."

"Don't apologize" said Jones, "It's rather the usual reaction that I get when I meet someone for the first time. Perhaps in time we shall all get used to our differences".

Sonny conducted him around the house to a small cottage. The driveway leading up to it, covered by an aluminum carport,

indicated that it had once been a garage. Two plastic lawn chairs positioned on the concrete gave a commanding view of the river and riverboat traffic. At night the sound of the horns and the chug of the huge diesel engines on passing boats was nostalgic to anyone who had ever worked on the river or been to sea.

In spite of the impression left by the odor from the big house the cottage was neat and clean. One large room contained the double bed, chest of drawers, a small desk and chair. In one corner there was a two-burner hot plate, toaster oven, electric coffee pot and sink. Beneath the counter was a small refrigerator, which he opened to be sure it was cooling. Off a short hall to the bathroom was a closet that contained the hot water heater as well as an iron pipe on which to hang clothes. The bathroom was small but contained the necessary toilet, lavatory and a galvanized metal shower. A shower curtain covered the opening. There was no door or curtain closing off the bathroom from the hall.

“How much?” asked the robotic voice.

“60 bucks a week,” said Sonny.

Jones wanted to tell him to stick it where the sun don’t shine but knew that before nightfall his presence and his “special circumstances” would be broadcast all over the county. Other renters would jack up the prices just to keep from renting to him. “You pay the utilities?” he asked.

“Yeah,” said Sonny, “but you do your own housekeeping. We change the linens once a week. Ma might do your laundry by the piece but it’s cheaper to go to the Washateria two blocks down the street. We get two weeks in advance.”

Jones handed him six twenty-dollar bills and reached out tentatively for the key.

“I’ll bring you a key,” said Sonny, “Ma has to approve the rental before I can hand it over. By the way, you don’t look like the type that would have wild parties but do keep it quiet if you play the TV or radio late at night. We don’t object to a little drinking, but don’t raise a ruckus, there’s more than one reason I don’t want the law coming around, if you get my drift.”

Jones replied, "I'm the soul of discretion, Awright if I park my jalopy in the driveway here?"

Walking away Sonny turned and said, "Sure, I'll be back with the key."

Jones drove his car around the corner and backed into the residual driveway. He unloaded his few belongings and hung his spare clothes in the closet. *'Guess I'd better go to the grocery store'* he thought, *'I wonder when the double stamp day is?'*

'Sonny came back promptly with the key and when Jones opened the door his curiosity could no longer be contained. "Pardon me for asking but do you wear that get up all the time?" he asked.

"Yep," answered Jones.

"Well, I mean, well you know what I mean, why?"

"Because," answered Jones, "I don't like to see grown men cry or scare women and children out of their wits". He closed the door and left Sonny standing at the threshold.

The military records which Jones meticulously kept in his old leather brief case, began in 1968 during his second tour in 'Nam. It contained all the shots that he had received, every dose of the clap he had been treated for, jungle rot [a malignant form of athlete's foot], colds and flu that had occurred in spite of the flu shots and the whole "itis" family: tonsillitis, pharyngitis, hepatitis, and prostatitis. All of the personal data had been expunged from his records or had been lost.

The first records of Wellington Jones, the person, began in Viet Nam; his platoon had been ambushed and cut off by the VC. When he called for artillery support the headquarters receiving the request diverted napalm bombers to disrupt the enemy attack. Unfortunately the napalm landed a few hundred yards short of the enemy and had taken out Lt. Jones' platoon. He had sustained horrible burns over much of his body; his survival was due to the heroic efforts of the MASH unit, quick evacuation to a hospital ship in the South China Sea, and the burn training that the military medical personnel had received. Later treatment in the Burn Center at Brooke Army Medical

Center was possible because of the knowledgeable treatment he had received in the war zone.

Over the next several years he had lived in VA facilities of one variety or another. Acute care facilities for the hundred-plus major or minor plastic surgery procedures he had endured and Physical Therapy units to maintain and improve the use of his mutilated body. It is no wonder that Jones had adopted the “get up”, as Sonny had described it, that he always wore. A black ski mask that came down over the Adams’s apple and base of the throat, long sleeve shirts, gloves that covered the cuff of the shirt sleeve, pants, and orthopedic appearing shoes.

His VA file indicated that he had been Medically Discharged from the U.S. Army with 100% Disability, something most of the people in Pembroke Mills would have envied. There was a long litany of medical appointments he’d had, and the date of his follow-up appointment. Periodically the VA re-examined him to see if he had healed sufficiently to down grade the percent disability he received.

Jones placed his luggage and a couple of cardboard boxes on the bed and began to unpack and put away his limited possessions. He had a wide array of medicines, all imprinted with VA logos, and several jars and tubes of ointments purchased over the counter. One jar, an udder cream, was purchased in a veterinary clinic. The briefcase was carefully hidden under his clothes in the bottom drawer of the chest, the first place any curious person would seek it out. It was no accident that the clasp was broken.

Jones then went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. While waiting for the water to warm up he doffed his clothing, he was as normal as you or I. His skin was as clear as a baby’s behind, not a blemish on it. Around his eyelids, the tip of his nose, and his mouth he carefully peeled off a film of flexible colodion he had applied to give a wrinkled, scarred appearance to the only parts of his body an observer might see. Then he slipped on a pair of latex gloves and stepped into the shower.

Following his shower he changed into government-issue underwear, opened one of the cardboard boxes and brought out an ultraviolet sun lamp that he regularly used to maintain his tan. After his tanning treatment he slipped between the sheets and rapidly fell asleep.

By 7:00 am he was dressed and out the door, careful to let Sonny and Mrs. Carmichael see him leaving and calling out, as loud as the robotic voice would permit, that he would be a while because he wanted to learn the town. Usually, he went for a brisk walk in the mornings, weather permitting, but today he strolled along eager to see and be seen. He did want to learn the various twist and turns so characteristic of streets in a river town, but also wanted the town people who had been alerted to his presence and his appearance to get used to seeing him on the streets so he would not seem such an oddity.

Most of all he wanted to afford the Carmichaels adequate time to thoroughly explore his room, as he knew they would, so they could spread the word through the town about his terrible war experiences and why he took such extreme measures to insure no one saw him in his natural state. He knew that by noon everyone in Pembroke Mills would be acquainted with the details of all his medical and surgical treatments.

It is easy to understand how the word spread so quickly during the days of “party line” telephone when everyone along the line could eaves- drop on a conversation. It is a little harder to comprehend the invisible network that spreads news so quickly in the modern era. Nonetheless by the time he reached the end of his walk and turned to start home the people he met on the street seemed to have changed already. They were not so stiff in their reaction to him and a few, especially the men who were of the age to be Viet Nam veterans, were almost solicitous.

One pretty little girl, who had heard his brief conversation with a passerby, quite fearlessly approached him and asked “are you a robot?”

“No” he replied.

“Well you sure do sound like one” she said and then skipped away down the street.

Jones gravitated to the VFW and the American Legion. In a few weeks he was a regular at the meeting hall voicing his support for the Viet Nam veterans, victims of an unpopular war. He rarely shared a meal with his comrades but did drink a few beers and bought his share as well. He was not a good card player so he became that most desirous of all opponents, a pigeon to be plucked.

Within six weeks Jones was on a first name basis with much of the town and likely could have been elected Mayor. A few of the more cautious Pembrokians were more difficult. Some even asked him why, with no relatives or interest in the town, he decided to move there. “Because it’s the cheapest place in the States to live,” he replied with a laugh. He didn’t seek female companionship. Most people did not question why.

One day in Fall, the weather report indicated that a cold front was on its way, not unexpected for that time of the year in the Ohio Valley. The temperatures were to dip down into the upper 30’s with highs in the low to mid 40’s. It was just the type of weather for which Wellington Jones was waiting. Late that night, he very carefully collected all his belongings, meticulously cleaned the bathroom lavatory bowl to be sure there was no saliva bearing tooth paste residue and sure to save his toothbrush so that he did not, inadvertently, leave it behind. After his shower and tanning session he scrubbed the shower clean. He pulled a Listerine mouthwash bottle from his toilet kit and poured the lye water it contained down the drain to dissolve any hair that might contain enough follicles from which to get DNA samples.

Like Sherlock Holmes, he was on his hands and knees on the floor of the apartment and with the aid of a hand lens, looked for anything else that he might have over looked. The pillowcase gave up a few hairs but he was not too concerned about the bedclothes because he knew Mrs. Carmichael would wash them as soon as he left.

He waited until the wee hours of the morning and silently loaded the old Ford with his belongings. He felt strangely calm considering

his plans for the immediate future. His sleep was filled with erotic dreams of almost forgotten lovers. Conquest on a different field he hoped was an omen of success in this new venture. It left him free of any tensions when he awoke the next day.

Wellington casually dressed in his usual attire and, in addition, put on a large, full cut overcoat and stepped out into the chilly morning. He spied Sonny at the wood stack getting some cordwood for the fireplace in the main house. "I thought I'd make a day trip up the river to Vanceburg and back, kind'a break the monotony and take in the fall foliage," said Jones.

"Well you'd better take a rake," replied Sonny, "most of the foliage is likely on the ground by this time. I was up there a day or two ago and there's some highway construction about the time you enter Lewis County."

Turning on his heels Jones said, "Thanks for the info," and casually walked away.

Jones settled behind the steering wheel, dutifully securing his seat belt, slipped the PRNDL into Drive and eased out of the driveway. At the corner he turned toward the highway to Vanceburg. Two blocks later he turned back right and then right again and headed back downtown. The bank opened at 10:00 a.m. and he wanted to get there before the morning rush began. He pulled to the curb right in front of the Bank. The old Ford ran quietly, and did not smoke, so passers by would not notice that he had left the engine running. He deposited a coin in the parking meter and strolled nonchalantly into the bank passed a yawning Security Guard.

The Guard managed a "Hi dee, Mr. Jones," but not as cheerfully as the employees' manual recommended..

Jones, nodding a reply, stepped across the lobby and into the president's office. The secretary to the president was at the copying machine gossiping with a girl friend about last night's date. Her hand movements suggested that she'd had a very good time.

Douglas Simpson was one of the youngest presidents of one of the oldest banks west of the Alleghenies. The bank had gone through several name changes and ownerships but, now known as the “OhioValley Bank of Kentucky”, had been in continuous operations since 1878. Oh, there had been that one glitch in 1930’s when FDR had declared a bank holiday; runs on banks had nearly wiped them out.

He was known to his closest friends, as Douglas Simpson, to all others he was Mr. Simpson, and he was everything that a small town Banker should be. He was of medium height and weight, with thinning blond hair. He had a small but definite beginning paunch, and was pale from too many hours in the office. Thick horn rimmed glasses told the knowledgeable observer that he was near sighted and probably also had astigmatism. He had an overbearing, superior attitude, but at the same time a huge chip on his shoulder because he had never made the varsity team in any sport and had never had a date with the homecoming queen from grade school through college. He let every one know that it was he who controlled their destiny, he who had the purse strings that could grant them the business or personal loan that they required, and by God, he was going to be shown the respect that his position deserved. Removed from behind the imposing desk, in the imposing office, he looked exactly like “Caspar Milquetoast”. He might have turned tail and run had one said “Boo” in a loud voice.

Jones seated himself in the chair across the desk from Douglas Simpson without being asked. “Mr. Simpson” he said, “ I am Wellington Jones a guest in the apartment of Mrs. Carmichael for the last several months. Perhaps you have heard of me?”

Peering over his glasses Douglas said, “Why yes indeed Mr. Jones, how may I help you?”

Jones measured his words carefully, “Mr. Simpson, do you know what I did for a living?”

Simpson, a quizzical appearance coming across his face said,“ I understand that you were in the Military.”

Jones replied in a soft, well controlled voice,“ Well, yes Mr. Simpson, as a matter of fact I was. I was a hired assassin, a paid

killer, a murderer for Uncle Sam. I cannot tell you how many people I assisted to their eternal reward during my career. A hundred would be a figure far too small, a thousand might stretch it a little. I learned a dozen different ways to kill a man. My preference is a clean, one- shot kill with a 38 caliber S&W pistol.”

Douglas Simpson paled a little. “Why are you telling me this Mr. Jones? It is hardly important if you are in financial straits and need a loan.”

Switching his speaking device from his right to his left hand, Jones said “Because Mr. Simpson at this very moment I have a silenced, 38 caliber, S&W aimed at your head. Unless you do exactly what I tell you, bits of your brain will punctuate every sentence of the loan application on the desk in front of you. Now kindly push your chair back from the alarm button beneath your desk.”

Bile rose up in the back of Simpson’s throat and he knew from whence came the expression, as bitter as gall. He turned pale. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead, and his armpits began to run wet- soiling his clean white shirt. For a moment he felt that the papers on his desk would be stained with his undigested breakfast if not his brains. His legs felt weak and he ardently hoped he would not pee in his pants. As any prudent man would do he pushed his chair away from the desk where there was no chance to activate the alarm.

They sat in silence for a few moments. When Jones thought Simpson had regained a measure of composure, he lied, “ Mr. Simpson, I have never had the pleasure of visiting your Bank. Now you and I are going to take a leisurely stroll through the facility and you will show me the points of interest in this charming old building”. In truth he had visited the bank un-disguised several times and could draw a floor plan of the facility in his sleep.

“We will,” he continued, “conclude our tour in the vault, which at this time should contain several hundred thousand dollars of Federal Reserve monies. Afterward you will escort me, as a welcomed new depositor, to the front door and to my car at the curb. You will be animated at all times during the tour, as if you were welcoming a prosperous client. If at any time you

should demonstrate any sign of duress I will make you dance in front of your employees before I blow your brains out.”

“You can’t get away with this,” said Simpson. “Even if I do as you say you will not get out of town before you are caught. There is no way you can disguise yourself with your physical defects. Besides the VA will report you any time, any place, that you seek further aid, and the FBI will nab you before you can fill your first prescription.”

Simpson heard a slight but audible click before Jones said, “I have just cocked the revolver, Simpson. I firmly believe that a man can get addicted to that sudden rush of adrenalin that occurs when you snuff out another’s life. It has been several years since I have felt that orgasmic rush. I suggest you lead me on the tour, your demeanor tells me you are not the type to be a martyr for justice.”

Simpson walked as slowly as an old man with arthritis. As he came around the desk he felt a bit faint and held on to the corner of the chair for a moment. He led Jones from the office, pausing long enough to say, “Mr. Jones wants a tour of the building, Irene, I won’t be a minute”.

As they walked toward the back of the building, like a couple of bosom buddies, they paused from time to time for Simpson to point out a particular feature. When they arrived at the vault it was a few minutes after 10. The timed lock on the vault had opened it at 10 sharp. No bank personnel or customers had yet had the need to visit it.

In the back of the vault the money was stacked in bound packages by denominations. It didn’t take a genius to know that 100 grand in twenties was five thousand bills, in fifties it was two thousand and in one hundred dollar bills it was only a thousand. Twenties would be easier to pass but to try to walk out of the bank with five thousand bills would make one waddle like a duck. Jones elected to take the money in one hundred dollar bills and deposit them offshore or fence them at a discounted rate locally.

Jones backed Simpson into a corner of the vault, opened his overcoat to reveal multiple small pockets and said, “All right,

Simpson, start filling the pockets with bound hundreds”. Simpson recoiled but caught his first glimpse of the pistol. He quickly decided that his life was worth more than the one hundred grand. He rationalized that he had to stay alive to help apprehend the thief. It took only a few minutes to fill the coat with the money.

The two walked out of the vault, through the lobby, and out to the curb, talking animatedly. They shook hands and Jones slipped in to the driver’s side of the car and slowly drove away. Simpson, left standing on the sidewalk, angry, disgusted, ashamed, guilty, but most of all nauseous and weak from the experience he had just had. He nearly vomited on the sidewalk before he summoned up the strength to call out to the guard, “call the police, God dammit. That son-of-a-bitch has just robbed us.”

Before Simpson or the Guard regained their composure the old Ford had rounded the corner. Neither thought to get the license number but with a description of the car, supplied by any sighted resident of Pembroke Mills, the Police would be able to find it almost immediately.

Jones turned right at the corner, left two blocks down that street, and almost immediately right again into an alley, then through a gate in a hurricane fence to a “U Store It” unit. Months before coming to Pembroke Mills he had rented two large units in the storage facility. One of those stood open, he carefully drove into it and got out of the car. The sound of multiple sirens pierced the morning air as he closed the door behind himself. The sirens continued through out the morning and into the afternoon as the vehicles of every police agency on both sides of the river hurried to set up roadblocks.

Safely away from prying eyes Jones removed his outer garments, except the gloves. He dressed in tweed slacks, a turtleneck “T” shirt, and a bright scarlet sweater. The orthopedic shoes had to go, replaced by a pair of elegant Italian loafers by the noted designer Lorenzo da Vinci. A tweed woolen cap completed his attire.

It took longer for him to transfer the money from the heavy old overcoat to a suitcase than it had to fill the overcoat in the bank. He

bundled all of his used clothing into the overcoat, opened the lid of a drum in the corner of the storage unit and carefully lowered the bundle into concentrated sulfuric acid. The acrid vapors, given off by the acid acting on the clothing, all but drove him out of the unit, but suppressing the cough it provoked he resealed the drum with the lid.

Suitcase in hand he opened the door and stepped out of the unit, a well tanned, handsome man dressed like a modern “Beau Brummel”.

He closed and locked the door with a rusted lock he had picked up in a flea market, walked across the driveway and unlocked a similarly aged lock on his second unit. Inside was a dark green, '95, Mercury Grand Marquis hooked up to a trickle charger. He disconnected the Mercury from the charger, deposited his luggage in the trunk, got behind the steering wheel and inserted the key. The engine turned over immediately and purred like a kitten. He slowly backed out, got out of the car, closed and locked the unit and got back into the Mercury. Only then did he take off the gloves he had worn, except for the tanning sessions, for the last 3 months.

Jones easily found the riverside highway and with it the nearest road-block. “What’s the problem officer? I’ve been hearing sirens for the last 10 miles”. The officer put his head into the passenger side of the vehicle, he looked carefully in the back seat and behind the front seat.

“Would you please open your trunk?” said the officer in a tone that was more a command than a request. He scanned the few innocent appearing bags and boxes and then said, “Nothing to concern you, Sir, you can be on your way.” Jones closed the trunk, got into the car and drove away.

William Trace was a 44-year-old Special Agent for the FBI. He was approaching retirement under the pistol-packing law that allowed personnel doing hazardous duty to retire earlier than clerical employees. He had never drawn his pistol except to clean it or at the practice range.

To say his career was less than distinguished was a gross understatement, rather it had been boring and unfulfilling. Some agents are marked for rapid advancement while still at Quantico; they demonstrate a special aptitude for the work or a practical application of their intelligence that sets them apart. A few have “political” connections that insure their advancement. There are those who luck in to a “high profile” case, are instrumental in bringing it to a swift conclusion, and are wise enough to keep quiet and let the Special Agent in Charge take the credit. They soon earn promotion.

Bill Trace was none of the above. He had never been involved in a high profile case and it was wearing on him now that retirement was near. To have spent his time in routine investigations, background checks, and chauffeuring or protecting visiting dignitaries was demoralizing. Many of the politicians were drunks who had to be assisted to bed and others had to have their lady friends secretly let down a freight elevator to avoid the prying eyes of reporters.

The one unforgettable period of his FBI career was the three years he had served as a liaison officer between the Bureau and the CIA stationed at Langley. He was fascinated by the “Dirty Tricks” section of the Agency and spent as much time as he could in their company, on the job and socially. He loved to hear them talk about the tricks they had pulled on our “Cold War” enemies and occasionally our friends. Trace soaked up all the information he could and retained it for future use in covert operations for the Bureau. Over and over it had been emphasized that even the dumbest crook could cover up the major elements of a crime. They always slipped up on some small detail that put the noose around their necks. Covert operatives had been drilled to pay attention to the most inconspicuous and minor points of their identity; to maximize their strong points and to hide or avoid using their weak ones. To give no one a clue that might lead to their identity.

Currently Trace was single after a second divorce that, fortunately, did not involve children. His first divorce left him

paying child support for two children he rarely saw, an eighteen-year old daughter and a sixteen-year old son. He drank too heavily most of the time, and had been sanctioned for it by the Justice Department. He laid the blame for all these problems on his disappointing career. To cap it all off he sustained an on-the-job back injury wrestling with a “Butchy” female who did not want to be cuffed. Now he was forced to take a three-month leave from his post in Louisville to recuperate from his disability. He felt like he had to do something to make his life meaningful.

Trace had grown up in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky, the son of a Baptist preacher. His childhood was equally as disappointing as his adult life; he never quite measured up to the expectations of his parents. They were particularly put out at his aspirations to be an FBI Agent and by his first marriage to a Catholic girl.

Trace went to see his back Doctor on Monday and was pronounced fit to return to full duty. All of the talk in the office was of the daring bank robbery in Pembroke Mills, the first in the one hundred twenty year history of the town. Trace was all ears, he had been following it on the news but was eager to hear the first hand information that the agency had on the case. He was about to get all of it he wanted and more.

George Wilkins, the Special Agent in Charge for Louisville, called him into his office a little later in the morning. “I understand that the doc says you are able to go full blast again,” said the S.A.I.C.

“Yes Sir, ready and willing”, replied Trace.

“Well I hope your time off didn’t turn your brain to mush. I want you down in Pembroke Mills today to take over the investigation of the bank robbery. Those country bumpkins down there can’t find their asses with both hands. They let the perp go without a single lead. A blind man ought to be able to find a severely scarred burn victim, driving a severely scarred old heap, in a New York minute. I don’t know if they have a motel in that burg or not, you may have to stay across the river in Portsmouth.”

“What have we got so far?” ask Trace

“Precious little,” said Wilkins. “The Chief of Police there is a seasoned officer named Oscar Johnson. I’ve met him at

some of the Agency seminars and thought he had a head on his shoulders. The County Sheriff is Wallace Lacey. I don't know him at all, and I don't know who the State Police have assigned to the case."

Trace said, "Would you ask Rena to call the motor pool and have them service a car for me. I'll leave mine in the parking garage and take the government car home to pick up my gear and be on my way from there. You'll get my daily reports"

It felt good, being back on the job again, and he felt supremely confident about this case. As he tooted along the highway his mind raced over the dozens of things he had to do to apprehend the perp. An hour out of Pembroke Mills he called the office of the Chief of Police on the radio and advised them he was coming down to assist them. He was told the Crime Scene Investigation unit from the State Police was there and had just about completed the examination of the bank. They would be at the Carmichael home when he arrived and then proceeded to give him directions to the house.

Upon arrival, Trace pulled around to the side of the large house when he saw all the official vehicles parked in front of the old garage. He got out of his government car, slipped on his coat, put on his hat, and headed to the site. Hats and coats were almost badges for the FBI who carried photo-Ids. "Who's in charge here?" he queried the first person he encountered.

The young man, a uniformed officer replied, "I can't release any information to the press, Buster. Check downtown with the Chief's office".

Trace answered his hostility with some of his own. "Do I look like a frigging reporter? I'm Special Agent Trace of the FBI. Now tell me, wise ass, who's the boss here?"

Somewhat more cordially the uniformed officer said, "Sorry 'bout that agent, I thought you guys wore those blue wind-breakers with the big 'FBI' in gold on the back. I saw a lot of those on the TV pictures from Waco" he replied sarcastically. "The boss here is that fat man with the Stetson hat and the pearl-handled revolvers on his hips. He might shoot his foot off if'n

he ever tried to draw them, but it sure does look good on election posters and television. His name is Oscar Johnson.”

Having grown up in east Kentucky, Trace should have known better than to have approached someone without showing his ID. They are almost paranoid when it comes to the Federal Government, going all the way back to the Whisky Rebellion against the Government under George Washington, and all the years since when the Revenue Agents have come to destroy the illegal stills.

He took out his FBI credentials and approached Oscar. “Pardon me, Chief, I’m Special Agent William Trace. The Special Agent in Charge of the Louisville office ask me to give you his regards and place myself and the Bureau at your disposal. What does it look like here?”

Johnson straightened himself in his chair, looked the Agent in the eye and said, “Hell boy, it looks like someone stuck up the bank downtown and got away scot free with a hunnert thousand dollars, that’s what it looks like. This old boy, Wellington Jones, if that’s what his name is, came into our little town and took our hearts in sympathy and then stuck it to us. If we ever catch that sumbitch, we might string him up before he has his day in court.”

Just then the lab tech from the State Crime Scene Investigation Unit came out of the apartment and approached the Chief. Damned if I’ve ever seen anything like this before Chief, this place has been sanitized. Did you say he was in the infantry in ‘Nam or in the C.I.A. We can’t find a damn thing in there, there’s not a cockroach egg, a rat dropping, a wisp of spider web, or more than a mite of dust. The only fingerprints are probably those of Mrs. Carmichael and her boy Sonny,” said Homer.

The other tech, Jack, chimed in “ He din’t even leave a stale fart to give a little character to the air in that place.”

Homer continued, “Did you ever know anybody to pour lye water down the drains to eat up the hair they may have left behind? If’n he’d come clean my place just once a month I wouldn’t ever have to get married agiun”

“Well, we’ll catch him sooner or later,” said the Chief. “The smartest sumbitch in the world slips up somewhere and we are gonna be there when he does.”

“Did you find anything in the car he was driving?” asked Trace.

“Sheeutt, that sucker’s missing too. He may’ve drove it into the river to throw us off the trail, ‘cause it sure didn’t go through any of the road blocks we set up. We are searching the riverbank on both sides to see if there is any place that looks like a car went in. If that turns up negative, we’ll get an Ultra-sound unit to probe the river. Just like they do for the Loch Ness monster. I’m a little concerned though that we might be opening Pandora’s box and find a lot of cars that we didn’t know was missing,”

About that time, Mrs. Carmichael came down from the big house waving a white sheet. “Have you men found out anything about my late tenant?” she asked.

“We just about found out that he don’t exist ‘Ma’ Carmichael. He don’t eat, he don’t bathe, he don’t go to the toilet. I wonder if’n he even breathes,” answered the Chief.

Mrs. Carmichael continued, “Well, now this is a little, well uh, a little embarrassing, but you know, well you remember all that stuff that was on the TV about the president leaving a stain on a beautiful blue dress of that young lady? You know, the one they did that ‘TNA’ identification on. Well, I think Mr. Jones left some of that stain on his sheets before he disappeared.”

“Ah, come off of it lady. Jones was a Viet Nam veteran and must be at least 65 years old now. He is not likely to have left any of ‘that’ kind of stain behind. Most likely it’s drainage from one of his burn scars and it may be contagious. I’d suggest you burn that sheet or at least boil it in hot soapy water. No telling what he’s a carrier of,” Trace was quick to reply.

“Well, I ain’t no educated woman, and I may not even be a smart woman, but I can tell you that my Sonny left me that kind of stain to clean up every week or so until he took up with that little tramp Maybelle Stewart from over yonder in Covington. A mother knows what it is.”

“Oh Ma, cut it out. Maybelle ain’t no tramp. Some man’s gonna be damn lucky to have a wife that likes to do it more’n he does,” said Sonny. “I hope she gets herself some old codger, with lots of money, who can’t get it up anymore. Maybelle would be better than Viagra for him”.

Sheriff Wallace Lacy had been at the fringe of all the discussion so far. Now he reached out and took the sheet from Mrs. Carmichael. “I agree with Agent Trace, ‘Ma’, you know what they say: ‘Old age is when a man has dry dreams and wet farts’. I’ll just take this sheet and get rid of it for you.”

“Old men don’t have nocturnal emissions,” said Trace.

Chief Johnson chuckled and added, “Old men have nocturnal omissions”.

Remembering election days to come, Sheriff Lacey said, “But we sure do appreciate your bringing this to our attention.”

Trace was receiving regular ass chewings from Louisville at the way the investigation was going, or rather not going. It wasn’t as if the leads were not fruitful, that they did not open up other leads, or that they ran into dead ends. It was that there were no leads. Jones had made himself invisible. Oscar Johnson put it this way. “That sucker could erase the scent of a skunk from offen a hound dog”.

The VA had been queried promptly of course, and the report came back, along with a discrete investigative report from the Sacramento Field Office, that Wellington Jones had indeed served his country as an infantry lieutenant during Viet Nam. He had sustained severe burns over much of his body, for which he was duly given the Purple Heart and 100% disability, which he had relinquished when he felt that he no longer needed it. It was not released to the public that perfectly good money was refused.

Lt. Jones had, with the government’s help of course, convalesced admirably from his severe wounds. He had

completed his education with the VA's help, and also obtained a law degree. Quite without the assistance of the government, he had been able to recapture his old personality and 'joie de vivre' that he had had before 'Nam. On his own, he had also wooed and won a beautiful wife, had three natural and three adopted children, all of whom he and his wife had nurtured into productive citizens and all of whom had earned their college degrees. They had been very active in children's rights and in the fight against child abuse. Wellington Jones, Esq. had been elected to the bench as a district judge in California. At the time of the bank robbery he was conducting a trial in Mariposa.

And so it went week after week and then month after month through a mild winter and into a lovely mountain spring. No leads, and no leads, and still more no leads. Somewhere there had to be something that could re-energize the investigation. Trace had long since been recalled to Louisville but continued to check back with the chief and the sheriff to see if anything at all had come forth. There was also no trace of the money that had been taken. The local fences had all been hauled in for questioning and the money launderers in all the large cities had been kept under close enough surveillance to make them all just a bit nervous.

It was early in the spring that Maria Steinhaus returned from her annual trip to Vienna for the winter Opera Season. Maria was the daughter of a Kentucky couple of very modest means; they owned the 'U-Store-It' warehouse. Her parents, both first generation Austrian-Americans, recognized her vocal gift and skimped, to give her voice lessons and later when she attended St. Olafs University. A scholarship at Julliard's and a chance to act as the 'stand in' for the prima donna of the New York Opera Co. gave her the break that she needed. She joined the Vienna Opera Co. and spent her winters in Europe, or on tour, for the opera season. When she got home she was just plain Mary to her friends and neighbors.

She and her parents were having lunch in the Cozy Kitchen Café, when Chief Johnson, Sheriff Lacey, and a good-looking stranger walked in and sat down at a table across the room. The stranger sat facing Mary. Was it his walk, his manner, or was it his facial appearance? There is no way of knowing but she had a vague recollection, then a more positive memory but still could not put her finger on it.

Finally she said, “Do I recall correctly that about a month before I left for Europe we had a rental of two units, for a year, come in by mail?”

Her Dad replied, “Lord, child, that’s been more’n a year ago now, you don’t expect us to remember every rental we have had in the last year do you.”

Maria countered, “Well not all the day to day and month to month rentals, but two units for a year just might ring some bells.”

After reflecting on it for a minute, her mother said, “You know, dear, I believe I took those rentals. It’s been almost a year now. They came in from Louisville but I don’t remember the name of the renter,” said her mother.

“I was working the office one day, at that time, when a man secured two of the units. He did not come into the office but I remember he drove off in an old Ford automobile. I guess it registered in my memory because he was so well dressed, even had a hat on, and the car did not seem appropriate for him,” said Mary.

Her father asked, “Did you ask him what his name was?”

“Ask him yourself,” replied Mary, “He’s having lunch with the Sheriff and Chief of Police.”

“Oh my, no!” said both parents, almost in unison. “That’s the FBI agent who is working on the bank robbery with the local authorities.”

“Well, that makes it even more curious because he is a dead ringer for the man I saw driving that beat up old Ford. You’d think the FBI could afford a better car, unless he was working undercover,” said Mary.

“Shush !” said her mother, “We’ve got to live in this town, so we cannot responsible be for any rumor starting,” she said, half

in German and half in English. She always had a way of getting the German and the English g'mixed when she was excited or nervous. The Germanic people have been conditioned over more than a few generations to be nervous when the police are about.

Lunch terminated abruptly with the subject of the police. The bill was paid and they left The parents trying to make themselves as small as possible and Mary, marching out like Isolde seeking Tristram. The parents hoped to let the matter die aborning but Mary, like a dog with a bone, would not let it go.

"Look," she said, "the year is almost over. We have two units that are secured and have questionable contents. I suggest that we look into them and see what's going on. We can apologize if everything is in order, even give him his money back if he raises too much cane, but it's our property and we don't need a search warrant to check contents if its in the public interest."

"Don't be too dramatic, sweetheart. It is probably nothing. Let's sleep on it and if you are still so certain tomorrow maybe we will look into it," said her father.

"I hope you don't mind if I ask Ben Hightower to keep a close watch on the units tonight. I'd hate to have someone slip one over on us while we screwed up our courage to do something," she said. Perhaps the parents were right. At any rate nothing at all happened that night. The old rusty locks were still on both units the next day when the Steinhaus family went to work.

Still it was there, like a festering sore. She had to know what was in those two units. The worst they could do was charge her with breaking and entering her own two units. It had to be done.

In the office, her father kept a tool specifically designed for breaking locks on units that had been abandoned. She took it when her Mom was not looking and slipped out the back door. She tossed the tool on her shoulder and walked nonchalantly down to the alley that contained the two units, 42 and 41 that had been rented by Mr. Henry James of Louisville. She first approached 42, deftly applied the pincers to the shackle and snapped it open. She removed the remnants of the lock and raised the door; it was empty! Then stepping across the alley, she applied the tool

to that lock. Her mouth was dry, her hands a bit wet and her heart was racing- what if this unit was empty too? Mary stepped back from the door. She agonized over the decision she had to make and finally she reached forward, bent over and grasp the handle of the door of the unit. With one strong, swift movement she lifted it to reveal... a 1980 Ford sedan that had once been powder blue but had oxidized to an unnamed shade of gray. The left front fender was still that shade of gray matte finish that is usually referred to as primer.

It took Oscar Johnson and Wallace Lacey little time to get to the unit. Both were salivating as they watched the tow truck haul the Ford away to the crime lab. The drum in the corner was a bit more of a problem since it contained sulfuric acid. They had to bring in the Chemical Neutralization Team. It was ultimately loaded onto a truck and carted off to the Crime Lab as well.

“When you send this stuff over to the state crime lab Oscar, tell the boys over there to keep it quiet for a while, please,” said Sheriff Lacey, “and don’t send anything off to the FBI lab quite yet.” Wallace Lacey was another of those Kentuckians who had a deep-seated distrust for the Federal Government, and being a veteran law enforcement officer, he had a particular distrust for the FBI. He had seen too many cases that were solved by the local authorities and turned over to the Bureau only to have the 5:00 news announce how the FBI had apprehended the wanted fugitive.

Lacey turned his attention to Mary, “ Now, little lady what was it that made you so all-fired certain that something was amiss with one or the other of these storage units?”

Maria answered, “Well, of course, I’ve a natural curiosity and the other day in the Cozy Kitchen the young man who was lunching with you and Chief Johnson just seemed to ring a bell in my mind, kind’a got my memory wheels turning. I recalled seeing a man very much like him, if it wasn’t him, driving away from the units in an old Ford automobile like the one everyone says the bank robber drove. It was after Mom and Dad had rented 41 and 42 out for a year. All of that seemed a bit unusual, the car didn’t fit the man, and the year long rental to someone from out of town.”

Sheriff Lacey, a proud smile on his face, said, "I'm sure glad you've got that deep curiosity. It's the first break we've had in this case in almost a year of hard investigation."

The motor vehicle section of the state police obtained the VIN from the car, registered with Ohio tags, and checked it through the Ohio Police. It proved to be owned by one Carl Swenson of Miami, Ohio, a ninety-seven year old resident of a nursing home, who hadn't driven anything for the past 10 years and couldn't even remember owning a car. A check back through his remaining family and friends revealed that he'd quit driving about 10 years before when he had an accident. The car was stored in the barn at his farm from that time until a year ago when a man bought it for junk and hauled it away. No one recalled the man's name or any other details. The vehicle itself was as free of evidence as the apartment had been.

Lacey, Johnson, and the Investigating Officer for the Kentucky State Police met in the Sheriff's office. "Looks like we've got a Bear by the tail fellows," said Johnson. "The only suspect we've got in this case is an FBI agent and him identified at a distance by an eye witness from a year ago."

The mood in the room was pretty glum. "What we gotta have is some sort of physical evidence, a single finger print or partial print, some of the money from the bank job, or something," said the state police officer. The money had still not surfaced at home or abroad.

"How about a little 'TNA', as Mrs. Carmichael called it, reckon that would be of any value," teased Lacey. "I've been sitting on that bed sheet she brought us last year because my inner self just wouldn't let a potential piece of evidence get away. It's been wrapped in plastic and kept in my office safe, under my seal, so the chain of evidence has been preserved."

Johnson said, "If we're gonna send that off to the FBI crime lab I suggest we cut it in two and send half to the State Lab as well." Then he continued thoughtfully, "If we get a report back from the crime lab that the sheet contained DNA, how are we ever gonna get a specimen from the only suspect we have to confirm or deny that he's the perp?"

The state police official answered, “We may not have to, many police, fire, and search and rescue units now require their personnel to have DNA on file for body identification in the event of a mass disaster.”

William Trace was a chronic insomniac, probably related to the many years of tension that he experienced every day on the job. Night after night he lay awake demeaning himself for his lackluster career and envying his more successful associates. As a baseball pitcher might endlessly re-play an unrealized “perfect game” in his head, or a running back a spectacular hundred yard run, Trace played a game in his head of a perfect crime. It began so insidiously that he could not remember exactly when it started, possibly as early as Quantico.

Those times when he was content with his life, career, and marriage, he could sleep soundly and not be disturbed by the plan. Those nights when he could not sleep it would surface. It began to surface with increasing frequency. Whenever his mind conjured up a new twist in the plan he became so excited that he would get up and brew a pot of coffee so that he could enjoy more fully the playing of the game. The plan soon took control of him and the crime in his mind was much more important than any of the minor investigations he had before him. His work began to suffer and the S.A.I.C. counseled him on occasion because his mind seemed to be elsewhere. He took comfort in the knowledge, from years in the bureau, that he would really have to screw up to be released before his pension date came.

Trace began to accumulate the equipment he would need to carry out the plan, all of it rather mundane and easily obtainable. Those items he could not acquire himself he could request from the Bureau and with their vast network they could obtain it with little or no question from the requisitioned agency. With a little alteration, most of it possible on his PC, he could create all the documents he needed. On his weekends off he scoured the small towns on both sides of the Ohio River for some of the items he needed and he carefully researched the place and most propitious time to carry out his plan. The only thing he did not

have was time to carry out the plan; for that he would have to create some plausible reason to have leave. He considered a self inflicted G.S.W. but knew it wouldn't pass the S.A.I.C., and then as embarrassing as it was, along came "Butchy" and the back injury. So it was that Trace got the leave he needed.

On a late summer day, a year after the robbery and just six months before his retirement, Trace looked up from his desk and was surprised to see Sheriff Lacey and Chief Johnson cross the room and enter the office of the Special Agent in Charge, George Wilkins. They were laying the evidence out before him when they heard a muffle explosion. No one ask the usual question, "What was that?" Each was gripped in his gut with a terrible, tight, nauseous feeling; each reluctantly but with alacrity was on his way to Trace's office. They found him dead of a gunshot wound to the head. Later, when they were clearing out his desk drawer, they found the key to a locker in the Louisville Train Station. The locker contained 100 thousand dollars. Along with the key was a note Trace typed on Federal Bureau of Investigation stationery, which read, "my preference is a clean, one-shot kill with a 38 caliber S&W pistol."

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