

A Doctor, a Lawyer, and a Priest

A STORY

BY DAVID SIPRESS



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THE COLONEL STEPPED out of his office and looked to his right, down the corridor to the narrow barred window at the end. Light snow was falling on the courtyard, and he caught a brief glimpse of the transport truck as it completed the tricky backup maneuver to the loading platform and ceased its persistent beeping. Patting his chest, he softly belched and savored the memory of an early lunch—imported Dorchester cheddar on brown bread with bits, washed down with a frothy pale ale. It had been the highlight of a very dull morning, which consisted of several long bouts of paperwork and a lackadaisical victory over a plodding opponent in a game of online chess.

He turned to his left. Ten prisoners sat on a long wooden bench. Above them, halfway up the cracked, peeling wall, was a row of numbers—one through ten—painted yellow and outlined in black. Below the numbers, directly behind the shaved heads of the prisoners, were ten, murky, egg-shaped stains—historical evidence of the thousands of perspiring skulls that had leaned against the cold concrete.

“Ah,” said the Colonel.

The guard, a large, bulky man with a small, round head, had been leaning against the wall across from the bench, banging away on his Game Player. He hustled the device into the pocket of his camouflage fatigues and grabbed his Kalashnikov.

The Colonel said, “Which one were you playing, Corporal Hovel?”

“Uh, *Battle Gods*, sir,” answered the guard.

“Very good,” said the Colonel. “Just the ticket for the modern warrior.” He looked at the prisoners. “As usual, they resemble one another, don’t you think, Hovel?”

“Pardon, Colonel?”

“Perhaps it is inevitable after so long in the same little cage, with so little opportunity for a hot bath.”

“Yes, Colonel,” replied the guard, dimly.

“Then you agree, Corporal Hovel. Excellent.”

The Colonel strode past the bench, turned sharply, and observed the prisoners from a vantage point directly above them. They had started out with the usual variety of body types; now all ten were more or less the same scrawny shape. They had arrived in the usual variety of outfits—gray business suits, blue work clothes, T-shirts and jeans—and now they were ten ragged scarecrows, wearing identical, pajama-style prison suits, with the exception of one or two who had been arrested after they had gone to bed and had been allowed, in a cost-saving measure, to keep their own pajamas.

What mainly rendered them indistinguishable from one another was that all ten were the same shade of brown—a warm, roast-potato hue—the color of the ancient dust that coated every inch of every surface of every cell in this former nineteenth-century fortress now known as Internment Center III. It was brown faces, brown hands, brown bare feet, brown pajamas—right down the bench. The only variation from this scheme was the top of each shaved head, tinted blue by the dull glow of the fluorescent fixture that dangled above them.

The Colonel addressed them. “Good afternoon, gentlemen. We are here today to discuss your future plans. You have been with us for a while now, and our meeting this afternoon is about deciding who will be permitted to return home and who will remain with us going forward—at another location, of course. I don’t need to tell you that things downstairs are getting a bit congested. This is the normal process—we like to have a bit of turnover when we can manage it. So I’m going to have a chat with each of you—no pressure—and we will see what we will see. Why don’t we begin at the beginning. Number One?”

The prisoner seated closest to the Colonel turned and glanced up at the number behind him. “Yes, Excellency,” he said, softly.

“Good afternoon, Number One,” said the Colonel. “If you don’t mind, I’d like you to tell us a little about yourself, what you did before you joined us here.”

“Did?” asked the prisoner, raising his head. “I’m not sure I understand, Excellency.”

This prisoner had once been a plump, elegant fellow, with a full-moon face that rested on a cushion of multiple chins. He’d sported an unruly mane of white hair that fell in a wave across his forehead. Now the mane was gone; the skin on his deflated face and throat hung in loose folds. A slight twitch electrified his left cheek. All that remained intact from his former visage was a pair of fierce, unkempt eyebrows, one of which lifted tentatively as he allowed himself to gaze, for the first time, directly into the chiseled countenance of the Colonel.

“What you *did*,” reiterated the Colonel. “Your work.”

“Oh, I see. Thank you for asking, Excellency. I was a teacher—a professor—at the university.”

“Ah, a professor—very good. Of what?”

“Again, thank you. I was a professor of literature, Excellency—French literature—poetry, in particular. The Symbolists—”

“I think I get the picture, Number One,” said the Colonel.

“Baudelaire, of course, first and foremost, and Mallarmé, Verlaine, and—”

“As I said—”

“Yes, Excellency, but if you would indulge me for one more minute.” The prisoner leaned forward and clasped his hands. “I am so very glad you raised the issue of my field of study. I have been looking forward to discussing it with someone in authority for quite a while because it is the key to understanding my situation. You see, I was given permission to travel abroad to complete the research for my book, *Charles Baudelaire, Reluctant Modernist*. It is a study of the poet’s ambivalence toward the very modernism his work so profoundly embodies. Well, while I was out of the country, I was denounced by a colleague with whom I have had a fractious relationship for many years. He claimed that I was meeting with dissident émigré groups while I was abroad—which is absurd, and I can get into that in a moment, if you would like—but in any case, I was arrested upon my return. And not long after I began hearing rumors through the grapevine that this colleague was about to publish a book on the *very same topic*. And now I’ve been told that he has apparently *stolen my title!* So, you see, Excellency, it is apparent that . . .”

While he was saying all this, the prisoner’s eyes were once again directed downward; he feared that one glimpse of the Colonel’s face would stop him in his tracks. Now he took a peek. The Colonel was smiling pleasantly and nodding.

He went on. “It is apparent that—”

“Yes,” interrupted the Colonel, “that is a very interesting story, Number One, but irrelevant to the task at hand. Today we are concerned with something altogether different. For our purposes, all that you have just told us is water under the bridge. Understood, Number One?”

“Yes,” replied the prisoner. “Water under the bridge. Perhaps at a later time—”

“So why don’t we move our conversation in a different and more pleasant direction? While you were speaking I was thinking that I would like to ask you a favor.” He was still smiling at the prisoner, who now smiled cautiously back. “I was hoping you would be willing to perform something for me this morning.”

The prisoner’s smile receded until it was just an open mouth. “Perform, Excellency?”

“A recitation. I would love to hear a poem this morning. I am a great admirer of poetry. Select something soothing, something . . .” he paused, hands on hips, and searched the ceiling for the exact right word. “Something *musical*—that’s it! Poetry is at its best when it has music, don’t you agree?”

The prisoner blinked and sat up a little taller. “Why, yes, I certainly *do*, Excellency. *Wholeheartedly*.”

“Then we are on the same page, Number One.”

“We most certainly *are*,” replied the prisoner. He threw back his head, tossing a phantom lock of hair, crossed his arms, and inhaled noisily, as he had always done when warming to a topic that stimulated the sweet, fleshy core of his most cherished opinions. “Your sentiments mirror my own,” he said. “Tragically, we have lost the music in our poetry. Today it is all, ‘Oh, poor me,’ and, ‘My father touched my—’”

“Yes, I’m sure, Number One. But let’s get on with it. The poem, if you don’t mind.”

“Yes, of course, Excellency. I’ll get on with it. A poem. Something musical.”

The prisoner closed his eyes. The gears were rusty. Repeated episodes of verbal abuse in his first months of incarceration, as well as one or two beatings in the crowded dining hall, had finally convinced him that there were sides of himself that were best kept under wraps in his current situation. Now, as he leaned back and rested his head comfortably against the concrete, a soft, contemplative smile crossed his lips—it was no small pleasure, after all this time, to oil those rusty gears.

“I almost have it,” he murmured, “I am thinking . . . what to choose? I think, yes, I believe I am ready.” Without opening his eyes, he nodded and inhaled deeply once again, entirely through his nostrils this time, like a man who has just sat down on the bench in his garden on a lovely spring morning. After the subsequent exhalation, he began:

“*Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine / Et nos amours—*”

“One moment, one moment,” interrupted the Colonel, shaking his head, “but the poem is in French.”

Now the prisoner’s eyes slowly opened. “Why, yes, Excellency, as I explained, I am, was, a professor of French literature, and I thought—”

“All well and good, but I do not speak French.”

“But—”

“How can I enjoy a poem, no matter how musical, when it is in a language I do not understand?”

The prisoner looked to his left, seeking assistance from his fellow prisoners, but none was forthcoming. All eyes were fastened on the floor.

“Would it not have been polite,” continued the Colonel, “to inquire whether or not I knew French?”

“Yes, of course. Yes. Please forgive me. The fact is, Excellency, my selection of this particular piece by Apollinaire was inspired by you, by your use of the phrase *water under the bridge*, as in *sous le pont*, and I thought that since this poem is quite famous . . .” He swallowed. “If you would like, I would be more than happy to translate the verses for you.”

“Are you trying to mock me, Number One—mock my ignorance?”

“No, of course not.”

“I think you are. I asked you for a soothing recitation, a pleasant interlude. Instead, I find myself thoroughly agitated.”

“I am deeply sorry, Excellency. If you will give me another opportunity—”

“Very disappointing,” the Colonel said, softly, “very, very disappointing.” He leaned over and began poking the top of the prisoner’s head with his forefinger, like a chef testing it for doneness.

The prisoner recoiled as best he could into his neck and shoulders. The pokes got harder, and the final one, more of a jab, elicited a short, high-pitched cry that caused several prisoners on the bench to flinch.

The Colonel said, “I’m afraid, Number One—”

“No,” uttered the prisoner. Now he was tugging at the crazed, tangled hairs of his eyebrows. “Please, no.”

“Corporal Hovel.”

The guard grabbed the prisoner by the arm. He yanked him to his feet and proceeded to shove him down the corridor until they reached the corrugated metal gate to the loading platform. He whistled sharply, and another guard appeared and

unlocked and raised the gate. A blast of cold air barreled down the corridor. They hauled the prisoner across the platform and into the back of the truck. The second guard lowered the gate from the outside, and Corporal Hovel shuffled back up the corridor, trailing his Kalashnikov and brushing brown dust from the front of his fatigues.

“NUMBER TWO,” SAID the Colonel.

This prisoner, wearing what were his own formerly white pajamas with purple piping, was the oldest and scrawniest of the lot. He raised himself from the bench in segments, like a marionette, and stood angled forward at the waist, arms dangling at his sides, gazing with an expression of dazed incredulity at his feet, which were crooked and bony and appeared too big for the rest of him. In fact, much of him—ears, nose, eyes, gangly hands with fingers like knotted limbs—appeared too big for the rest of him, perhaps because the rest of him had so completely shrunk.

“Number Two, how are you this morning?” inquired the Colonel.

“Fine,” mumbled the prisoner. Then he coughed and repeated a bit more forcefully, “Fine, Your Honor.” For the past few minutes, he had been deciding on a replacement salutation for the just-proven-to-be-ineffective *Excellency*. He was well versed in flattering forms of address and understood their usefulness. After rejecting several other possibilities, he had chosen *Your Honor* because *honor*, doubling as a verb, expressed not only the superior status of the Colonel but also the prisoner’s great regard for that status.

“So, Number Two,” said the Colonel, smiling and nodding, “what was your line of work?”

“I was a salesman, Your Honor.”

“A salesman—why, that’s marvelous!” The Colonel clapped his hands. “My mood is improving already. Isn’t that marvelous, Hovel?”

The guard, still removing specks of dust from his trousers, straightened up and said, “Yes, Colonel, very marvelous.”

“Once again you agree with me, Hovel. I am grateful for the validation.”

“You’re welcome, Colonel.”

“Well, well,” said the Colonel, turning back to the prisoner, “a salesman. You must sell me something.”

The prisoner raised his head. He said softly, “But I have nothing to sell, Your Honor.”

“Nonsense, Number Two.”

“But as you can see—”

“Think, man! Seize the moment! I probably shouldn’t be telling you this—putting myself at a disadvantage here—but I’m definitely in a buying mood today.”

The prisoner looked up into the fluorescent light and sighed thoughtfully. Next, he looked down and scanned himself from top to bottom. He said, “There are, of course, my clothes. But—”

“But what?”

“They are such miserable rags.”

“Is that the way to make a sale? I’m not a salesman myself, but I would imagine that the first rule of salesmanship is never, *never* speak disparagingly of the merchandise in front of the customer. Isn’t that obvious, Corporal Hovel?”

“Obvious, to me, sir,” muttered the guard, this time without glancing up at all. He was busy playing with a toy that he always carried in the shirt pocket of his fatigues—a tiny magnetized coffin with a petite removable metal skeleton that flew zip-zip back into the coffin from several inches away, landing snugly with a satisfying *click!*

“Well, yes, Your Honor,” agreed the prisoner, “that is very true. Exactly right. I don’t know how I could have been so foolish.”

“A bit rusty,” suggested the Colonel. “It’s understandable. But let’s get on with it. The fact is, I’m eager to spend a little money this morning . . . the *devil!*” he snapped his fingers. “There I go *again!* I should learn to keep my mouth shut, shouldn’t I, Number Two?”

The prisoner mumbled something.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, Your Honor. May I turn around for a moment?”

“Of course.”

The prisoner turned and faced the wall behind the bench. He shut his eyes and began to shake his head vigorously from side to side, like a swimmer attempting to unclog his ears, only in his case, it was his brain he was attempting to unclog, trying to shake it free from the thoughts that had congested it for so long—thoughts of his wife, his children, a glass of beer, a game of bridge, a roast chicken, a bar of chocolate, his two cats, the good-for-nothing brother whose shenanigans had gotten him into this situation in the first place, his own bed. Next, he took several deep breaths, uttered what sounded like words of encouragement to himself, then took more deep breaths, then uttered more words of encouragement, then commenced to bend and unbend his knees while simultaneously flapping his elbows, slowly at first, then faster and harder, until clouds of brown dust shot out from his barely perceptible

torso. The words of encouragement turned into loud, invigorating grunts, and he began twirling his arms in the air like propellers until they were a blur. The other prisoners, averting their eyes, sat grim and motionless before this driving dynamo. Corporal Hovel, who had been testing the outer limits of his toy coffin's magnetic powers, looked up and shouted, "Fly away, little birdie! Fly away!" at which point the prisoner abruptly ceased his gyrations. Dropping his arms, he stood still, skinny shoulders rising and falling.

Next, like the comic impressionist who begins by turning his back to the audience and then slowly turns back again, having transformed himself into a famous politician or a movie star, the prisoner now turned around to face the Colonel, having transformed himself, not into a well-known celebrity but into *himself*—into the man he once had been.

"Ah," said the Colonel, "I see it now—the old *get up and go*, the old *stroke 'em till they spread*, the old *give 'em the spiel and close the deal*. Excellent, Number Two!"

The prisoner, his posture now surprisingly sturdy and erect, cleared his throat and said, "If I may be so bold, Your Honor, I was hoping I might take up a minute of your valuable time?" His voice was confident, his eyes bright, booted up like computer monitors.

The Colonel glanced at his watch and frowned. "Well, if it's only a minute—a lot on my plate this afternoon."

"Thank you, Your Honor. By the way, is that an Omega Seamaster 300 on your wrist?"

"Yes, it is."

"Excellent timepiece—durable, reliable, manly, yet elegant."

"Thank you, Number Two. Now, let's get on with it. I'm a busy man."

"Yes, I can see that. I can see that you are a busy man. And *that*, Your Honor, is precisely why I would like to talk to you this morning about a particular topic of crucial importance to Your Honor."

"What topic would that be?"

"That would be the topic of . . . *sleep*."

Several of the prisoners glanced up. The Colonel blinked. He too had been snared by this artful misdirection.

"Sleep, Number Two?"

"Yes, Your Honor, that is what I said. *Sleep*. We both know that a man such as yourself—a man with responsibilities so numerous and of such importance that the rest of us cannot even begin to imagine—such a man cannot afford to toss and

turn all night, thereby depleting the precious reserves of energy that he so urgently requires to carry out the many difficult tasks he faces during the course of his demanding, often exhausting, workday.”

“True, true,” agreed the Colonel.

“Such a man deserves to be absolutely comfortable when he climbs into bed. He should not be subjected to even the slightest irritation or distraction. This is the reason why the garments that such a man selects for his nightly rest, the garments in which he will pass this essential respite from the rigors and challenges of the day, are so very, *very* crucial.

“Ah.”

“Your Honor,” said the prisoner. Leaning forward, he raised one hand discreetly to his mouth and lowered his voice. “May I approach? Some of what we are about to discuss could verge on the personal and confidential, and—please forgive my presumption—but I suspect Your Honor would prefer that we speak of these matters *sotto voce*.”

“By all means, Number Two,” replied the Colonel, a look of profound seriousness on his face.

The prisoner moved closer. “Again, if I may be so presumptuous,” he said, his voice just above a whisper, “might I inquire what type of garments Your Honor wears when sleeping?”

The Colonel drew back his head. “Why, I sleep in my bare skin. Is that a mistake?”

“No!” replied the prisoner, holding up his hands. “No, of course not. Skin is an excellent choice. But even a man such as yourself, with skin such as your own, skin toughened by war and by all other manner of adversity, can fall prey to the stray crumb or persistent grain of sand that grates disagreeably against bare, unguarded flesh in the night.”

“Ah.”

“And then there are the icy breezes that can chill a man, *any* man, who inadvertently allows the bedclothes to slip from his naked shoulders. I ask you to consider the fate of the mighty Alexander the Great, a soldier much like yourself, Your Honor. Although the cause of his death is much debated by historians, most believe that he was felled by a simple chill in the night, while he was asleep, and the resulting fever—”

“Hmm,” interrupted the Colonel. “I seem to recall reading somewhere that his death was brought on by a congenital scoliotic disorder which caused an ascending spinal infection—much like a spondylitis, or meningitis.”

“Pardon me, Your Honor. I was not aware of that particular competing theory. Your Honor clearly—”

“Whatever, Number Two.” The Colonel impatiently twirled one hand in the air.

“Yes, Your Honor, I will go on. There is another crucial point I would like to raise with you, if I may. A man such as yourself, being of such obvious capacities of a certain nature, will often—*very* often, I imagine—share his bed with another. In this day and age, such a man needs protection, not just for that one particular area that immediately leaps to mind but for his *entire* body—protection from the infectious microbes that his lovely and desirable nocturnal companions might unknowingly transport to his bed. Skin, Your Honor, is no protection from insidious biological interlopers.”

The two men had been standing a foot apart, conferring like colleagues. Now the Colonel took a step back and exclaimed, “I see, Number Two—now I *am* worried!”

The prisoner again raised his palms. “No need,” he assured the Colonel.

“Is there anything I can do? Can you suggest a solution?”

“Yes, Your Honor, I can.” He spread his arms. “*Here* is your solution.”

“Yes?”

“Pajamas!”

“Pajamas!” repeated the Colonel.

“Yes, *pajamas*. One hundred percent Egyptian-cotton pajamas—so soft it is as if you are wearing a cloud, yet strong enough to protect the skin from any and all threats to Your Honor’s health and well-being.”

“Wonderful!” exclaimed the Colonel. “Although that particular pair looks a bit—”

“Dirty? Old? Don’t be fooled, Your Honor—not that a man of your intelligence could ever be fooled. But the fact is, a man such as yourself is far too busy with vital military matters and urgent affairs of state to be concerned with the trivial vagaries of fashion. However, there is no getting around the fact that one is often judged, rightly or wrongly, on the basis of such trivial matters. That is why men such as myself, unfettered as we are by the great responsibilities borne by men such as *yourself*, make a study of these petty aspects of human existence. And, based on my long expertise in this insignificant realm, there is one thing I can assure Your Honor of.”

Once again, he cleared his throat. Next, reaching down and holding out the shredded flaps that were the corners of his pajama tops, he declared, “When you are wearing *these* garments, Your Honor, you will never, *never* have to fear that you are out of step with the current trends. The fact is, Your Honor . . . this *is* the current trend.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and there is even a name for this chic and up-to-the-minute style. It is called *distressed!*”

“Distressed,” reiterated the Colonel. “Amazing! Who would have thought? We get so isolated from the ways of the wider world in this place. I feel completely out of step. Were any of the rest of you aware of this?”

It took the other prisoners a moment to realize that the Colonel was addressing them. One or two mumbled something. The rest just shuffled their bare feet.

“Corporal Hovel!”

The guard looked up, closing his fist around the coffin toy.

“Corporal Hovel, were *you* aware of any of this?”

“Yes. I mean, aware of what, Colonel? About his pajamas and such? Was he saying he’s depressed about his pajamas?”

The Colonel stared at him for a couple of seconds before turning back to the prisoner. “I have a question,” he said. “I assume that this particular pair of pajamas is what they call one of a kind?”

“Indeed it is, Your Honor. Thank you. I neglected to point that out.”

“Well then, here is my concern. If these pajamas are as stylish as you say, and also one of a kind, I imagine that they must be terribly costly. I am wondering now if I can afford them.”

“Afford them?” repeated the prisoner, a look of stupefaction on his face. “Afford them? I assure you that you can afford them, Your Honor.” He grinned and stepped forward to once again speak to his customer in confidence. “Because for you there is no price. For you these garments are free of charge.”

“You mean you wish to give them to me?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“For nothing?”

“For nothing.”

“But what about the sale?”

“No sale, Your Honor—a gift.”

The Colonel shook his head and clucked his tongue. “And you call yourself a salesman, Number Two. What kind of salesman gives away his merchandise to a customer who has expressed a willingness to pay?”

“Your Honor—”

“Is that any way to run a business, Number Two?”

“Your Honor, I was only trying—”

“Trying what?”

“Trying to . . .” The prisoner’s voice trailed off. He nodded, and his body slumped like an overcoat pulled from its hanger. He was well aware that he wasn’t as clever as the next man, but he was clever enough to recognize that these were the opening notes of a tune he had heard before.

“Furthermore,” the Colonel continued, raising his voice, “you have the temerity to stand there in those disgusting rags and lecture me about style! Let me ask you this, Number Two.” The Colonel placed his hands on his hips and stepped his legs a foot apart. Raising his chin, he said, “Do I—and feel free to chime in, the rest of you—do I really look like I need to take sartorial advice from *you*?”

Everyone’s eyes were on him. One and all observed the black silk ascot, expertly knotted and tucked into the blazing white collar with the twin embroidered silver daggers; the epaulets with alternating red and gold bands laid across the majestic span of his broad, erect shoulders; the impeccable, tapered, forest green jacket, bristling with gold buttons and campaign ribbons; the razor-sharp, crimson-striped breeches; the gleaming, black Austrian riding boots—and took his point.

“No need to respond,” said the Colonel. He brought his legs together. “Here is my problem, Number Two. I have to ask myself, what kind of salesman thumbs his nose at a profit? What kind of salesman refuses to grow his business? I can only think of a single answer—a *fake* salesman—one who does not believe in our capitalist system. One who does not believe in the redemptive power of the market. Perhaps a left-wing follower of certain outlawed and outmoded ideologies. I am beginning to suspect that you are a very dangerous man, Number Two—a saboteur of free enterprise in our midst.”

The prisoner nodded again.

“And, in light of this, I am sure you can understand why I simply cannot take the risk of allowing you to roam freely among the general population, doing your worst. Corporal Hovel!”

The guard stepped forward, and the prisoner collapsed, almost gratefully, into his burly, outstretched arms.

“TWO DOWN, EIGHT to go!” announced Corporal Hovel, when he returned from the loading platform.

Prisoner Number Three quickly got to his feet.

“Very good, Number Three,” said the Colonel. “Excellent enthusiasm and initiative.”

This prisoner was a tall man in his late thirties with slightly stooped shoulders and a long, handsome, if somewhat gloomy, face. Because he had been shaving his head since the age of twenty (he had gone bald at nineteen) and had always been thin, his current appearance was not terribly different from what it always had been.

The actual reason that he had popped up so promptly was that he was having a spot of bother with his stomach, and he worried that if he remained seated any longer, he was going to have an accident. This state of affairs had been set in motion by the professor's *yelp* at the end of the head poking, but what had really gotten the ball rolling had been the sight of the poor salesman being carried down the corridor, foreshadowing, the prisoner imagined, his own inevitable journey to the loading dock and into the truck, and from there? Well, there were rumors, of course. . . . It didn't bear thinking about, so he tried to put it out of his mind, but his stomach picked up the slack.

"Have you been preparing for your interview?" the Colonel asked.

"In a manner of speaking," the prisoner replied.

"In a manner of speaking," echoed the Colonel, smiling thinly.

The prisoner had not looked directly at the Colonel's face until this moment. It was more or less as he had expected—tanned and angular, with the *de rigueur* military brush cut, and a salt-and-pepper goatee. There were sharp dents under both cheekbones, and a single crease in the smooth, flat forehead—long and V-shaped, like a seabird in flight. What was unexpected was the incongruous look of benevolence in the clear, deep-set eyes.

"Have we met before?" asked the Colonel.

"I don't believe so, sir."

"Where are you from?"

"From the capital—North Park District." The prisoner's mind flashed back to his apartment, a large loft space with high ceilings and tall windows, filled with the things he loved.

"North Park District. Is that right? Tell me, Number Three, do you play football?"

"Football? No. Why?"

"Why not? You're young and strong." He looked the prisoner up and down. "Well formed—perhaps a bit on the slim side at the moment."

"I never really played sports."

"Never really played sports. Not the competitive type?"

"Not particularly."

“I see.” The Colonel paused, fingering his goatee. “You know,” he continued, “there used to be a large tannery in the North Park District—on Lime Street. Do you know that street?”

“Yes.” The prisoner knew the tannery building as well. It had been converted into residential apartments. Several of his friends lived there—or had. The complex had been raided a few months before his own arrest.

“The tannery belonged to my family. I recently revisited the place. It was an interesting experience—turned up lots of memories. As a boy I went up there every Sunday to play football with the sons of the workers. The tannery courtyard doubled as a football pitch—it was fine once you got used to the stench. We played other teams throughout the city. Our side was excellent. In fact, one of my teammates became the Phantom. He and I were great friends.”

“Oh, yes?”

The Colonel paused again and peered cryptically at the prisoner. Then he said, “We were quite close, actually.”

“I see,” said the prisoner. *But he didn't.*

“You say you don't play, but do you follow football?”

“A bit, sir.”

“A bit. So, you have heard of the Phantom?”

“Yes,” replied the prisoner. The Phantom—so called because of his elusive style of play—had been the captain of the national team and a great hero. But he had been caught up in a huge scandal several years earlier that involved, among other things, the release of a video of the Phantom having sex with a teammate and the thirteen-year-old daughter of the Minister of Sport.

“Such a shame,” said the Colonel.

“Yes,” mumbled the prisoner, unsure of what response was required of him.

“Then you agree? That it is a shame?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. Now, why don't we get down to business? Let me ask you. I hear there is quite a scene over there in the North Park District. It is home to many artist types, is it not? Were you an artist before you joined us here?”

“Of a sort.”

“Of a sort. What sort, Number Three?”

“A writer.”

“A writer.” The Colonel flashed a bemused smile. “I hope you brought paper and pencil with you today.”

The prisoner immediately started patting nonexistent trouser pockets; then he froze. He raised his hands and rested them awkwardly on his hips, feeling his face turn red. A loud gurgle emanated from his midsection.

“Don’t look so worried, Number Three. It was a joke, I was pulling your leg. What kind of writer—a novelist?”

The prisoner swallowed and said, quietly, “I wrote a novel several years ago, a comic novel.”

“Did anybody read it?”

“It got some attention, and a film was made of it. But I never wrote another.”

“Why not?”

The prisoner shrugged.

“What else?”

“Not much. I also write—wrote—for various magazines—totally nonpolitical stuff, believe me—”

“Whatever,” said the Colonel.

“Yes, whatever,” muttered the prisoner. He was thinking that he was utterly confused. His obvious need to keep the conversation going was very much at war at the moment with his urge to end it so that he could see to his *other* problem.

“What, Number Three?”

“Nothing.” *We both know where this is going anyway.*

“Is that it? Anything else?”

Get a grip, the prisoner told himself. He lowered his hands from his hips and clasped them tightly at his waist. He said, “Mostly I wrote about food and travel and the like. I’ve also written a bit of comedy, mostly for television. And then there were several short pieces for the theater, one-man-show type of things, in which I sometimes performed myself, telling amusing—”

More gurgling down below.

“Oh, yes?”

“No. I mean, not telling, really—not at all, actually—more like just talking, but from a script, which I write out beforehand. I can’t do it without a script.” He bit his lip.

The Colonel’s eyes lifted slightly and narrowed, and for the next few seconds they appeared to be penetrating the prisoner’s forehead and subjecting the underlying mechanism to a thorough examination.

The prisoner rocked uncomfortably on the balls of his feet until the Colonel blinked and said, “Yes, Number Three? Go on. You were saying something—something about telling funny stories?”

“No, not exactly—”

“I think you were about to tell us that you are a comedian?”

“Oh no! Believe me, I am certainly *not* a comedian. I’m not even a particularly funny person. In fact—”

The prisoner was about to explain that it was quite common for writers who write funny to not be funny in real life, but the Colonel interrupted.

“Let’s not split hairs, Number Three. You write comedy, you perform it onstage, and . . . what? Do people laugh?”

“Sometimes,” the prisoner mumbled.

“Are there jokes involved?”

“In a manner of speaking . . . not literally—”

“In a manner of speaking—well, there you have it. In my book, that makes you a comedian. I think everyone would agree.”

“Still—”

“Still, *what?*” The Colonel frowned and crossed his arms. “Is there something *wrong* with being a comedian, Number Three?”

“No.”

“Do you consider being a comedian beneath you? Not *artistic* enough?”

“No.”

“I am reminded of what was it that Bergson wrote: ‘The only cure for vanity is laughter, and the only fault that’s laughable is vanity.’ Are you familiar with that quote?” He was grinning now.

The prisoner nodded. He was also familiar with another quote from Bergson: “In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate.”

“I assure you, nobody here will consider you any less the artiste. So, can we just agree that you’re a comedian? In a manner of speaking?”

“Yes. I guess. Whatever.”

“Excellent! In that case . . .”

Of course, the prisoner knew what was coming next. He had been in this situation many times in his life—in restaurants, in bars, at dinners.

“. . . you must tell us a joke, Number Three.”

The prisoner could recite entire poems that he hadn’t read since grammar school. He could recall virtually every phone number of every person he had ever known. One look at a recipe, and he never had to look at it again. But jokes? *In one ear and out the other* did not even begin to cover it. In fact, for years now he had stopped listening to jokes altogether. The minute someone at a party said, “Have

you heard the one about blah blah blah,” his mind would exit the premises. If he happened to catch any bits and pieces, they were immediately deleted from his memory. The reason for this? He wasn’t even really sure there was one. It seemed involuntary—as if his brain was allergic and possessed an extremely fast-acting immune system.

(Or maybe there *was* a reason: On the rare occasions when he did listen to a joke, he tended to get extremely anxious. It was the test aspect that did it. Something in him always told him that he *had* to guess the punch line, and as quickly as possible; it felt as if he didn’t have a choice. And no doubt there was a reason for *this* as well. He was a person—and a writer, for that matter—who always preferred to know exactly where things were going, and, if possible, exactly how they were going to end.)

When he was first taken to his cell and met his cell mates, they were quite excited. Several had read his novel, almost all had seen the movie, two or three had come to his performances. Everyone expected he would liven things up a bit—provide a few much-needed laughs. (By this time they had told each other every joke they knew, ten times over.) It didn’t take long for them to realize that in spite of who he was and what he did for a living, he wasn’t up to the task, and although they found this disappointing, they also found it hilarious and quickly took to kidding him about it. Almost every day one of them would ask him to tell a joke, and then the rest would whine in unison: “But I don’t *know* any jokes!”

“But I don’t know any jokes,” the prisoner told the Colonel.

“Nonsense, Number Three.”

“I never remember them—”

“Of course you do. I remember the first joke I was ever told: Why was six afraid of seven? Because seven ate nine. Get it? I heard it as a boy. I always think of it when we hold these little sessions, what with all the emphasis we put on numbers. Everyone knows at least *one* joke, Number Three—especially a professional humorist such as yourself.” The Colonel raised one eyebrow. “Unless, what you are saying is, you don’t *want* to tell me a joke?”

The prisoner smirked, then quickly raised his hand to his mouth; as he did, he felt an unfamiliar sensation traveling down his right side. He was sweating, enough to have dissolved the caked-on layers of dust.

“You’ve seen what I’ve been through this afternoon,” the Colonel continued. “This process can be extremely stressful. The fact is, I could really use a good laugh. A little levity would be just the ticket. I think we *all* feel that way.” He gestured toward the seven statues on the bench.

“That’s right!” chimed in Hovel. “Let’s have a joke.”

“Would you deny us a little levity?”

“No, sir.”

“Fine.” Then the Colonel said, “Number Four.”

“Yes?” said a small voice from the bench.

“You look like you want to give your colleague some help. Do you need help, Number Three?”

“No!” replied the prisoner, gesturing forcefully behind his back. “I do *not* need any help.”

“Good!” The Colonel rubbed his hands together. “Let’s get started.”

“I just need a minute, Colonel.”

The prisoner massaged his forehead, miming an effort to remember. In fact, what he was doing was giving himself a talking-to: “*You can do this. You can do this. Just begin, for Christ’s sake.*”

He began: “Three men walked into a bar—no, excuse me, Colonel—it was a desert island. Three men were marooned on a desert island; they were a doctor, a lawyer, and, let me think, yes, a priest. The third man was a priest.”

“A priest! Excellent, Number Three.”

“Yes—a doctor, a lawyer, and a priest. And these three were having a conversation. They were discussing something very important, something that they all wanted to talk about, and that something was, if I can just recall” (more massaging of forehead) “that something was what they *missed*, yes, what they missed from their former lives, back home. That was what they were discussing—what they each missed the most now that they were marooned on this tiny desert island in the middle of the ocean, with nothing to do but sit around under the coconut tree and look at each other while they waited and waited for a ship to come out of the blue and rescue them.”

The prisoner paused, nodding to himself.

“We are also waiting,” said the Colonel.

“So,” he continued, “the first one to speak was the doctor. He sat on the sand with his back against the tree while the water gurgled and lapped—”

“Number Three—”

“Sorry. So then the doctor said, ‘What I miss the most, my friends, here on this barren desert island, is my nurse.’”

“Ah,” said the Colonel.

“‘What is it that you miss about her?’ asked the lawyer and the priest. ‘Why, what I miss about her,’ replied the doctor, ‘is how I used to screw her. Oh, yes, how

I screwed her in the examining room, in the waiting room, on my desk, on the floor, on the gurneys, everywhere! I have such wonderful memories of her, and of all our goings-on, the various positions—’ ”

“We get the picture,” said the Colonel. “Let’s move on to the lawyer.”

“Yes, by all means. So next came the lawyer. The lawyer said, ‘What I miss most, gentlemen, here in this forsaken place, is screwing my legal secretary. Yes, she was really quite something. We would do it on my desk, *under* my desk, in my fancy leather chair, on my Persian carpet, everywhere! Sometimes we would get so hot and heavy that the entire office would shake and law books would fly off the shelves and fall on top of us, and all my important papers—the depositions and the writs and the briefs—were spread out all over the place and we would roll around on them like a couple of greased pigs, squealing away—’ ”

“Oink! Oink!” went Corporal Hovel, curling his hands into trotters.

“Get on with it, Number Three.”

“And now, last but not least, we finally come to . . .”

(Between these fragmented utterances, the prisoner was grinding his teeth and riding—by now, like a practiced surfer—one treacherous gastric wave after another. Meanwhile, inside his head he was racing from room to room, opening and slamming shut drawers, frantically searching for something he was becoming more and more certain he didn’t actually possess.)

“ . . . we come to the final speaker, and this speaker was, needless to say, the priest.”

“The priest,” said the Colonel. “Hallelujah.”

“Well, the priest had been sitting there, in the shade of the coconut tree, listening very carefully to the other two. Now the doctor asked him, ‘What about *you*, Father?’ ‘Yes,’ chimed in the lawyer, ‘what about you, Father? What do you miss the most?’ The priest leaned back against the coconut tree and thought long and hard about the question that was being posed to him. He thought and thought. He rubbed his bald pate and—”

“Brevity is the soul of wit, Number Three.”

“Indeed. Sorry.” He breathed in and out a couple of times and continued. “And then the priest arrived at the answer. He opened his mouth to speak. And what he said was this: “What I miss most from the world that I’ve left behind since being marooned here on this barren desert island, what I long for day and night is . . . is . . . I think it would have to be my altar boy, yes, and how we—’ ”

A sound! Like a pistol shot! The prisoner whirled around. When he saw Number Six with his head thrown back and his hands in the air, he realized that what he had heard had been a *laugh!*

Another laugh from Number Six! Next one from Number Four! Right after that, one from Number Seven! Soon short, nervous bursts were erupting up and down the bench and ricocheting off the opposite wall. Then these isolated, somewhat theatrical outbreaks became more sustained. They began to converge, and as they did, they morphed into something new and unexpected—an epidemic of mirth that swelled as it spread, and before long, the entire bench was in the grip of a full-blown, unbridled, rollicking hysteria, and the sound of it engulfed the entire corridor! Every prisoner was convulsed. There was Number Five, doubled over, hugging himself for dear life, shaking like a stalling engine; next to him, Numbers Six and Seven were hugging each other, snorting and wheezing, heads rolled back, eyes spilling tears; the rest were smacking their thighs, clapping their hands, stamping their bare feet. Brown dust was flying. Several prisoners were crying over and over, “His altar boy! His altar boy!” Number Ten fell off the end of the bench.

It went on and on as they gave themselves over to the all-consuming joy of it, and in that brief, precious interval, their bodies felt miraculously restored to their true weight and density, and their minds encompassed only laughter.

It wasn't long before Hovel joined in, and soon he was laughing the loudest. Eventually, Prisoner Number Three too was carried away. He yearned to go to the bench and embrace his comrades, but he stayed where he was, laughing so hard that he dropped to his knees.

They didn't want it to stop. But in the end, it had to. When it finally petered out, and the here and now came cruelly back into focus, there remained only Hovel's idiotic gasping, which eventually died out in a brief, noisy coughing fit. After that the only sound in the corridor was the creaking of wood as the prisoners reconfigured themselves on the bench.

“Ah, Number Three,” said the Colonel, “what a big success.” His face displayed a taut, frozen smile.

“Thank you, sir,” said the prisoner, getting to his feet. He wiped his nose and looked down at the floor.

“And you said you weren't a comedian.”

The prisoner shrugged. In the back of his mind he registered the fact that his stomach had stopped churning.

“But I have a problem,” the Colonel said. “Although I did find the joke effective, I got the distinct impression that there may have been more to it—that we had perhaps been rude to you in our desire to be supportive and had interrupted before you'd had the chance to complete it?”

“Not at all, sir.”

“Speaking only for myself,” he continued, still smiling tightly, “I felt the joke lacked something. I felt it needed something more—maybe some fleshing out at the end. Perhaps you can explain it a bit?”

Suppressing a smile of his own, the prisoner said, “As a comedian, sir, I can tell you that explaining a joke is the one sure way to—”

“Excuse me, Colonel.” It was Hovel.

“Yes, Corporal.”

“Are you saying you don’t get the joke, sir?” asked the guard. He lumbered forward, prepared to be helpful.

The Colonel replied, “Not necessarily, Hovel. But did *you* get the joke? You seemed to be laughing louder than anyone, so I assume the answer is yes.”

Corporal Hovel grinned at the prisoner, then at the others on the bench, and finally at the Colonel. “I certainly *did* get it, sir,” he said. “We *all* got it. That’s why we were laughing so hard.”

“Ah,” said the Colonel “thank you for clearing that up.” Slightly taller than Hovel, he reached over and squeezed his shoulder. Hovel winced, and his hand popped open. The coffin toy fell out and bounced to the feet of the prisoner, who bent down and picked it up. The tiny skeleton gazed dementedly up at him.

Corporal Hovel, rubbing his shoulder, asked, “Would you like me to explain it to you, sir? About the altar boy and such, and how the priest was giving it to him—”

“No, thank you, Hovel.”

The Colonel turned back to the prisoner. “You were about to say something, Number Three. Explaining a joke is the one sure way to . . . what? Kill it?”

“There is, of course, the famous quote, sir: ‘Humor can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process—’ ”

“‘And the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind,’ ” the Colonel promptly added, in spite of himself.

“So I feel that my joke requires no further elaboration,” said the prisoner, “no matter how you slice it.”

The Colonel stared at the prisoner for several seconds, his eyes like small, hard, gray stones. Then he said, “Point taken, Number Three. You may go.”

“What?”

“You may go,” he repeated. “One thing.” He approached the prisoner until the two of them were standing nose to nose. He lifted the end of his boot and placed it directly on top of the other man’s bare foot. A sharp, vivid pain shot up the prisoner’s

leg into the small of his back. The Colonel inclined his head so that the stiff bristles of his goatee brushed against the prisoner's ear. He whispered, "Perhaps we will see each other again, Number Three—*around the old neighborhood.*"

He released his boot, and the prisoner stumbled backward.

"Through there," the Colonel said, pointing to the exit door. "Turn left, then right, down the hallway. Follow the arrows to the gates. When the guard asks for the pass code, tell him, 'fifty-eight bravo,' and he will wave you through. Go. . . . *Now!*"

The prisoner nodded, acknowledging the command; however, his legs didn't respond. Remaining where he was, he turned to look at the bench, thinking that he was going to say something, but he was stopped short by what he saw—the seven of them, bowed and motionless like mendicant monks in filthy russet robes, their shaved heads and emaciated limbs covered in dust, their faces serene and content (several still smiling faintly)—and he had the realization, pristine and gemlike, that this image was what he was supposed to take away with him, and he would always have it; it would never fade or be erased from his memory.

Now he began to move toward the door.

"Step on it, Number Three," barked the Colonel.

WHEN THE HEAVY metal door had swung shut behind him, the prisoner rested with his back against it for a minute or two, gathering his forces. Next, he caught the muffled sound of the Colonel's voice (he willed himself not to listen) and immediately afterward, what sounded like Hovel's. He opened his hand—he still had Hovel's coffin toy. He took out the skeleton, let it go, and watched it fly back into the coffin. He did this a few more times, then placed the toy on a small table near the door and walked slowly away. He was halfway down the hall to the gate when he had to stop and rest again—he was unused to the exercise. The guard by the gate raised an arm, motioning him forward. The prisoner looked down—he saw his bare feet poking out from the thin, ragged legs of his pajamas—and when he started walking again, for the first time in as long as he could remember, he was thinking about the weather. **N**