

# Survival Stories

## ONE

**I** was being evicted from my apartment. The charges were groundless, probably fabricated by my enemies to make me suffer. But I decided against filing a formal complaint or appealing the decision for now. Many people were against me, and I felt that any action I took would only furnish them with an opportunity to examine my personal files and to make things worse for me. I realized they were gloating now over their successes, these people who were against me. But this was only temporary. And I determined to keep evidence of my distress to myself as much as I was able. There was no point in adding to their enjoyment.

I discovered that few apartments were vacant this time of year. I had to go to the District Housing Authority where after standing in a line for several hours I was informed that my name was no longer on file and that I would have to complete a new application and begin waiting from the bottom of the list. But it had taken me years to secure my first apartment! I protested. All my things would be in storage until I could find another place! It was going to cost me money! Then I should not have so thoughtlessly squandered it, the woman told me. She said a place to live is precious in this day and age, adding that my record would make it difficult to convince anyone to take me in. She scowled and then seemed to derive enormous satisfaction from examining my form and enumerating my mistakes. Next she drew a pamphlet from beneath the counter and without a word pushed it toward me through the slot in the window. It was an information booklet designed to aid newcomers to the city in their

search for a place to live. This was something new. In it I read that, though there were official channels, I was still permitted to carry out a search on my own while my name was on the waiting list. If in fact through my own efforts I obtained living quarters, I was instructed to inform my District Housing Authority (DHA) immediately to have my name struck from the list. Failure to do so would mean forfeiture of any accommodation I had secured. I stood in line again to ask the woman about the meaning of this final provision, but all she would tell me was that it meant exactly what it said. I asked if I could hear the details. For example, if I found a place and then went somewhere for lunch before phoning the DHA. Would I have to give up the apartment? You don't phone the DHA, she said with a truculent sneer, you come in. If you can't do that you send someone else. Forms have to be filled out. Statements have to be made. Procedure is sacred. Nobody is exempt. Then she looked around me at the line that extended beyond the restraining cord and down the hall. "Next!" she bellowed.

Gapp, a friend of mine, lived in the apartment block just off Terminal Street, near the railway yard. He had been there for a number of years, ever since I had known him. I decided to ask him if I could stay with him for a few days until my problem was straightened out. I could see no reason why this would pose any difficulty. He was an ardent bachelor who kept to himself, but he had always had time for me in the past. I had not seen him for several months. But I was confident he would not resent my intrusion on his ascetic lifestyle if I promised it would only be for a few days.

The building was not where I remembered it to be, and I walked several blocks out of my way before finding it. I was surprised also to discover, as if for the first time, that he lived on the tenth floor. I was certain he had been on the seventh and I could not imagine that my memory would play such tricks on me. In any event, I pressed the buzzer and he allowed me into the building, as always without using the intercom to ask who it was. The elevator rattled all the way up. And I was struck by the shabbiness of the facility. It was not that the building was ancient, though it had been erected some years ago. But it was run down, and the neglect was evident everywhere. The foyer was dusty and strewn with litter. Splintered wood, cracked doorframes and peeling paint were to be expected. Someone had sprayed vulgar messages on the walls of the elevator, and I experienced some discomfort when the elevator stopped on the sixth floor and a young man with long hair entered. He seemed intrigued by my presence and

did not take his eyes from me for the time we were together. I was grateful when the door swung open on the tenth floor and I could make my escape.

Gapp's apartment was at the very end of the corridor. Again, I was repelled by the drabness of everything around me. The hall was narrow and the air stale and close. Food smells mingled. I heard a baby crying when I walked by one door and a loud television while passing another. I wondered what sort of lapse had prevented me from taking into account the fact that it was midmorning on a weekday. Why would I expect Gapp to be home at all? He had employment. Even if he were not working he was sure to have other commitments. I remembered that his old mother lived in a tiny flat in the factory district and was unable to get out. Gapp brought things to her and sometimes cleaned the place up. One of the reasons I was prepared to ask this favour of him was that he spent so little time at home. Still, someone had answered when I pressed the buzzer downstairs. I reminded myself that I was not doing anything wrong in coming up here. I did not have to ask him for anything if it seemed inappropriate to do so.

I was discouraged when an unfamiliar voice answered my knock. "Who is it?"

I said it was me and knocked again.

There was a pause. Then the voice said, "Who?"

I stated my name. Then I called on him to stop joking around and open the door. I knocked again.

"Wait a minute, will you!"

The door opened a crack. The chain was still on. I could see a pair of eyes looking me up and down and a mouth twisted with distrust. "What is this?" said the voice. "What do you want?"

I asked if Gapp still lived there.

"I'm Gapp," the voice said somewhat peevishly. "What do you want?"

I drew in a breath and said I was looking for Gapp. I was his friend. We had spent long hours together and I needed to ask a favour. I was prepared to pay money if necessary.

"Who are you?" he asked.

I stated my name and said again that I would give him some money if he brought Gapp to me.

"I told you I'm Gapp," he said, interrupting me. "And I don't know you. You don't look like any friend of mine."

I told him to stop pretending. This was too important. If he

brought Gapp to me I would make it worth his while. If he knew where Gapp had gone I wanted him to tell me. Any information he could provide would be rewarded.

"I told you I'm Gapp," he said, "and I don't know you. Why don't you leave me alone?" He started to shut the door.

I cried out *No!* hastily inserting my foot and my arm between the door and jamb. Please! I called out to him, just listen to me! Gapp is my friend and I need his help!

He said nothing as he pushed on the door, crushing my arm. The pain leapt through me like a flame. I was sobbing when I fell away from the door and cradled my arm against my body, and I cursed the day I had met Gapp. The door slammed shut as I watched. "Bastard!" I yelled, and kicked the door with all my remaining strength. But it held fast.

I stumbled back down the corridor, moaning and muttering profanities. I could not help cursing my fate. I had probably knocked at the wrong apartment. There were two Gapps and I had chosen the wrong one. But, as I recalled, the directory at the front entrance had listed only one Gapp. Perhaps my Gapp had moved out and another had moved in. Anything was possible. And upon further reflection, I concluded that it had most likely been years since I had last seen him, not months. However, that did not excuse his behaviour.

When I turned the corner I saw the man with the long hair standing by the elevator. I stepped back as he moved toward me, but there was nowhere for me to go. I cried out for help as loud as I could but nobody came to my aid. Being injured, I was unable to defend myself. He struck me in the face and pushed me down and then kicked me. I tried to crawl away, but he grabbed the collar of my jacket and dragged me along the corridor to the elevator. When it came, he forced me inside and propped me against the wall. I felt his hands going through my pockets until he found my wallet. Everything I had of any value was in there, all my identification, all my money, but I could do nothing. He punched me twice in the stomach and when the elevator door slid open pushed me out. I fell to my knees, gasping, and listened for the door to close. Then I pulled myself to my feet. The basement was without light and some sort of devilish machinery clattered just beyond the walls. I dared not make a sound. Several minutes passed before my eyes adjusted to the darkness. Finally I ventured upstairs and left the building.

## TWO

I had lately been spending too much time alone in my apartment brooding. So when I was invited to a social function with people from work I decided to go. I put on my good clothes and took the stairs down to the street. I avoided the elevators. I had no faith in these slipshod mechanical devices, these cages on strings. Outside, the sky was gathering grey and drizzling and smoke from nearby factories hung foul and stagnant in the air, a sulphurous foaming cloud that plunged the city into premature night. I had planned to leave earlier and was annoyed at being delayed after having had plenty of time all day, but there was nothing I could do while I waited for water to reach my apartment. I had complained to the authorities a number of times about the water, but to no avail. I pointed out that since I was paying for water I had every reason to expect it to be there when I turned the tap. My last complaint had gone unacknowledged for months. I knew it only aggravated them when I complained, but how was I to live without water? Every day I had to wait twenty minutes for water when I turned on the tap. I asked, Was this reasonable? And so despite the laws prohibiting such practices I had begun hoarding drinking water, packing my refrigerator full with bottles and bottles of it. When I wanted to quickly wash my hands I used water from the toilet. But to take a bath I had to wait twenty minutes. This in a modern society that boasted of its progress.

After waiting a while for the bus I decided to walk and save my pennies for something else. As I went, I reflected on the fact that I had not in the strictest sense been "invited" to tonight's gathering. But since I happened—quite by chance—to be in the room when the arrangements were being made, my colleagues could hardly have forbidden me to come. However, it was clear I was not wanted since everyone else had been formally asked to attend. So I was really going just to spite them. My thoughts turned to my unpopularity and what might have caused it. It had long ago occurred to me that the chronic injustice plaguing my existence was that people considered me an outcast. For this was by no means a new phenomenon. I had been unpopular in school as well. Still, I had done nobody a wrong that I was aware of. I was not treacherous like some who flourished by making life an affliction for others. I spoke sensibly, I did my work. But with no effort on my part I caused discomfort when I entered a room. Men grimaced as if in pain, women averted their eyes and curled their lips into a sneer. My presence was in many

ways like an absence. I was avoided as other people are sought out. If I were to disappear this minute my death would in all likelihood go unmarked and unmourned. Who would notice anything was different until I failed to arrive for work tomorrow? And even at that, it would be days or perhaps weeks before anyone troubled to look for me in my apartment. People would guess that I had found another job or left town or been arrested. Nobody would dare ask any questions. Eventually someone would assume my place and take over my belongings, but other than that I would leave no relic of myself behind. To simply die would not be so bad because oblivion is a natural end of living, but to die without anyone remarking one way or the other was a frightening prospect.

I ventured along a narrow passageway between two squat stone buildings and then emerged into the street. A lone hunched figure, surprised by my sudden appearance, removed itself from my path and hurried silently away. Of course, my mother would notice if I vanished, though it would make little practical difference in her life. I remembered how I had spoken to her recently and that she had cried. But I could not now recall if we had argued or if years of neglect had simply made her bitter with the knowledge that I did not want to visit her. I'd had to explain that my job took up all of my time but that she was always in my thoughts. Or something. She seemed addled and unusually inquisitive, wanting to know about this and that. Things that were none of her business. So I invented a story that seemed to pacify her. But, stupid me, I could no longer remember what it was. I would have to call her again someday, but maybe by then my fabrication would be forgotten and I could in all safety tell her something else. Why did I worry about such things on my way to a party? I was approaching the deserted city square and as I passed over the damp flagstones a bus roared through, leaving behind a plume of soot. A monument was being erected in the square and in relief against the purple sunset the scaffolding presented a oddly sinister pattern of lines and shadows.

It was a city of rivers and subterranean caverns and so I had to cross stone bridge after stone bridge in order to reach my destination. There used to be trees too, but no more. In front of a defunct confectionery I noticed a dead tree stump slowly rotting away. For years I had watched the systematic removal of the city's trees by silent grey-clad workmen. The trees were diseased, so we were told. Is it true as someone once said that where there are no trees there are no birds, and where there are no birds there is little thought of freedom?

I cast these deliberations aside and lowered my eyes. The moon hung low and sullen, a torpid eye observing me through a veil of effluvium. A thin mist descended. My feet raised a hollow clatter against paving stones and concrete steps. There was not a body in sight. The shops did not remain open after dusk. This was no longer permitted. The new law seemed designed to persuade people to stay at home by removing yet one more excuse they had been using for going out. It was just as well because there had been a time when I would have spent all my money on trifles that I didn't need. Living alone you take comfort in material things. A new wristwatch, a book of poems by Tzara, fine Bulgarian shoes, a little mechanical bear that dances when you wind it up. I had each of these and more when in truth all I really needed to survive was food. I was a compulsive spendthrift. I would often purchase something just because it was there. Many people were sorry when the shops were forced to close, but I was not.

When I rounded the last corner I slowed my steps. Voices and music emerged from the upper floor of a set of flats. This had to be the place, a wooden rooming house of modest dimensions that faced the street with an array of quaintly shuttered windows and two doors side by side, each marked with a number. I ascended the steps and knocked on one of the doors. Since I had not been told the exact address I had to guess which one would open on the upper flat. But I had common sense in my favour and so naturally I would choose the correct one.

I had to believe this was the home of someone from my office, but it was much nicer than I could ever afford. The street was wide and clean and quiet, the streetlamps were lit, no derelicts or beggars wandered about. Children could perhaps play in yards and attend school here in safety, neighbour could trust neighbour, residents could count on mail being delivered and refuse being collected at regular intervals. It seemed an elaborate fantasy, but I had heard there were these places, oases of sanity, where the old order had not yet descended into chaos. They were rare, but this could very well be one of them.

After a few moments I concluded that nobody was going to answer my knock. I pushed the door ajar and stepped inside. A steep flight of stairs led up to the flat and at the head of the landing an open doorway framed the interior of a room. I could see the stipple ceiling, an elegant brass light fixture. The voices and music were louder, but not much. It was a subdued gathering, in celebration of a retirement. I recognized a voice here and there: Rattigan, my chief tormentor, a pig if there ever was one; Ornett who had the face and



temperament of a badger; Pilson the worm; Wenkal, that lascivious toad. In the doorway a woman's bare elbow bobbed into view, the slender hand clutching a long-stem glass filled to the brim with wine. When the woman entered my sights completely I saw that she was nobody I recognized. She laughed and without a glance in my direction shut the door.

I left. I decided against making my presence known, there would be no reward for such impertinence. While retracing my steps I paused at the river's edge. It was no secret that my life was not one of intrepid bravery or conspicuous accomplishment, I could claim neither talent nor deep wisdom. My world consisted of home and work and the cramped spaces in between where one seeks to fashion an existence. So why was I not unhappy? Why had I not given in to despair as so many others had? I raised my head as I pondered this question to glimpse the stone façade of a government building, opaque and inscrutable, yet strangely benign in this soft twilight. The river, folding over on itself in a succession of oily waves, threw back at me dancing ringlets of light.

I emptied my mind and followed the rhythm of the water touching its lip to the shore.

### THREE

It was too hot to sleep. After what seemed like hours I got dressed and left the apartment. The night air was painfully warm, like something swollen and throbbing. Moisture hung like damp sheets and coalesced densely in the lungs. I kept myself moving by an act of pure will. When I spotted a man approaching, my breath caught in my throat and I instinctively cowered. I thought I might be in danger. He was so ugly I imagined he might be demented, some sort of murderous lunatic escaped from his cell. But as he came nearer I decided that, though deformed and crippled, he appeared to be harmless enough. If anything, he seemed fearful of me. He clutched to his heart a laden grocery bag and he kept his face directed toward the ground. I almost paused to greet him as we drew near to one another, but at the last moment with my gaze full upon him I thought better of it. Avoiding me, he kept his head down and quickened his pace as if he were guilty or ashamed of something.

I turned and followed him at a distance, treading carefully on



the grass so he would not hear my steps. From this angle I could see that his entire body was tilted slightly to the right, in which arm he cradled the grocery bag. I struggled in my mind to determine what it was about him that aroused my curiosity so. He brought to mind a sensation, a memory, though I could think of no one of my acquaintance who resembled him in any way. In fact, I was quite certain that if I had ever encountered anyone like him it would have been in a vision or in a dream. No other human being, I concluded, had managed to spontaneously fill me with such churning revulsion. For without a doubt he was a repulsive creature. All stunted and slouched, like a monster from a horror show. It must have been because of this complete lack of similarity to anything I had previously encountered that I was struck with such fascination, like a child with an unusual, glittering plaything.

I maintained the distance between us, following discretely for several blocks until he turned to go up a cobbled walkway. The house was compact and, in the darkness, appeared well-kept. And as I came closer I noticed its near perfection, the fancy trimmings and detailed scrollwork along the eaves. Even the lawn seemed freshly mown, and in fact had about it an implausible flawlessness, as if a professional were charged with its upkeep. The man struggled with the key, apparently trying to fit the wrong one into the lock, for he removed it and examined it closely in the porch light. Then when he tried again the door opened immediately. At no time did he indicate by any of his actions that he suspected he had been followed.

He went inside.

I waited a long time for a light to come on, perhaps as much as five minutes. When it finally happened I jerked awake with a violent start. My heart pounded and I felt as if I had been dreaming. A chill had come over me and all at once I found myself stifling a sneeze. Feeling in my tense limbs a need for motion I silently approached the house and made my way around to the back. Once there, I could see a single window illuminated by a soft silver glow and, hardly breathing, I crept over until I was crouching beneath it. The house was girded by a thick growth of shrubs and very close to me was a rosebush. I had to be careful to avoid its thorns.

I looked around and could see lights from other houses. A feeling almost of desperation had come over me and I trembled to think what I was doing. The man had come to me out of the darkness, bringing with him a seed of memory, and now I was huddled like a criminal in his garden, waiting for whatever was going to happen. I

had formulated no unlawful intentions. I had not conspired with myself to violate his privacy or his well-being. But my fears were by no means alleviated when I considered that this was not the first time I had taken it into my head to follow a total stranger. There had been occasions when just to amuse myself I had selected one person from a crowd on the street and followed him or her, sometimes for hours. It seemed like harmless fun. Quite stimulating in its own way. And I gathered it was a common enough pursuit for those with time on their hands. My own habit was to watch these people for a while and then leave them as soon as a routine began to unfold and their lives became decipherable from the small portion I had witnessed. This time however, for some reason unknown even to myself, I longed to reveal my presence to this man and to intrude on and perhaps even alter the pattern of his existence. I began to grow uneasy because I regarded this as a peculiar and irrational desire.

I remained where I was for a few moments longer and then poked my head up to see in the window. Against the wall facing me a black and white television exuded a tyrannical and dreadful glow. On the screen a little man held up a box of cleanser. In a huge bed layered with heavy quilting an old woman reclined, her eyes wide open and attentive. As she watched the screen, her lips twitched to the rhythm of some inward narrative and in her hands she massaged a string of black beads. On the wall at the head of the bed hung a crucifix, a graphic, almost licentious, representation of suffering. It made me shudder so expressive were its details.

When the man entered the room the woman displayed no reaction whatsoever and continued to watch the television as before. He gently shut the door behind him. He had stripped down to his undershirt, though he still wore his baggy trousers. Pellets of moisture clung to his cheek and upper lip. He was carrying a tray, and I could see that he meant to feed the old woman. I could also see that his head was permanently and sharply inclined to the right so that his body seemed grotesquely out of proportion with itself. To look into his face was frightening, with its wide expanse of forehead and deadpan eyes, its distended shapeless madman's mouth. Suddenly I knew why he had become for me an object of singular curiosity. I remembered that as a child I had been taken to see the freaks at the circus; people whose very livelihood depended on the shock value of their deformities. When I was younger I had purposely concealed my unease and along with the others had expressed delight at such displays, laughing at the man with no torso or the dwarf who could touch his ear with his

tongue. Despite their lack of resemblance to the rest of humankind they all seemed happy enough. But I somehow drew from them a realization that they were wretched and pathetic creatures who bore their afflictions in the only way they knew how. They could not mask their disfigurement, so instead they hid their anguish beneath a clownish exterior. Everyone seemed to think these people were in fact happy. But how was this possible? What could a man with flippers for arms have to be happy about? I would go home and suffer hideous nightmares. I would lie awake crying and choking, powerless to dispel the images of stunted arms and legs, faces like melting wax, eyes tormented by horror and pain. I felt a weight of guilt simply for being normal.

The man spooned the viscous white contents of a bowl between the woman's lips. She took some in, but most of it dribbled down her chin and dripped on to a cloth he had spread about her for that purpose. Not once did she glance at him. It was as if he were a stranger to her. Intent on his task, the man's ugly face bore the perplexed yet benevolent serenity of an imbecile.

In a thicket of trees and undergrowth at the rear of the property I uncovered a stone that fit snugly into the palm of my hand. I threw it, and when the glass shattered I stood in full view waiting, just waiting for someone to come to the window and peer out.