Dr Bloodmoney

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Extract

One

Early in the bright sun-yellowed morning, Stuart McConchie swept the sidewalk before Modern TV Sales & Service, hearing the cars along Shattuck Avenue and the secretaries hurrying on high heels to their offices, all the stirrings and fine smells of a new week, a new time in which a good salesman could accomplish things. He thought about a hot roll and coffee for his second breakfast, along about ten. He thought of customers whom he had talked to returning to buy, all of them perhaps today, his book of sales running over, like that cup in the Bible. As he swept he sang a song from a new Buddy Greco album and he thought too how it might feel to be famous, a world-famous great singer that everyone paid to see at such places as Harrah's in Reno or the fancy expensive clubs in Las Vegas which he had never seen but heard so much about.

He was twenty-six years old and he had driven, late on certain Friday nights, from Berkeley along the great ten-lane highway to Sacramento and across the Sierras to Reno, where one could gamble and find girls; he worked for Jim Fergesson, the owner of Modern TV, on a salary and commission basis, and being a good salesman he made plenty. And anyhow this was 1981 and business was not bad. Another good year, booming from the start, where America got bigger and stronger and everybody took more home.

'Morning, Stuart.' Nodding, the middle-aged jeweler from across Shattuck Avenue passed by. Mr Crody, on his way to his own little store.

All the stores, the offices, opening, now; it was after nine and even Doctor Stockstill, the psychiatrist and specialist in psychosomatic disorders, appeared, key in hand, to start up his high-paying enterprise in the glass-sided office building which the insurance company had built with a bit of its surplus money. Doctor Stockstill had parked his foreign car in the lot; he could afford to pay five dollars a day. And now came the tall, long-legged pretty secretary of Doctor Stockstill's, a head taller than he. And, sure enough as Stuart watched, leaning on his broom, the furtive first nut of the day sidled guiltily toward the psychiatrist's office.

It's a world of nuts, Stuart thought, watching. Psychiatrists make a lot. If I had to go to a psychiatrist I'd come and go by the back door. Nobody'd see me and jeer. He thought, Maybe some of them do; maybe Stockstill has a back door. For the sicker ones, or rather (he corrected his thought) the ones who don't want to make a spectacle out of themselves; I mean the ones who simply have a problem, for instance worry about the Police Action in Cuba, and who aren't nuts at all, just – concerned.

And he was concerned, because there was still a good chance that he might be called up for the Cuban War, which had now become bogged down in the mountains once more, despite the new little antipersonnel bombs that picked out the greasy gooks no matter how well dug in. He himself did not blame the president – it wasn't the president's fault that the Chinese had decided to honor their pact. It was just that hardly anyone came home from fighting the greasy gooks free of virus bone infections. A thirty-year-old combat veteran returned looking like some dried mummy left out of doors to hang for a century . . . and it was hard for Stuart McConchie to imagine himself picking up once more after that, selling stereo TV again, resuming his career in retail selling.

'Morning, Stu,' a girl's voice came, startling him. The small, dark-eyed waitress from Edy's candy store. 'Day dreaming so early?' She smiled as she passed on by along the sidewalk.

'Heck no,' he said, again sweeping vigorously.

Across the street the furtive patient of Doctor Stockstill's, a man black in color, black hair and eyes, light skin, wrapped tightly in a big overcoat itself the color of deep night, paused to light a cigarette and glance about. Stuart saw the man's hollow face, the staring eyes and the mouth, especially the mouth. It was drawn tight and yet the flesh hung slack, as if the pressure, the tension there, had long ago ground the teeth and the jaw away; the tension remained there in that unhappy face, and Stuart looked away.

Is that how it is? he wondered. To be crazy? Corroded away like that, as if devoured by . . . he did not know what by. Time or perhaps water; something slow but which never stopped. He had seen such deterioration before, in watching the psychiatrist's patients come and go, but never this bad, never this complete.

The phone rang from inside Modern TV, and Stuart turned to hurry toward it. When next he looked out onto the street the black-wrapped man had gone, and once more the day was regaining its brightness, its promise and smell of beauty. Stuart shivered, picked up his broom.

I know that man, he said to himself. I've seen his picture or he's come into the store. He's either a customer – an old one, maybe even a friend of Fergesson's – or he's an important celebrity.

Thoughtfully, he swept on.

To his new patient, Doctor Stockstill said, 'Cup of coffee? Or tea or Coke?' He read the little card which Miss Purcell

had placed on his desk, 'Mr Tree,' he said aloud. 'Any relation to the famous English literary family? Iris Tree, Max Beerbohm . . .'

In a heavily-accented voice Mr Tree said, 'That is not actually my name, you know.' He sounded irritable and impatient. 'It occurred to me as I talked to your girl.'

Doctor Stockstill glanced questioningly at his patient.

'I am world-famous,' Mr Tree said. 'I'm surprised you don't recognize me; you must be a recluse or worse.' He ran a hand shakily through his long black hair. 'There are thousands, even millions of people in the world, who hate me and would like to destroy me. So naturally I have to take steps; I have to give you a made-up name.' He cleared his throat and smoked rapidly at his cigarette; he held the cigarette European style, the burning end within, almost touching his palm.

Oh my god, Doctor Stockstill thought. This man, I do recognize him. This is Bruno Bluthgeld, the physicist. And he is right; a lot of people both here and in the East would like to get their hands on him because of his miscalculation back in 1972. Because of the terrible fall-out from the high-altitude blast which wasn't supposed to hurt anyone; Bluthgeld's figures *proved* it in advance.

'Do you want me to know who you are?' Doctor Stockstill asked. 'Or shall we accept you simply as "Mr Tree"? It's up to you; either way is satisfactory to me.'

'Let's simply get on,' Mr Tree grated.

'All right.' Doctor Stockstill made himself comfortable, scratched with his pen against the paper on his clipboard. 'Go ahead.'

'Does an inability to board an ordinary bus – you know, with perhaps a dozen persons unfamiliar to you – signify anything?' Mr Tree watched him intently.

'It might,' Stockstill said.

'I feel they're staring at me.'

'For any particular reason?'

'Because,' Mr Tree said, 'of the disfiguration of my face.'

Without an overt motion, Doctor Stockstill managed to glance up and scrutinize his patient. He saw this middle-aged man, heavy-set, with black hair, the stubble of a beard dark against his unusually white skin. He saw circles of fatigue and tension beneath the man's eyes, and the expression in the eyes, the despair. The physicist had bad skin and he needed a haircut, and his entire face was marred by the worry within him . . . but there was no 'disfiguration.' Except for the strain visible there, it was an ordinary face; it would not have attracted notice in a group.

'Do you see the blotches?' Mr Tree said hoarsely. He pointed at his cheeks, his jaw. 'The ugly marks that set me apart from everybody?'

'No,' Stockstill said, taking a chance and speaking directly.

'They're there,' Mr Tree said. 'They're on the inside of the skin, of course. But people notice them anyhow and stare. I can't ride on a bus or go into a restaurant or a theater; I can't go to the San Francisco opera or the ballet or the symphony orchestra or even a nightclub to watch one of those folk singers; if I do succeed in getting inside I have to leave almost at once because of the staring. And the remarks.'

'Tell me what they say.'

Mr Tree was silent.

'As you said yourself,' Stockstill said, 'you are world-famous – and isn't it natural for people to murmur when a world-famous personage comes in and seats himself among them? Hasn't this been true for years? And there is controversy about your work, as you pointed out . . . hostility and perhaps one hears disparaging remarks. But everyone in the public eye—'

'Not that,' Mr Tree broke in. 'I expect that; I write articles and appear on the TV, and I expect that; I know that. This – has to do with my private life. My most innermost thoughts.' He gazed at Stockstill and said, 'They read my thoughts and they tell me about my private personal life, in every detail. They have access to my brain.'

Paranoia sensitiva, Stockstill thought, although of course there have to be tests . . . the Rorschach in particular. It could be advanced insidious schizophrenia; these could be the final stages of a lifelong illness process. Or—

'Some people can see the blotches on my face and read my personal thoughts more accurately than others,' Mr Tree said. 'I've noted quite a spectrum in ability – some are barely aware, others seem to make an instantaneous Gestalt of my differences, my stigmata. For example, as I came up the sidewalk to your office, there was a Negro sweeping on the other side . . . he stopped work and concentrated on me, although of course he was too far away to jeer at me. Nevertheless, he saw. It's typical of lower-class people, I've noticed. More so than educated or cultured people.'

'I wonder why that is,' Stockstill said, making notes.

'Presumably, you would know, if you're competent at all. The woman who recommended you said you were exceptionally able.' Mr Tree eyed him, as if seeing no sign of ability as yet.

'I think I had better get a background history from you,' Stockstill said. 'I see that Bonny Keller recommended me. How is Bonny? I haven't seen her since last April or so . . . did her husband give up his job with that rural grammar school as he was talking about?'

'I did not come here to discuss George and Bonny Keller,' Mr Tree said. 'I am desperately pressed, Doctor. They may decide to complete their destruction of me any time now; this harassment has gone on for so long now that—' He broke off.

'Bonny thinks I'm ill, and I have great respect for her.' His tone was low, almost inaudible. 'So I said I'd come here, at least once.'

'Are the Kellers still living up in West Marin?'

Mr Tree nodded.

'I have a summer place up there,' Stockstill said. 'I'm a sailing buff; I like to get out on Tomales Bay every chance I get. Have you ever tried sailing?'

'No.'

'Tell me when you were born and where.'

Mr Tree said, 'In Budapest, in 1934.'

Doctor Stockstill, skillfully questioning, began to obtain in detail the life-history of his patient, fact by fact. It was essential for what he had to do: first diagnose and then, if possible, heal. Analysis and then therapy. A man known all over the world who had delusions that strangers were staring at him – how in this case could reality be sorted out from fantasy? What was the frame of reference which would distinguish them one from the other?

It would be so easy, Stockstill realized, to find pathology here. So easy – and so tempting. A man this hated . . . I share their opinion, he said to himself, the *they* that Bluthgeld – or rather Tree – talks about. After all, I'm part of society too, part of the civilization menaced by the grandiose, extravagant miscalculations of this man. It could have been – could someday be – my children blighted because this man had the arrogance to assume that he could not err.

But there was more to it than that. At the time, Stockstill had felt a twisted quality about the man; he had watched him being interviewed on TV, listened to him speak, read his fantastic anti-communist speeches – and come to the tentative conclusion that Bluthgeld had a profound hatred for people, deep and pervasive enough to make him want, on some

unconscious level, to err, to make him want to jeopardize the lives of millions.

No wonder that the Director of the FBI, Richard Nixon, had spoken out so vigorously against 'militant amateur anti-communists in high scientific circles.' Nixon had been alarmed, too, long before the tragic error of 1972. The elements of paranoia, with the delusions not only of reference but of grandeur, had been palpable; Nixon, a shrewd judge of men, had observed them, and so had many others.

And evidently they had been correct.

'I came to America,' Mr Tree was saying, 'in order to escape the Communist agents who wanted to murder me. They were after me even then . . . so of course were the Nazis. They were all after me.'

'I see,' Stockstill said, writing.

'They still are, but ultimately they will fail,' Mr Tree said hoarsely, lighting a new cigarette. 'For I have God on my side; He sees my need and often He has spoken to me, giving me the wisdom I need to survive my pursuers. I am at present at work on a new project, out at Livermore; the results of this will be definitive as regards our enemy.'

Our enemy, Stockstill thought. Who is our enemy . . . isn't it you, Mr Tree? Isn't it you sitting here rattling off your paranoid delusions? How did you ever get the high post that you hold? Who is responsible for giving you power over the lives of others – and letting you keep that power even after the fiasco of 1972? You – and they – are surely our enemies.

All our fears about you are confirmed; you are deranged, your presence here proves it. Or does it? Stockstill thought, No, it doesn't, and perhaps I should disqualify myself; perhaps it is unethical for me to try to deal with you. Considering the way I feel . . . I can't take a detached, disinterested position

regarding you; I can't be genuinely scientific, and hence my analysis, my diagnosis, may well prove faulty.

'Why are you looking at me like this?' Mr Tree was saying.

'Beg pardon?' Stockstill murmured.

'Are you repelled by my disfigurations?' Mr Tree said.

'No-no,' Stockstill said. 'It isn't that.'

'My thoughts, then? You were reading them and their disgusting character causes you to wish I had not consulted you?' Rising to his feet, Mr Tree moved abruptly toward the office door. 'Good day.'

'Wait.' Stockstill came after him. 'Let's get the biographical material concluded, at least; we've barely begun.'

Mr Tree, eyeing him, said presently, 'I have confidence in Bonny Keller; I know her political opinions . . . she is not a part of the international Communist conspiracy seeking to kill me at any opportunity.' He reseated himself, more composed, now. But his posture was one of wariness; he would not permit himself to relax a moment in Stockstill's presence, the psychiatrist knew. He would not open up, reveal himself candidly. He would continue to be suspicious – and perhaps rightly, Stockstill thought.

As he parked his car Jim Fergesson, the owner of Modern TV, saw his salesman Stuart McConchie leaning on his broom before the shop, not sweeping but merely daydreaming or whatever it was he did. Following McConchie's gaze he saw that the salesman was enjoying not the sight of some girl passing by or some unusual car – Stu liked girls and cars, and that was normal – but was instead looking in the direction of patients entering the office of the doctor across the street. That wasn't normal. And what business of McConchie's was it anyhow?

'Look,' Fergesson called as he walked rapidly toward the

entrance of his shop. 'You cut it out; someday maybe you'll be sick, and how'll you like some goof gawking at you when you try to seek medical help?'

'Hey,' Stuart answered, turning his head, 'I just saw some important guy go in there but I can't recall who.'

'Only a neurotic watches over other neurotics,' Fergesson said, and passed on into the store, to the register, which he opened and began to fill with change and bills for the day ahead.

Anyhow, Fergesson thought, wait'll you see what I hired for a TV repairman; you'll really have something to stare at.

'Listen, McConchie,' Fergesson said. 'You know that kid with no arms and legs that comes by on that cart? That phocomelus with just those dinky flippers whose mother took that drug back in the early '60s? The one that always hangs around because he wants to be a TV repairman?'

Stuart, standing with his broom, said, 'You hired him.'

'Yeah, yesterday while you were out selling.'

Presently McConchie said, 'It's bad for business.'

'Why? Nobody'll see him; he'll be downstairs in the repair department. Anyhow you have to give those people jobs; it isn't their fault they have no arms or legs, it's those Germans' fault.'

After a pause Stuart McConchie said, 'First you hire me, a Negro, and now a phoce. Well, I have to hand it to you, Fergesson; you're trying to do right.'

Feeling anger, Fergesson said, 'I not only try, I do; I'm not just daydreaming, like you. I'm a man who makes up his mind and acts.' He went to open the store safe. 'His name is Hoppy. He'll be in this morning. You ought to see him move stuff with his electronic hands; it's a marvel of modern science.'

'I've seen,' Stuart said.

'And it pains you.'

Gesturing, Stuart said, 'It's – unnatural.'

Fergesson glared at him. 'Listen, don't say anything along the lines of razzing to the kid; if I catch you or any of the other salesmen or anybody who works for me—'

'Okay,' Stuart muttered.

'You're bored,' Fergesson said, 'and boredom is bad because it means you're not exerting yourself fully; you're slacking off, and on my time. If you worked hard, you wouldn't have time to lean on that broom and poke fun at poor sick people going to the doctor. I forbid you to stand outside on the sidewalk ever again; if I catch you you're fired.'

'Oh Christ, how am I supposed to come and go and go eat? How do I get into the store in the first place? Through the wall?'

'You can come and go,' Fergesson decided, 'but you can't loiter,'

Glaring after him dolefully, Stuart McConchie protested, 'Aw cripes!'

Fergesson however paid no attention to his TV salesman; he began turning on displays and signs, preparing for the day ahead.