

Chapter One

The summer fog whipped through a framed space in the bathroom where a window once was. Walt pushed down his diaper and sat on the toilet as a stiff breeze worked its way up Telegraph Hill. He wrapped his arms around his chest, a chest that rested flat on his meager frame. His receding hairline and three-day-old stubble accentuated a gaunt expression where enough playfulness lurked underneath to get him through most days. This, however, was not one of those days.

With a shiver, the sixty-five-year-old bent over to read the *San Francisco Chronicle* at his feet and studied a headline— “Japanese Sub Raised”. A curse howled in his head. *Damn Nips*, and then he heard the click of the lock. The brass knob turned.

“Who goes there?” he asked.

“It’s Lani,” said a female’s voice. “Lani Fuata.”

He gazed down once again to the periodical. A warning loomed up. “Fuata? Sounds foreign. Are you a friendly?”

The young woman drew in a long breath and said, “Blimey, we’re not going to do this again, are we?”

No response.

“Open this door or I’ll have to ring up the bobbies,” she said in a kidding way.

“You a Brit?”

“Come out,” she ordered.

“Go away. I’m doing my business.”

“You’re a right little cheeky bugger, aren’t you?” “Speak American. Not that English hoity-toity crap.”

He could sense her ear pressed against the entry until the sound of fading footsteps calmed him. Another moment passed before he peered back into the photo of the enemy’s vessel. *Damn Nips*.

He heard the clatter of jumbled sounds from outside. With caution he peeked out through the framed hole. Two strangers milled around in the backyard. One had a crowbar in his hand, working it along the jam of the backdoor.

Bastards. Walt crept to a cabinet. He braced his slippered feet and yanked on a drawer’s handle until all banged backwards against the bathtub. A hairbrush,

shaving lotion and a revolver rattled onto the tiled floor. Afraid the clamor might have betrayed his position, he stilled the weapon with his touch.

All quiet.

The Colt .45 was brought to his inspection and he conversed with it in silence as if the metal object was a long-lost sweetheart: Hi there, girl. You have served me well during this greatest of all wars. No reason we shouldn't finish the job together.

Walt held the pistol in his hand as he crawled infantry style back toward the cavity in the wall. He inched the barrel up the sheetrock, took aim and pulled the trigger.

A loud bang caused the man with the crowbar to crash into a ladder that held his partner. They went sideways into a thirty-foot-high magnolia. Hornets swirled in angry flight. The men slapped at the stinging pests, bumping into each other, into patio furniture, buckets and a table saw. Dogs barked from across the alley.

Lani rushed around the cottage to the rear. She came to the figures sprawled across a brick path and asked if they were all right. One returned a yelp.

"El gringo es loco."

She figured the word "loco" possessed universal meaning and nodded. "On the island of Rotuma we call such a person iuhaehae, or crazy one." Insects buzzed around her hair as she turned to a wrinkled face.

"Mr. Walter Manning, what the bloody hell are you doing?"

"Protecting home and country from these aliens."

"These men are here to do a few repairs," she said, gesturing back to the blue-collar stiffs. "There are no aliens in the backyard."

"Always knew the Mexicans were in cahoots with the Japs.

Bring 'em on," and he raised his .45 again.

The laborers ducked behind Lani. She muttered a curse before stepping forward and snatching the gun away, tossing it to the turf. "Your World War II has been over for fifteen years."

"Can't be. You're lying." Calculations in the back of his brain pushed forward with painstaking effort. "That'd make it..." and he petered out.

"1960," Lani interjected.

"Impossible."

"Oh, it is definitely possible, believe me. Or believe *Aitu*. He never lies."

After admonishing her for worshipping false gods, Walt turned and retrieved the Chronicle. He studied the date on the top of the front page— "May 26, 1960". Frustrated at not being able to put the day right in his head, he gazed at the wallpaper as if some answer might lie within its flowery prints.

The laborers, after a few reassuring words from Lani, brushed themselves off and went back to their job, mumbling.

“Walter,” Lani said, “get on with your business and wipe yourself.”

With a crooked grin, he held up a roll of toilet paper as if to offer her the job. She wagged her finger at him, saying, “Behave yourself.”

“You’re no fun,” Walt said and then looked past her to the activity, squinting. “Who are those guys?”

She released an explosion of air, calmed herself and repeated, “They are workers.”

“Workers?”

Be patient. “They’ve come to replace a few windows as well as fix the back door.”

“Well, tell ‘em to go away. I’ll get to it tomorrow.” At one time he was a do-it-all handyman, but things had turned for the worse during the last six months.

With little energy to deliver another explanation as to the purpose of their visit, Lani used an old threat. “Abigail will be most displeased if they leave.”

“Abigail? My daughter?” “Only one you have.”

“Well, tell her to keep her grimy mitts off my house. It’s mine. Not hers. Understand?”

“I understand perfectly, but I’m afraid Abigail does not,” and she walked toward the back entrance.

He bristled at the mention of his child’s name before returning his attention to the toilet. A ball of tissue and other matter filled the bowl. With a nonplused expression he inspected the puzzle for quite some time before flushing and exiting into the hall where a familiar face waited. Lani stepped around him and went to the area where he had just been.

“By any chance would these be yours?” Lani said, picking up his diaper and pajamas like lost treasure.

While she bent over to redress him, he asked, “Where’s the wife?”

Lani’s lips tightened. Her mind struggled with the correct phrasing.

“Well?” Walt said, impatient.

“Elizabeth is no longer with us. She’s with Aitu now, in heaven.”

His cast fell to the side. “I should know that.” With the weight of this information, he placed a hand on his caregiver’s shoulder as he slid a leg into his nightwear. “My wife was the prettiest thing you ever saw,” he started.

Lani continued with her task, letting him rattle on, letting him sooth his conflicted mind with the memory of his late spouse.

“She had these limbs that climbed forever,” he said. “If you did some exploring, you could see air all the way up those thighs of hers. Not to mention her breasts. Why they were...”

“I’m sure they were,” Lani interrupted with a kittenish laugh.

“Got a picture of her someplace around here,” and Walt pulled away, one arm hanging outside his pajama sleeve.

“Hold on,” she said but he stepped away down the hall toward the living room.

Walt swept the space with his examination. “Where is she? Maybe she’s in the dining room,” and off he went, half naked, searching for ancient black ‘n’ whites, she dressing him on the go.

The result, however, was the same in every corner of the house. No Elizabeth.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“After some rest, we’ll take another gander about, okay?” Lani caught up with him, buttoning his nightshirt. She tendered her hand to escort him back down the hall, but he shook aside the offering.

“I’m not an invalid,” and he walked away with a spry step.

She followed him to his bedroom where he slid under the covers while she threw an extra blanket over the window to block out the rising sun.

He gazed back up at her, confused. “Who are you?”

“I’m Lani, Lani Fuata, your caregiver.”

“You’re too young. Can’t be older than twenty.”

“Twenty-one, actually. Not that age is that important.”

“You sure?”

Without a word, Lani tucked the duvet under his chin and stamped his forehead with a kiss before exiting. She came to the bathroom and stopped. The door stood ajar but the handle was fixed in the locked position. Can’t let that happen again, she thought, and scurried to the kitchen to retrieve a roll of duct tape. Upon her return, she covered the latch with a strip of the sticky cloth.

This morning could’ve been worse. A stream of possible catastrophes ran across her mind’s screen. Images of stray bullets and cursing laborers sent a surge of adrenalin through her, and she rushed back outside. She recovered the Colt .45 from the yard, smiled an anxious consideration to the workers and exited through a gate to the front, hurrying along a wooden plank lane.

Telegraph Hill’s east side was a maze of walkways, which were laid out with lumber and tagged with signposts. The timbered avenues were as odd to her as the whole of the neighborhood. Hundred-year-old cottages stood partially hidden behind eucalyptus trees and flowering maples. The clapboards’ pointy arches, crooked windows and red and blue colored doors stood in contrast with the skyscrapers that rose just four blocks away. She turned right and continued her climb up to Montgomery Street, the nearest plot of asphalt available to park a vehicle.

Crammed between a VW bus and a DeSoto, an early fifties Ford pickup stood idle. Months of accumulated dust served as a billboard for the neighborhood’s creativity. *Dullsville, fall out, graveyard, juicehead and wasteland* appeared in

cursive lettering upon its various parts. Lani glanced past the gibberish to yellow scraps of paper tucked under the wiper blades.

She brought the tickets forward for a quick study and then steered her vision to the heavens, to *Aitu*, as a Rotuman proverb latched onto her memory—*A whale's tooth belongs nowhere else but in a whale's jaw*. Life should remain unfettered. No need to complicate it with useless rituals and customs. She took a second gander at the parking violations and tossed them to the ground.

With persistent jiggles of a key, the passenger door moaned open. The space behind the seat would make a good hiding place for the pistol. Another disparaging idea came to her and she sped back toward the bungalow.

Walt's storage shed came into view. She entered and started rummaging through cardboard containers and behind steel machines. Dusty shelves and forgotten corners revealed nothing.

"Show yourselves, you wankers. I know there are more of your kind in here."

With hands on hips, she scanned the area once again. Washers, dryers and a late model refrigerator came under her inspection. She pictured Walt with his trolley dragging one appliance after another down the hill, unable to part with them upon retirement. His tooth fit in his jaw just fine at one time, she thought, knowing his place in his simple life. With wonder she continued to gaze at the remains of a former enterprise when another thought came to her.

"Of course," and she smacked her lips at the obvious nature of it all and investigated the hulls of the machines. Inside a stove lay an old hunting rifle. Another machine housed a Remington, a box of cartridges and a bayonet. On a mission, she reentered the house and searched the domicile. The top shelf of a hall closet concealed a snub-nosed .38 revolver. She deposited the entire cache into an army duffle bag and backtracked to the pickup.

* * *

On the short side of noon, Walt remained in a fitful sleep. He had kicked off the duvet as well as his pajama bottoms and diaper.

She went to him and rocked his shoulder with a gentle touch. "Wake up, you lazy git. The day is wasting away."

"So am I," he said in a muffled voice.

"We'll have none of that talk in this house," Lani said as she latched onto him.

"Hey."

"You complain like an old rooster with its wings flapping," and she gave him another nudge but this time with more authority.

"All right, all right," and he shoved her arm away and swung his feet over the side of the bed.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Walt said as he perused a wet cloth circulating his belly.

“What I do every morning.”

His Catholic upbringing propelled him to cross his palms over his privates. It was her turn to slap his hands aside as she began hand-washing him.

“You’ve done this before,” he said. “I’m a professional. Now sit still.”

A smirk grew on his face as she lathered his thighs with a soapy hand towel. Lani, having finished drying and dressing the old man, followed him out to his favorite spot, out to the back porch and a haggard rocking chair and threw a horsehair blanket over his legs before departing.

He fell into a kind of spell, staring past the drone of work to the beauty that graced the backyard. Baby tears acted as a carpet for a cluster of naked ladies, their pink stems adding a bit of cheer within the shadows. Red-masked parrots flew away and down to an embarcadero, which bordered a placid bay. Vessels skimmed across the water in silent parade, flowing under the Bay Bridge. The view appeared fresh and new as if seeing it for the first time, the way most things came to him as of late.

“*Ciao, Signori Manning,*” a passing pedestrian said. Not much younger than Walt, the gentleman wore a straw hat, thick glasses and a sizeable paunch. A smoldering cigarette poked out from between his stubby fingers.

“What?” Walt answered.

“Good afternoon,” the man repeated.

“It’s too early.”

“Pardon?”

“The afternoon, seems a bit soon to judge which way the day’s going to go.”

“Oh, I’m fairly certain it will be just fine,” and the man tugged on the leashes of two bulldogs.

Walt pointed with his chin toward the animals. “My wife used to drool like that...every time she entered my boudoir.”

“You are bragging, no?” the pedestrian said before another thought came to him. “The annual street fair is this weekend.”

“Nothing but an open-air mental ward, if you ask me.” “The young beatniks, they are full of vim and vigor. That is for certain.” He brought his cigarette to his mouth for another drag.

“Don’t care much for the marijuana or heroin.”

“The world is changing, this is most definite,” the Italian

“What needs changing? Everything was just fine before.” “You are a conflicted man, but a good one, I suspect.” “Never been accused of being conflicted, or of being good for that matter,” Walt said. “So I’ll ask you to refrain from assuming such.”

“As you wish. *Buongiorno, Signori Manning,*” and he tapped the brim of his hat and sauntered away.

While Walt couldn't remember the gentleman's name, most likely the Italian was a neighbor. On the other hand, perhaps he wasn't. Maybe he belonged with Mussolini's underground movement. With the evil of others on his mind, he started to rise, mapping out a course to find a weapon, when Lani approached with coffee and cream puffs. He reseated himself.

“Was that Mr. Gagliardi?” Lani said.

“Who else would it be?” he answered with a lie.

“He will be retiring this year from city government. Did you know that?”

“Why wouldn't I?”

“He's been working all these years down at the Hall of Records.”

“I know all there is to know about the man.”

“Then you know that he took up lodging in old Captain Andrews' place, the house with the double-decker balcony.”

“Of course.” Another lie.

“The one with the barn roof.”

“What did I just say?”

“All right, you cheeky devil, then tell me why history holds a place of honor over his home.”

He shot her a slow burn. “You gonna keep on jabbering or can I have my sweet?”

“Answer the question first.”

“I don't do tests. Never did.”

She ignored him, saying, “During your American gold rush, men on the take drugged and stored strangers in his house until they were shanghaied out to sea.”

“That's it? All this fuss over some history lesson?” Another voice called out from below. “How are you, Walter?”

“Fine. My, you're sporting a rather ravishing image today,” and he put on his happy face.

Lani turned to him. “Holding court, are we?”

He shushed her, his eyes holding steady on the taut curves that lay underneath a hip-hugging print dress. Pink flowers protruded from her delicate fingers.

“What do you have there?” Walt asked.

“Just some naked ladies for my table.”

“I'm all for that.”

“Why don't you come over later?” the woman said. “You remember where I live, don't you? Up the hill, near Julius' Castle? A few people are coming by to celebrate Bastille Day. First drink is on me.”

“Only place I’d sip from. Say, did I ever tell you that you’re the spitting image of my Elizabeth?” Walt thought about his phrasing and added, “Don’t know why spit should be in the same sentence as someone’s image, but there you have it.”

The long skirted girl peered at Lani and said, “Got your hands full with that one.”

“He’s for sale. Fifty-percent off. One time only offer.”

“Tempting, but I’ve already done my shopping for the day.” She waved goodbye and jiggled away, feeling the heat from the old man’s gaze.

Walt leaned over the railing.

“Like what you see?” Lani said.

“Can’t tell. Everything’s bouncing around too much.” He bit into the pastry while his eyes remained fixed upon the end of the alley. “What does she do again?” “I’m told she works at The Condor. Go-go dancer, I believe.”

“God bless her.”

Lani reached over and refilled his cup. He spied a tattoo on her outstretched arm.

“What’s that?”

The exercise of dialogue, no matter how repetitive, was good for the mind, she figured, and said, “It is a sea turtle,” and traced the markings with her touch, “ringed by a fishing net. I did this myself.” She explained the process, done with nothing more than a sterilized nail.

“Don’t approve.”

“You are not alone, I’m afraid. My mother and father feel the same. Most Christians do. I, however, have a tendency to hold onto the past, a past my grandfather taught me. As tribal chief, he brought me with him to England, fighting seven years for our independence.”

“How’d that work out?”

“Well, he is still in London, and I am here.” She shrugged. “Perhaps someday.” *Perhaps someday Rotuma will gain its freedom, perhaps someday I will too.*

She lifted her pants leg and pointed with her index finger to her calf. “This one is in the shape of waves. Tongans, who discovered my island long before the white man came, have a very strong connection to water.”

“Makes you out to be some sort of savage.”

“At least you didn’t mention my dark skin or my wild hair.

I suppose I should be thankful for that.”

“Just getting around to it.”

Chapter Two

The sound of loud voices from outside stirred him awake. Walt turned over and buried his head under the pillow. Aluminum cans crashed against the house.

He hand-wiped the sleep from his eyes and squinted at the bedside clock. Enraged, he hurried into his slippers, wrapped his robe over his pajamas and snuck past the snoring Lani. He stomped down the steps from the front stoop and gazed back up the hill. A house stood ablaze with lights. People dotted the balcony, singing and chanting indecipherable nothings. Walt moved further along the wooden avenue to the other side of a stand of cherry blossom trees for a better view.

He cupped his hands over his mouth and yelled, "It's two- thirty in the morning."

"Walter, is that you?" a voice said from atop the bluff.

"I got no reason to be anyone else."

"It's me," and she crisscrossed her arms to signal a hello.

"The one with the naked ladies? From this morning?"

"Can you dial down the racket?"

"Come up for a nightcap," she persisted.

"I don't know."

"Please."

"The missus might not approve," he said.

"Where's your chivalry?"

"Back under the warm sheets."

She giggled, more determined than ever to acquire his presence and broke out in a poetic voice: "*Birds singing in the dark / Rainy dawn.*"

“The taste of rain / Why kneel?” Walt added.

“Hey, you know Kerouac.”

“If you say so.”

“Come on up. I’m gonna swallow some yellow canaries.”

“Well, I guess I can’t miss that,” and he shuffled down the lane, turned right onto the Filbert Steps and hiked up to Montgomery. Neon lights flickered atop a building, which stood above a fifteen-foot high retaining wall that divided the two lanes into an upper and lower boulevard. A German restaurant was shutting down, S-H-A-D-O-W-S switched off one letter at a time.

Walt headed for a knot of activity outside a three-story, art deco residence where light poured out from every window. Half way down the block he tripped over milkweed that poked through the sidewalk cracks. On one knee, brushing the dirt from his robe, he spotted a familiar pickup. So this is where you’ve been hiding, he thought. He rose and tried opening the doors but they were locked.

What the hell?

* * *

“I am hurt / I am scared,” quoted a curvy, head-shaved blonde from the entranceway.

“I want to live / I want to die,” answered an old man in his black pajamas.

“I don’t know where to turn in the void,” Blondie said.

“Or when to cut out.” A blank expression showed on Walt’s face as if this latest outburst was as much a mystery to him as anyone else.

“Bowery Blues”—It’s one of my favorite Kerouac poems,” Blondie said.

He scratched an itch down low as he peeked past the blue, white and red flag of France to the inside. “Got any sweets in there?”

“Wouldn’t be a celebration without some,” and she hooked onto his arm and led him inside. A herbal scent drifted through the living room as “cigarettes” were passed from one person to another.

Blondie clanged her flute with a fork. “All right, cool it. I want to introduce you cats to my neighbor. This is Walter Manning,” Blondie said while gesturing with her hand in presentation. “He is a gentleman and a fan of Jack Kerouac.”

“I dig the outfit, man,” someone said, studying Walt’s black nightwear. “It has that revolutionary vibe. Very groovy.”

“Are you a disciple of Mao’s?” asked another.

“Where’s the chocolate?” the old man asked.

“Isn’t he the most precious thing?” Blondie said, bringing him closer. “Don’t get any ideas, girls. He’s all mine.”

Amidst a ring of protests, Blondie pulled on Walt, dragging him to an assortment of food dishes. He picked his way through the plates, sniffing at quiches, tarts and asparagus tips.

“Don’t see anything here to my liking,” Walt said. “What about some booze?”

“Here you are,” and she held out her glass of champagne.

He eyed the offering, saying, “You call that booze?” and his vision started to wander.

“Isn’t this where you want to ask me my name?” she said.

“I suppose,” and he continued his search.

“Geraldine. Geraldine Parker.”

With his eyes turned away from her, straining to define foods and drinks at other tables, he said, “Are you any relation to Charlie Yardbird Parker?”

“No, but did you know him?”

“Probably,” and he drifted toward a promising feast.

“Oh...my...God. I dig Charlie Parker,” she said, accidentally blocking Walt’s view of a French delicacy.

He ogled a pile of éclairs not more than two feet away and started to reach for one when Geraldine spun him around and guided him to a record player. With lost hope, he looked back over his shoulder at the fading treats.

She positioned a diamond needle onto a vinyl forty-five. A jazzy intro, meandering and loose, began to filter through the glass walled room. Walt steered his regard toward her curvy frame, substituting one sweet for another.

“Scrapple From the Apple,” she said. “Written in...”

“Written in forty-eight at Birdland,” Walt interrupted, finishing her sentence, “a nightclub in New York named in Charlie Parker’s honor.”

“You’re some kind of hipster, you know that?”

“Don’t know what I know.”

A chap in a turtleneck and cropped hair sauntered over, his head rolling to the tune. “Can ya dig it, man?” He pointed to the airwaves. “Hear that? Charlie’s sliding from Ab major to A minor back to G major. Far out.”

Walt pulled back with a wary expression.

“His music is alive,” continued the beatnik. “Full of oblique coded animal references.”

Walt, as if captive to his own past, mumbled out more Kerouac: “*Shots in the arm for the wallet / Gleefully he whistled the perfect horn.*”

“Man, you know your groceries. How about you and I fly with the eagles tonight. Go get Dixie fried.”

Walt’s vision drifted. Crepe paper, balloons and travel posters loomed up all around him. “What are you celebrating again?”

“Bastille Day.”

No response.

“French workers entered Paris on July 14th in 1789, starting a revolution,” the beatnik said.

“But today is May 26th,” Walt argued.

“We’re going to party for a month and a half. Cool, huh?”

“What would be *cool*,” Walt said, “would be to honor the upcoming Memorial Day and all those Americans who gave their lives so you could sip champagne and blow smoke out your ass.”

“Hey, man, don’t be a drag.”

Geraldine witnessed the tension. “Everything all right here?” she interjected, still swaying to the sound of a jazzy alto sax.

Walt spied her jutting back and forth. “I think I know those hips.”

“I walk by your place and say hello to you and Lani.”

“Who?”

“Lani, your caregiver.”

Confused, he started to excuse himself when a voice greeted him. “*Ciao, Signori Manning*. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

The crinkled up expression on Walt told the Italian that another introduction might be necessary. “I’m *Signori Gagliardi*. From down the lane? Captain Andrew’s old place?”

Walt studied the man’s penciled-in mustache, his black beret and his tri-colored striped shirt. “You seem kind of confused. You Italian or French?”

“Everyone is French for the next six weeks.”

“Thought I was American.”

“Sounds sooo bourgeois,” Geraldine added.

“That’s not the sound of *bourgeois* I hear,” Walt said, as he motioned toward the entrance.

Geraldine peered at him for clarification when the searing noise rose up to her as well. She dashed to the front window, glimpsed outside. “It’s the pigs!”

All hauled ass, bumping into one another, seeking a quick exit. Geraldine and Mr. Gagliardi each clamped onto an arm of Walt and hurried him out through the kitchen door and down a flight of wooden steps and into the darkness. From behind a bank of ferns, the trio could see shadows crisscrossing each other from the windows above to the beat of frantic whistles.

“Damn fascists,” Geraldine said out of the side of her mouth.

“I had a hunch they were in this thing,” Walt blurted before turning sideways to Mr. Gagliardi. “You one of them, one of those fascists?”

“Pardon?”

“If you are, I’m afraid you and I are going to have a disagreement,” and he squared around to the Italian with his fists raised for a one-two punch.

“I resent the accusation, sir,” Mr. Gagliardi said in a raised voice. “I am a loyal city worker and have been an accountant down at the Hall of Records for over thirty years.”

“Shhh,” Geraldine said and pulled down on her neighbor’s pajamas. “Save your fight for the real enemy,” pointing to the activity inside her house.

* * *

Montgomery Street melded with the night, everyone and everything fast asleep.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Geraldine whispered to Walt.

“Wanting has got nothing to do with it. It’s our sworn duty.”

From a toolbox, the old man found a band saw and slid it down the window of his Ford. Geraldine and Mr. Gagliardi stood guard. Walt jiggled the metal strip and yanked upward. The latch popped up. All scrambled inside. Walt reached under the steering column and peeled off the rubber tips of red and black wires. Copper flicked against copper until sparks ignited the truck.

They motored down Telegraph Hill. Geraldine told Walt to turn off the headlights as they approached Grant Avenue.

“Park the sled at the Bagel Shop,” she said.

Walt eased the Ford to the side of the curb. With the exception of a feral cat, little life showed itself in North Beach as nearby streetlamps cast angular shadows across the block.

“What’s the plan?” Walt asked.

“The birds that run this place,” Geraldine said, “are in cahoots with those fascist pigs that swamped my place earlier. The owners are always calling out the dogs whenever we arrive for a cup of joe and some conversation. It’s time to let the establishment know we’re not going to take their crap any longer.”

As they exited the pickup, Mr. Gagliardi noticed a bag behind the front seat. He unzipped the haversack. “Can we use this?”

He showcased a snubnosed .38 before passing it on to Geraldine.

Walt stepped over and scoured the contents, retrieving a Remington and a box of cartridges. “It’s all coming back. Clear as sucking on a tit.”

“This is so exciting,” Mr. Gagliardi said as he spied the stockpile.

“Yeah, it is, isn’t it?” Walt said.

Geraldine led the pack as they slinked across the street to the Bagel Shop. She elbowed out a glass pane, reached inside and twisted on a knob. An alarm went off. Walt rushed in and yanked the bell from its stronghold, but it continued to ring.

“Sit on this,” Walt said to the plump Italian as he handed him the squealing annoyance. “It’s still got some life in it.”

“At your service,” Mr. Gagliardi said as he roosted down upon the contrivance.

Geraldine and Walt scanned the store, their weapons at the ready. The duo came to a restroom and entered. Walt wondered what military value rested within such a place and was about to express his concerns when Geraldine fired her pistol at a cluster of pipes. Loud pops echoed off the tiled walls as water gushed everywhere. Instead of fleeing with Geraldine, Walt stood beneath the fountain. She fled back to him, latched onto the sleeve of his pajamas and towed him to the exit.