

## GHOST

A. J. PADILLA

Sixth months ago, on the night of December 23, 1962, my boss at Universal Life and Casualty died of a massive heart attack. He had been watching the Christmas episode of *Bonanza* when he got up to go to the fridge for a beer. His wife found him twenty minutes later. The paramedics tried everything to revive him, but the poor guy had probably been dead before he hit the kitchen floor.

"Look at it," he'd once said to me as we stood on Sixth Avenue, looking up at the forty-four-story steel and glass behemoth where we both worked. "It's like an overgrown baby, always demanding attention."

I became the new head of Building Maintenance a week after his funeral and was put in charge of the health and well-being of that overgrown baby.

The promotion came with a raise and a cramped basement office. It also meant being on call nights and weekends, but I didn't care about that. After twenty years with Universal Life, I was at last exactly where I wanted to be, and all the good things life has to offer suddenly seemed within reach.

Then, on a sultry evening six months later, my wife announced over supper that she wanted a divorce. Teresa wouldn't tell me why she wanted to end our marriage after nineteen years, except to say that we had "grown apart," as if we were a couple of characters in one of the stupid soaps she watched every weekday afternoon.

"Since you got promoted your whole life is that damned building. I don't seem to matter much to you anymore."

I pleaded with her to reconsider, but she remained immovable as Everest.

Teresa and I rarely argued, and when we did it was usually about little things that were soon forgotten. Over the years we had settled into a happy routine and were comfortable with each other -- or so I thought until that evening.

After her bombshell, she got up from the table and disappeared into our bedroom, locking the door behind her.

So, there I was, alone, with my marriage suddenly gone to hell, and with no family or close friends to reach out to for sympathy or counsel. For the next couple of days, I tried living with -- and yet apart from -- Teresa. We spoke little and sometimes not at all. A suffocating loneliness took hold of me and I began to feel like a spirit haunting what had once been my life.

On the morning of our third day apart, I quietly packed some things in an old suitcase and headed for the front door. As I walked past the living room I caught a glimpse of Teresa sitting on the divan, her hands folded primly on her lap as tears ran down her cheeks. She looked as beautiful as the first time I saw her, way back when we were both still in high school. I had meant to say all sorts of hurtful things, words that would cut into her flesh like shards of glass, but seeing her like that took my breath away and I left our apartment in silence, a swarm of angry words still bottled up inside me.

I took a cab to Penn Station, where I put my suitcase in a locker before walking across town to the Universal Life Building. I rode the service elevator down to my office and called a nearby hotel to book a room. The Chester wasn't exactly the Plaza or the Waldorf, but it was cheap and clean and only fifteen minutes from Universal Life.

I struggled for days to come up with an explanation for what had happened. What I finally did was hire Dennis Coyne, a private investigator with a sloppy little hole-in-the-wall office in Washington Heights. Coyne was an overweight ex-cop whose entire wardrobe seemed to consist of a single wrinkled brown suit. The guy didn't look like much, but he knew his business. It took him less than a week to find what I probably should have been able to figure out on my own: Teresa had been carrying on with another man.

I got lover boy's address and paid him a visit late one Saturday afternoon.

The man who came to the door was tall and slim. He had slicked back blond hair and a thin Clark Gable mustache. I knew the type, all cheap cologne and phony charm in a tailored gabardine suit.

From somewhere behind him came a woman's soft voice. "Who is it, hon?"

I didn't waste any time.

"Do you know Teresa Cobb?"

He body stiffened and he tightened his grip on the doorknob.

"Yeah, I know her."

He tried to smile, but his face only twitched.

I reached out and got him by the throat.

"Don't ever go near her again. Do you understand?"

He grabbed my wrist, but could not pull my hand away.

"Do you understand?" I repeated.

He nodded and let out a strangled squeak. I had planned on leaving him looking like he'd gone fifteen hard rounds with Sonny Liston, but I saw from the panicked look on his face that it wouldn't be necessary. He'd had enough.

In fact, the guy looked about ready to cry.

The woman's voice called out again from somewhere inside the house.

"Honey? Is everything okay?"

I turned and left.

A couple of days after my visit with lover boy, I went to see Teresa. She looked away when I brought out a few of Coyne's glossy close-ups of her and the blond creep holding hands in Central Park.

If she still wanted a divorce, I said, she should send the papers to me in care of Universal Life and Casualty. I'd continue to pay all the bills until the divorce, but there would be no alimony, not one red cent. And if she tried collecting anything, I'd find a shyster with the scruples of Heinrich Himmler and file my own divorce suit on the grounds of adultery.

I spent a couple of lonely, miserable weeks at the Chester before something happened that changed everything. It was nearly five in the afternoon on a Friday and most employees were getting ready to go home for the weekend. I was on my way up to the twenty-third floor to look into replacing some cracked ceiling tiles when two junior executive types got on the elevator. They were Mutt and Jeff in three-piece suits. One was tall and rangy with coal-black hair and eyes; the other was short, stocky, red-haired, and balding. Each carried a yellow legal pad.

Jeff spoke first.

"Hope this ordeal doesn't take too long."

"Ditto, old man."

"Who calls a planning session this late on a Friday?"

"Why, our esteemed department head, that's who."

"I'll tell you this, if he pulls another of his trademark late-into-the-evening soliloquies, I won't be dashing off to Grand Central for the long and sleepy ride back to Scarsdale. I'll stretch out on the divan in my office and spend a cozy night right there."

"With no one to tuck you in? That sounds too much like boot camp to suit me."

They got off on the twentieth floor. I don't think they ever noticed me standing there in my gray Building Maintenance uniform.

Afterwards, I thought about what Jeff had said. Things like that happened now and again when an executive was entertaining a client until the wee hours and hadn't had the foresight to book a hotel room. But could it be done night after night?

At any given time, there were one or two unoccupied offices somewhere within the building's forty-four stories. If you knew where they

were and how long they would remain unoccupied, it might be possible to turn Universal Life into a kind of hotel. Of course, you would need unlimited access to the building to pull it off. You would also need balls of steel to try and get away with something like that. As the head of Building Maintenance, I had the former. I could only hope I possessed the latter.

I went to my dreary room at the Chester that night and tried watching the evening news on a small black and white television. President Kennedy had given a speech to a chamber of commerce somewhere in the Midwest earlier that day. There was a snippet of film showing him speaking to a smiling, prosperous-looking group. I tried concentrating on what he was saying, but it was impossible. I kept thinking about what I'd heard on the elevator just a few hours before.

I shut off the TV and went out for some Chinese food and a cold beer. It was around seven-thirty when I got to the restaurant on Eight Avenue.

I sat in a booth and ordered shrimp lo mein and a Rheingold. When I was done with supper, a waiter in a stained red vest handed me the check. He bowed slightly and smiled before disappearing into the kitchen. The pale blue saloon doors he went through reminded me of a job we were doing on the thirty-first floor, an office with a view of Manhattan's eastern skyline. It had belonged to a guy named Tipton, a big shot in the Accounting Department. Tipton had retired after thirty years and we were getting his office ready for a new man, a college hot shot out of our Boise office who had insisted that his new office be painted in shades of blue. It would take at least three weeks to repaint, put down a new rug, and replace all of Tipton's old furniture. I had at least that much time to try out my plan.

I paid the check, but didn't return to the hotel. I walked back to Universal Life instead.

Milton Little was on duty at the employee entrance that night. With his big, calloused hands, lantern jaw, and steel-gray crewcut, he looked like an ex-prizefighter. Milt had known me long enough not to shove a log book in my direction. I could also count on him forgetting all about me by the time his relief came on duty at midnight.

"Anybody around, Milt?"

He looked up from his Herald Tribune.

"A guy from Policy Loan came by half an hour ago to pick up some paperwork, but he's long gone. That's been it for tonight."

"I suppose that makes us the last of the Mohicans."

"Guess so, Mister Cobb. What brings you back to us so late?"

"A project on thirty-one."

"It never ends, does it?"

“No, it sure doesn’t. You have a good night, Milt.”

“You too, Mister Cobb.”

I hurried down to Building Maintenance, where I changed into my uniform and picked up a flashlight and my key ring. A service elevator took me up to the thirty-first floor and I let myself into Tipton’s old office with a master key. All the old furniture had been pushed into the center of the room and covered with a drop cloth. I pulled the cloth aside, dragged a vinyl divan over by the window and sat looking out at the Chrysler Building’s illuminated spire until I dozed off.

I woke, stiff and uncomfortable, at the sound of a passing jet out of La Guardia. The wall clock read a quarter past one. I was far too groggy to start asking myself what I was doing there, so I took off my shoes, stretched out on the creaky vinyl, and slept dreamlessly for hours.

I gave up my room at the Chester the next day.

Three weeks went by before the kid from Boise showed up and I had to look for somewhere else to sleep. I made do with my basement office until fate came to the rescue a second time. Lester Anhalt, a forty-year man, had retired and moved to his summer home in Maine. His replacement was in the hospital recovering from an emergency appendectomy and wouldn’t be able to take over for almost a month. After his last move up Universal Life’s pecking order, Anhalt had spent his own money installing a custom cabinet that housed a well-hidden wet bar and a small television set. The office even had its own small lavatory. It certainly wasn’t the Ritz-Carlton, but the nights I slept there offered a few of the comforts of home.

There were times during those first months living inside Universal Life when, as hard as I fought to keep her out, Teresa found her way back into my thoughts and made sleep impossible. When that happened, I left whatever office I was using at the time and wandered the building’s darkened corridors and offices until the need for sleep caught up with me.

In the half-light and silence of those nocturnal walks, I discovered a new Universal Life, one that had escaped my notice during the hurly-burly of daytime activity. What had seemed rows of anonymous workstations became small islands of individuality. Over time, I even developed a fondness for a few of them. Santa Claus on the twenty-third floor was a favorite. A tiny Christmas tree, about six inches in height and complete with miniscule decorations, sat on that desk even though it was mid-summer. Then there was the Family Man. He had a workstation on the twenty-ninth floor. It always smelled faintly of peppermint and was home to multiple framed photos of a perfect-looking family: three beautiful smiling children and a wife who looked

a lot like a young Ginger Rogers. The Preacher sat at a desk on the thirtieth floor. Dozens of tiny scraps of note paper were tucked into the corners of the blotter, each scrap with a Bible verse on it. The Movie Fan's desk on the thirty-first floor had postcard-sized photos of film stars taped to the sides of his file cabinet and a framed photo of a smiling William Holden on his desk. The Samurai worked on the thirty-second floor. His workstation was next to a window, and he used the adjoining sill as a home for a collection of *bonsai* trees in yellow pots decorated with Japanese ideograms.

I eventually discovered many such workstations scattered around Universal Life, each of them part of a high-rise *Brigadoon* that came to life every workday morning and vanished each afternoon at five.

Everything in life, if you do it long enough, becomes routine, and spending days and nights inside Universal Life was no exception. I showered every morning in the Building Maintenance crew's changing area. Food was never a problem. I ate in the company cafeteria every day and made sure to stock up on enough sandwiches, fruit, and deserts to see me through the weekend.

I slept until noon on Saturdays, then washed my socks and underwear for the week and dried them using my office space heater. Our uniforms are laundered for us by a service, so that was never a problem. Sunday evenings were always spent in Nelson Guidry's office on the fortieth floor, mostly listening to his fancy radio setup. He was a lifelong company man, a patrician who dressed like something out of an old GQ advertisement and talked down to just about everybody who hadn't gone to Yale. He'd commanded a ship during the war and that's exactly how he ran his department, as if he were still at the helm of a destroyer on patrol in the South Pacific. It was an open secret inside Universal Life that Guidry had the best liquor in the building and I rarely left his office without helping myself to a shot or two of Calvert Extra or Remy Martin Cognac.

Living inside Universal Life taught me how little I needed the outside world. Even the occasional illness was not a problem. Our infirmary was staffed by a full-time nurse and Dr. Emil Geist, a semi-retired physician who does a lot of routine medical claims work for us and also treats minor employee ailments. When I began suffering from headaches soon after moving into Universal Life, I went to see him and he gave me a box of pills that he said would take care of the problem. In no time at all the headaches were gone.

The ghost stories began in mid-July. A cleaning woman leaving a double shift one night probably caught a glimpse of me wandering through a

darkened office and concluded that I was a ghost, the restless spirit of a young executive who had died while waiting for an elevator early one morning. The poor guy suffered a massive stroke and crumpled motionless to the lobby floor. It was this victim of a tragically unfinished life that, the cleaning women swore, she saw wandering through Universal Life that night. She shared her story with anyone who would listen and it soon made its way through the entire building.

The people in charge of security didn't believe in ghosts, of course, but they had old Pat Grogan do evening patrols for a week or two. Pat is the oldest guard at Universal Life and not much of a threat to anyone, not even a ghost. I did my part, too, by putting an end to my night-time wandering for a while.

The ghost incident reminded me that everyone's luck eventually runs out. Sooner or later, I'd find myself with only my cramped and stuffy basement office to sleep in and have to return to a room at the Chester. Oddly enough, I was rescued from that sad fate by an executive who had a reputation for making the lives of people under him miserable. The guy, Tom Crenshaw, called me from his office on the forty-second floor one afternoon, carrying on about a problem with a leaky ceiling tile and insisting that the matter be taken care of immediately. You would have thought he was King Farouk the way he went around demanding things.

The rest of my crew was busy with other jobs, so I decided to look into the matter myself. The leak in his office, as it turned out, was nothing much. Most people would have filled out a work order and waited their turn, but a few droplets of water were enough to infuriate a prima donna like Crenshaw. Since I could find no evidence of a leak originating in his office or any of the offices directly above his, the roof needed to be checked for signs of damage. Even a small leak can eventually work its way into a building and in the course of time emerge many floors below its source.

A thorough roof inspection usually requires two or more men, so I had to take one of my engineers off a job to be a second experienced pair of eyes. I called Bart Shamsky and waited for him by the flight of stairs leading up to the roof, smoking the last Lucky Strike in my pack. That's when I first noticed the door built into the space under the stairway. It was painted the same institutional green as the rest of the stairwell and was easy enough to miss if you were in a hurry. I made a mental note to come back and look into it, but wasn't able to return until an evening almost two weeks later.

None of the keys in my ring would open the door, so I went down to my office for lock-picking tools and a cigar box full of unidentified keys. On the way back up, the elevator stopped on the eleventh floor and Bill Rohrenbeck

got on. Bill was a likable old timer and one of the first people I met when I started at Universal Life. I seemed to recall hearing something about his retirement, but there he was.

"You still here, sport?"

Bill's one of those hale-fellow-well-met types, a born salesman always ready with a handshake, a smile, and a bit of conversation.

"Just finishing up a few things, Bill. You know how it is."

"Sure do. How's the family?"

"Fine, thanks. And yours?"

"Oh, doin' great, just great. Couldn't be better."

Bill's wife had been dead for years and his children were grown and living somewhere out on the West Coast. It would not have surprised me one bit to learn that, like me, he had taken up residence somewhere within the building. He got off on the twentieth floor with a wave and a smile.

I ended up picking the lock when none of the thirty or so keys in my cigar box worked. What I discovered was a space about twice the size of a walk-in closet. It had a sloped ceiling and its bare cement floor was covered with a layer of plaster dust. The place had likely been used during the final stages of the building's construction, but was now too far off the beaten path to be of any use. A few paper cups and empty Pabst Blue Ribbon cans were scattered about, along with an old copy of *The Daily Mirror*. There was a light switch by the door and an outlet on the far wall.

I picked up the newspaper. It was dated June 21, 1958. The pages were yellow and brittle with age. June of fifty-eight was the month I received my promotion to assistant head of Building Maintenance. Teresa and I celebrated by going to Miami for a long weekend. We stayed at the Fontainebleau Hotel, where Frank Sinatra was performing at the time. I never cared much for him, but Teresa insisted on going to every one of his shows.

I read that old newspaper from cover to cover as I stood there, enjoying the sports news, comic strips, gossip columns, and even checking to see what had been on the idiot box that day. I took another long look around before leaving and knew I'd found a new place to spend my nights.

I worked nights for more than a week to get the place into shape. When I was done, years of accumulated dust and dirt were replaced by clean, newly painted walls and ceiling. Discarded items from the basement storage area supplied my furniture: a small table, a rusty gooseneck lamp, and a folding chair. A patchwork of discarded rug fragments covered the cement floor.

There was one final thing I needed and it required a visit to the world



outside Universal Life. So, late one afternoon, I walked out of the building for the first time in more than a month. It was a sultry summer day and pedestrian traffic outside the building was heavy. For a moment I froze, staring at the river of people flowing past Universal Life. The jitters hit me with the force of a blow to the solar plexus. If I'd been a bank robber on the lam, with my face plastered on post office walls all over the city, I couldn't have felt any jumpier than I did on the walk to the Seventh Avenue bedding shop.

The shop hadn't changed much in the five years since I'd bought a new mattress for the bed I shared with Teresa. Rows of beds stood against the shop's south and north walls, leaving a narrow aisle just wide enough for customers to walk through. At the end of the aisle, the same salesman who had waited on me in nineteen fifty-eight sat at a scarred wooden desk. He looked up when my entrance set off a cluster of tiny bells above the door.

"May I help you, sir?"

"Do you sell cots? The roll-away kind?"

"Certainly."

He moved swiftly toward the rear of the shop.

"Come with me, please."

A half a dozen cots were stored near the shop's rear entrance.

"How much for that one?" I said, pointing to a cot with a gray mattress.

"That foldaway guest bed sells for Forty-nine dollars."

I would normally have haggled with the guy, but just then I didn't care about the cost. I was still feeling anxious and wanted to get back to Universal Life as quickly as possible.

"Of course, that includes tax and delivery, as well as a five-year replacement warranty."

"I'll take it."

I pulled two twenties and a ten from my wallet and handed them to the salesman.

"Where would you like the bed delivered, sir?"

"I'll take it with me."

"Beg pardon?"

"No need for delivery. I'll take it with me."

"This sort of item is usually ..."

"Listen, I paid for it, so it's mine now, right?"

"Well, yes, of course, but ..."

Now it was his turn to look jittery.

"Have you got any rope or heavy twine?"

"Rope, sir?"

He looked ready to give me back my fifty dollars.

"Yes, rope. Or some heavy twine."

The salesman went over to his desk and came back with a roll of jute twine.

"Here you are. Really, sir, if you would just tell me where you want the item sent, I'll be happy to arrange for the quickest possible delivery."

Ignoring him, I went over to the cot, opened it, removed the mattress, and rolled it up as tightly as I could. I wound the twine around it half a dozen times and secured it with a square knot. I lifted it onto my left shoulder and headed for the exit.

"Sir! What about the frame?"

"Keep it."

Back at Universal Life, I walked past Pat Grogan at the employee entrance and moved toward the service elevators. A tap on my shoulder nearly made me fly out of my skin. I spun around. Pat was standing there with a curious look on his tired old face.

"Planning on spending the night?"

"Having a relative over for the weekend, Pat. Our old roll away cot's mattress is thin as a slice of deli cheese."

"You don't want whoever it is to get *too* comfortable, do you, son? They might never leave." He laughed and walked away.

I rode down to the basement and hid the rolled up mattress in a supply closet.

The final thing I brought up was an armchair that was being replaced in an office on the 18th floor. Its vinyl was ripped in a couple of places, but it was more than good enough for me. It cut into the meager available space, but made the place look and feel a little less like a prison cell.

I moved in the following night.

My days gradually became mirror images of each other. I'd have supper in the employee cafeteria every weekday around five before retreating to my hideaway. I'd take a large coffee up with me and sit in the vinyl armchair reading all the late edition newspapers I'd picked up in the lobby newsstand. When I was ready for sleep, I moved the chair into a corner, unrolled the gray mattress, and set my small alarm clock to five in the morning. Then I turned off the gooseneck lamp and lay there listening to a handheld transistor radio through an earpiece.

Whenever I felt like a breath of air before bed, I'd walk up to the roof for a while. It never failed to amaze me how different Manhattan looked from

my forty-four-story perch. Midtown traffic became streams of light flowing in all directions, while pedestrians, looking slightly larger than ants, moved about in unhurried silence. It all looked so peaceful. Lots of things in life are like that, I suppose -- calm and perfect from a distance, but up close a noisy, god-awful mess.

There were times when I wondered if there might not be another ghost hiding away in one of the skyscrapers surrounding Universal Life. One night, I brought a flashlight up to the roof with me and aimed it in every direction, switching the thing on and off like some shipwrecked sailor signaling a desperate SOS to passing vessels. For an hour or so I searched for some response, a sign from one of the towers out there telling me I was not alone. But there was only darkness.

I resumed my restless walks through Universal Life on a night in late August. I had dreamed about Teresa and a summer weekend we spent on Cape Cod ten years ago. We swam and took the sun during the day and at night we made love. I'd never seen her look happier. Late on our last night there we walked out into the dunes and lay on the still-warm sand looking up at a sky alive with stars. In my dream we were back at the Cape, hopelessly lost among the dunes. Teresa was kneeling at my feet sobbing. I woke with Teresa's face still fresh in my mind. Sleep was impossible after that, so I left my hiding place and descended into the darkened building.

It was just after midnight and I was standing by a favorite work station, the one with the tiny year-around Christmas tree, when I heard a sound in the corridor off to my left. The overhead lights suddenly came on and I ducked under a desk and waited, my heart pounding.

The squeak of rubber-soled shoes on the tile floor was accompanied by a woman's voice whispering "Where'd I leave those goddamned glasses?" over and over like a mantra. The voice drew closer, and I was sure that by tomorrow morning the whole building would know that I had been the nocturnal spirit haunting Universal Life.

Still hidden from sight, I reached for a small wastepaper basket by the desk and tossed it as hard as I could. It clattered down the aisle between workstations.

A woman's high-pitched scream was followed by the frantic scraping sound of her shoes as she ran off. I heard her cry "Holy shit!" from somewhere in the distance before everything became quiet again.

I put the wastepaper basket back in place and shut off the overhead lights before sprinting to the nearest stairwell and back up to my hideaway.

As the days passed, I thought less and about my life in the outside world. I even managed to make a new friend -- Dr. Emil Geist.

Beginning sometime mid-September, Dr. Geist began showing up in the cafeteria every day around suppertime. He always carried a folded copy of the New York Times tucked under his arm and ordered a Salisbury steak with mashed potatoes and vegetables, black coffee and a cup of vanilla custard. The meal never varied, nor did the table where he sat reading the *Times*.

I became curious after a week of seeing him there day after day and asked around. That's how I found out about his wife having passed away. They'd been married forever, and I guess the poor old guy didn't know what to do without her. Phyllis, the nurse in the medical office, told me that he recently started coming in on days he wasn't scheduled and staying until all hours.

I felt sorry for him. In a way, we were both there for the same reason: we had lost part of our lives, one of us to death and the other to betrayal. I thought many times about going over to him and trying to start a conversation, but I never did. Instead, it was Dr. Geist who came over to my table one afternoon.

"How are the headaches, young man?"

"Fine now, Doc, thanks to you."

"Well, that's good to hear. Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all."

We ate in silence for a while.

"We seem to be this place's most loyal customers," I said.

"It would certainly appear so."

He didn't say much that first time, but we sat together every day after that and he gradually became talkative as hell. Doc Geist and his wife had been all over the world during their long marriage and he enjoyed telling me about the places they'd visited. He would go on about trips to Borneo, Nepal, Peru, Japan, or some other place I'd never see in a hundred lifetimes. He made them all come to life for me and I soon found myself looking forward to our meals together.

Even ghosts in their hiding places aren't free from the tidal push and pull of events in the outside world. Sometime around mid-October, late on a Monday afternoon, I was settling in at my usual table with a meatloaf special and a late edition of the *Daily News*. The headline read, *President to Address Nation*.

Doc Geist looked distracted when he joined me that day. He hardly touched his supper and mentioned his son for the first time. Until then, I

assumed he and his wife had been childless, like me and Teresa.

He pointed to the headline in his copy of the *Times*.

"A colleague of mine, a neurosurgeon, had a vacation home there back in the 30's and 40's. In Cuba, that is. In the old days they called Havana the "Paris of the Caribbean," you know. Marvelous weather, great food, and friendly people, a truly wonderful place. My boy used to love our trips down there."

The day after President Kennedy's Cuba speech he again brought up his son.

"My boy is really a very fine physician, far more capable than his father. He's got a small private practice out West. Bailey and I haven't had much to say to each other for many years. We had a falling out over the woman he chose to marry, you see. Both my wife and I disapproved of her at the time, but we could not have been more wrong. She has turned out to be a fine wife, and a wonderful, caring mother to their three children.

He looked down at the newspaper.

"This is a nasty business. God only knows how it will turn out."

"Do you really think it's that bad, Doc?"

"Well, there's always a danger of miscalculation, isn't there? One misstep, a single failure of judgment on one side or the other, could so easily turn into a world cataclysm. All it would take is one incident and ..."

He never completed the sentence, suddenly falling silent and looking off toward the cafeteria windows to the buildings beyond Universal Life.

"I'd really hate to have it all end without having patched things up with my son."

He turned to me and I saw that his eyes were welling up with tears.

"If you don't mind my saying so, Mister Cobb, it seems to me that you might have some fence mending of your own to attend to."

"What makes you say that?"

"The wedding band on your left hand for one thing. Also, a man your age doesn't sit here day after day unless he's a widower like me or he feels he no longer has a home to go to. Forgive me, but I suspect you may fall into the latter category."

He tapped the newspaper with his finger.

"Time may very well be short for all of us. I intend to call my boy tonight and say some things that have long needed saying. You might think about making a phone call of your own. That is, if my guess is correct. If I'm wrong, I hope you will forgive a melancholy, meddlesome old sawbones for his misdiagnosis. It certainly wouldn't be his first."

With that, he rose from the table and left, not bothering to finish his

supper. I didn't buy any of his end-of-the world talk, but it started me thinking about Teresa and about the phone call the Doc said I should make.

I never did make that call. I didn't have to.

I was in my office the next day, catching up on paperwork and talking with Bart Shamsky about all the crazy stuff going on over in Cuba.

"You think they'll chicken out, Eddie? Ship those missiles back to Moscow?"

I looked over at Shamsky. He was standing by the office percolator pouring a cup. I had known him nearly ten years, since he was first hired and I spent a month teaching him the ropes. He was a good engineer, serious about his work, a guy you can count on to keep his cool and think a problem through, but he was clearly rattled by the latest headlines.

"What are you worried about, Shamsky? You know these politicians always figure a way out of things. It's no different with this missile stuff."

"I'm not so sure. You back the Russians into a corner, what else they going to do but fight?"

"Stop worrying. Kennedy's as smart as they come. He'll pull something out of his Irish bag of tricks."

He sat down across from me.

"Can you imagine it? Can anybody imagine it? Everything gone in a flash, just like that, over some dumbass missiles that shouldn't have been there in the first place? You ever see pictures of Hiroshima after the bomb?"

"Everybody has, Bart, but that's not going to happen here, so why not drop the subject? Drink your coffee and think about something else, like doing your job for instance."

"Doesn't seem fair, Eddie. I mean to kids who'll never have a chance to grow up...."

That's when the phone rang. I was relieved not to have to listen to any more of Shamsky's talk about a nuclear Armageddon.

"Building Maintenance, Cobb speaking."

"You've got to come home."

It was a voice I hadn't heard in more than four months.

"Teresa?"

She sounded frightened, like a kid trapped in a dark room unable to find a light switch.

I looked over at Shamsky.

"Would you excuse me a moment, Bart?"

"Oh, sure. I've got to hit the john anyway."

"Everything's going to be blown up, Eddie. I don't want to die alone."

"Don't get hysterical, Teresa. Nothing's going to happen."

"How do you know? How can *anybody* know?"

She was right. No one could know for sure. And a lot of people were scared. I saw it on faces all over the building. The papers were full of stories about long lines in supermarkets around the city, as if people were expecting a nuclear war and thought a big enough supply of bottled water and Campbell's soup would see them through the thing just fine. Maybe stocking up at the local A&P was all they could think of doing when faced with something so terrible, as logical a reaction as any when your fate wasn't in your own hands.

"Why don't you get Romeo to come over and keep you company if you're so damned scared?"

"Who?"

"Lover boy, dearest."

"I don't know what ..."

"Your blond Casanova. You couldn't have forgotten."

"Oh. I don't know where he is and I don't care."

"Don't you?"

"I haven't seen or heard from him since before you walked out, Eddie. That's the truth."

Teresa is an awful liar. This little shaky thing in her voice always gave her away. She wasn't lying to me about Romeo or about being terrified.

"Look, Teresa, why don't you have a glass of wine and watch your soaps."

"It's the end of the world."

"It's going to be the end of this phone call if you don't cut out that kind of talk."

"Oh, please come home. *Please!*"

"Come home. Just like that? After all these months? I'll think about it, Teresa. In the meantime, you get a hold of yourself."

I hung up just as Shamsky returned.

"Problems, boss?"

"Everything's hunky dory."

"Yeah, hunky dory. Except that we might all wake up with a thermonuclear tan tomorrow morning."

She had never called, not once in all the time I'd been away. There were letters from her, sure, at least a couple of dozen, but I had put all of them away unopened.

The prospect of seeing Teresa again made me nervous as hell. I tried putting her phone call out of my thoughts, but I suddenly couldn't stop thinking about our apartment, and how it would feel to walk through our front

door again after a day's work. I remembered the cooking smells that filled the place as Teresa prepared supper, the sounds that came from the kitchen as I sat in the living room reading the evening newspaper, and remembered the way Teresa had of singing along with the radio as she cooked.

"Give it a rest, will you? I've had about all I can take of this doom and gloom shit."

"Okay, okay. Don't blow a gasket. I'll grab my tools and go see about a work order on the nineteenth floor."

I tried getting back to work after Shamsky left, but the papers on my desk might as well have been written in Chinese for all the sense they made. I got up and paced around my tiny office, a mix of anger, excitement, and fear whirling around inside me like a tornado.

I had to get out of there, not up to my hideaway but outside. After months of dreading the thought of stepping out onto a Manhattan sidewalk, at that moment it was the one and only place I wanted to be.

I changed into my civvies and walked out of Universal Life.

Teresa was breathing deeply in a familiar and comforting rhythm. We had made love with a passion missing from our marriage for years, and then she fell asleep naked in my arms.

My night table clock said it was one thirty in the morning. Even as I lay there with Teresa, missiles in their silos or down in the mechanical guts of a Polaris submarine, and B-52 bombers circling like enormous silver vultures high above the clouds, were preparing for an apocalypse.

Teresa sleepily moved her hand over my bare chest and sighed. I had managed to sooth her terror with soft words of forgiveness and renewed love, while all the while my own fears churned inside me.

Helpless millions in the city were quietly preparing for the end. But what if the human race somehow managed to escape obliteration, if the weapons of mass death were put away by armies of desperate and frightened men? What if, after all the talk of nuclear war, there was a tomorrow? Would I return to the safety of my hiding place high above the streets of Manhattan? Or would I remain with my faithless wife to face an uncertain future together?

I felt Teresa's warm breath on my shoulder and realized that there was no longer a choice to be made.



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Padilla is Academic Librarian working at the Dutchess Community College campus of the State University of New York. He has had short stories published in the Scarlet Leaf Review, Pulp Literature, the Acentos Review, and the Corner Bar Magazine.