

A HOUSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

L. E. Modesitt JR.

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“George, we are on the Brink of a Recession!” announced James Boulin Chartwell, III.

George arranged his face to show concern. The Senior Member of the Council of Economic Advisers glowered.

“This is Serious, young man. There is a Major Metropolitan Area where employment and wages in the Construction Sector have actually declined in the last quarter.”

George refrained from asking if he were sure. The Honorable James Boulin Chartwell, III, was always SURE.

“What area?” inquired George politely.

“The Greater Denver Area.”

George understood. Denver was somewhere near the Rockies.

“Now admittedly, the Deviation from the National Trend is Not Yet Significant. But the level of employment for carpenters, electricians, masons, plumbers, and heating technicians is down One Tenth of One Percent. This is Inconceivable. The Denver Area is one of the most rapidly expanding markets in the country. More houses are being built, but construction workers are making less money. What will the Unions say? What will the President say?”

Chartwell’s voice, while not quite to the point of professorial panic, had lost the deep, firm, and convincing tone he employed to sway the policy makers.

“And... ?” prompted George.

“George, you will Look Into It. We must have The Answer before the Budget is Finalized.”

George struggled out of the deep leather armchair. He smiled at Mildred as he ambled out into the hall. This time she refused to look at him. George suspected that it was the purple shirt and gold tie, rather than the maroon plaid jacket.

In his office, the other three staff economists were all at their desks. George had been on the staff two years. This was the first time he had seen them all together.

“Hey, Ed. What’s the big project?”

Ed—Theodore Hastings Freylinghausen—rolled his eyes. “The Recommended Executive Budget. Balance of Payments. Special Drawing Rights. Proposed Variations in Variable Budgets...”

Ferron Riccardo didn’t look up. Norman Dentine flashed George a brief smile.

George shuffled behind his desk.

A decrease in employment coupled to an increase in housing starts? He started doodling on the scratch pad. After an hour he decided he didn’t know enough to doodle.

He walked over to the console scanned the print outs, then typed a few lines.

“Mary, whose program is on now?”

“That’s Mr. Riccardo’s. He’s trying to determine the role of inflexible wages in the modern economy, especially as a forecasting and budgetary tool.”

“Check. I’m next on line with a short cut on the Greater Denver Economic Unit.”

George walked over to the iron jawed Riccardo.

“Ferron, how much longer on this thing of yours?”

Riccardo peered at his Complexitron Wrist Chronometer. “

“About twenty six minutes and thirty one seconds.”

George wandered down to the cafeteria. At eleven the corridors were always deserted. He was back at his desk with two Cokes in twenty five minutes.

Somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty six and one half minutes, the console burped. George rescued his short print out before it was overwhelmed by what would follow.

The print out confirmed the summary of James Boulin Chartwell, III. George gulped the remainder of the first Coke. He nearly strangled, since he’d forgotten to pulverize the ice cubes. He thumbed through his directory.

He jabbed out a complicated code.

“National Association of Home builders.”

“This is Dr. George Graylin with the Council of Economic Advisers. I’d like the name and number of the president of the Denver Chapter.”

“If you’ll hold just a minute, Dr. Grayman, I’ll be right with you. Thank you.” Click. ,

George drummed out a facsimile of “Pomp and Circumstance” with his left hand.

“Dr. Grayland, the president of the Denver Chapter is Mortpn B. Newton. He’s also the president of Newton Construction. His office number is 303 2 757 1253. Is that all you need?”

“For now. Thank you very much.”

George drummed out a few bars of something whose title he couldn’t remember. He weighed the possibility of getting an open WAIT line to Denver through the Reservation Comm Center.

He punched out the number.

“Center. Will you hold, pu lease?”

George drummed out “Listen to the Mockingbird.”

“Thank you for waiting. May I help you?”

“WAIT line, Denver. Priority, Rapid Routine. Code 444 B C.”

“I am sorry, sir, but there is a two hour hold on Wide Area Integral Teleview service.”

“Will you confirm that?”

“Yes, sir. Time is 11:42.”

“Thank you.”

As the picture of the harried operator vanished, George’s teleview screen belched a pink slip. He slipped it into a manila file titled *For Mildred*. She always questioned his expenses. George smiled.

Then he punched out a direct link.

“Newton Construction.”

“This is Dr. George Graylin with the Council of Economic Advisers. I’m calling from Washington. For Mr. Newton.”

“I’m sorry, sir. He’s on one line and has two calls holding.”

“Have him call me. My number is G E C 000 1 223 6767.”

“Could you repeat that, sir?”

“Certainly. G E C 000 1 223 6767.”

“G E C 000 1 223 6767?”

“Perfect. Thanks.”

George grinned. He picked up the second Coke, watered down as it was. The cup started to fold in his hand. He managed to get the whole soggy mess into the pulper without dribbling more than a few drops on his paper strewn desk or on his maroon jacket.

“Damn water soluble plastics! Damn barefoot conservationists!”

The viewer buzzed.

“Graylin here.”

“Dr. Graylin, this is Morton Newton in Denver. You called?”

“Yes. We’ve been reviewing the reports on the construction industry in the Denver area. What do you think of the situation?”

“Frankly, I don’t see how it could be better. Our starts are up, and the labor situation is beginning to ease. For a while it was damn hard to get people who wanted solid work.”

“We’re interested in how housing starts can be up while construction employment is down.”

“Oh, just the nature of the business. Construction’s a funny thing. Almost an art. It just doesn’t have any rules.”

“How about innovations?”

“Innovations?”

“New technology, building techniques...”

“We’re pretty set in our ways, Doctor. It’s hard to get carpenters or plumbers to change, you know.”

“Probably just a statistical fluke,” commented George. “It does happen. Once in a while. Sorry to bother you, Mr. Newton.” „ “No problem at all.”

“Thanks again.” George thumbed open the connection.

He riffled through the directory. Keypunched out another number.

“Dr. Woolford’s office.”

“George Graylin. Council of Economic Advisers. Hubert in?”

“One moment, please.”

“Woolford here.”

“George Graylin at the Council of Economic Advisers. I’ve run into an oddity Wondered if you fellows at Housing might be able to clarify.”

“Shoot, George.”

“Are you aware of new techniques in homebuilding in Metro Denver?”

“No, haven’t approved anything.”

“How about something you haven’t approved?”

“We turn down so many schemes to build the better, cheaper house...”

“And the normal reasons?” “Usually more expensive. Or impractical.”

“Any other reasons?”

“If it would cause a major restructuring of the labor market. What’s your interest?”

“Decrease in construction employment,” laughed George.

“See what I mean?” Hubert Woolford pulled at his long chin. “I’m sure that techniques we’ve turned down are feasible. You know, I know that solutions at the expense of employment are unwelcome. What’s the real rate of unemployment now? Not the one you quote between four and five percent.”

“Twenty one percent, including adjusted underemployment. Reason?”

“Just curious. I remember when it was just five percent. Unadjusted or statistically manipulated.”

“Thanks anyway, Hubert. Let you know.”

“Would you?”

“Certainly. Talk to you later.”

George went back to the directory, this time to the addendum.

“Union Negotiating, Mr. Bargunn’s office.”

“This is George Graylin, Council of Economic Advisers. Mr. Bargunn there?”

“One moment.”

“Gus Bargunn. What can I do for you, George? You’re the only conservative economist left in Washington.”

“No politics, Gus., What’s the story in Denver?”

“Denver?” The tone was bland. Too bland.

“No reason... except we’ve got a few figures here about increasing unemployment in homebuilding. But housing starts are up, and increasing. Means less labor intensive techniques, I’d guess...”

Gus Bargunn smiled. “You know, George, I might like you... some day.”

“Cut the compliments, Gus.”

“Affirm. Houseman—he’s developed so called new methods, will eventually hit us, but right now, he’s non Union. Doesn’t exist.”

“Yet,” added George.

Gus dropped the labor management smile.

“Thanks again, Gus. Unofficially, if interested, James Boulin Chartwell, III, holds for you. Jobs, not technology.”

“Can I pass that on?”

“No, but you will anyway.” George grinned.

“George, ever think about Labor?”

“I’ll keep it in mind. If I need a job.”

George ambled down to the cafeteria and drank two more Cokes, to wash down the yeastburger.

A Memo was waiting when he returned.

“George: Have you any information on the Nature of The Problem? What is the danger of Incipient Recession?” “There was more. George threw it in the pulper He tapped out the intercom code of the Senior Adviser. ”Mildred. The Adviser in?“ ”Yes, Dr. Graylin.“” Mildred used “Doctor” in a tone of contempt. The other PhD’s were “Mister.”

James Boulin Chartwell, III, and his glass of One Hundred Percent Pure Mineral Water, appeared on the screen.

“George, what have you Discovered?”

“Enough to go to Denver.” “That’s the Spirit, George. Get to The Heart Of The Matter.”

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He made it through the Reservation Gate before the afternoon crush. He caught a cab without notice, keeping the hand in his pocket on the ultra beamer just in case.

He had to pay an extra ten dollars for the two trips around the quad while the police disposer unit digested an illegally parked car.

George packed a small bag, then changed to a plain dark gray suit, pale blue shirt, and black tie. He hoped he wasn't too conspicuous.

The flight to Denver was uneventful. The passengers were knocked out once, in the middle of dinner, when a femrad tried to divert the plane to Sweden.

At Stapleton International, George waited an hour for the Denver Motor Pool to find his car.

Struggling with his newly acquired map and a perverse number of one way streets, he managed to find his hotel.

He set up the portable defense screen as soon as he entered his room, then dialled Houseman's office number. There was no home viewer listed for the builder. He got the answering service. No picture.

"This is Dr. George Graylin with the Council of Economic Advisers in Washington. While I'm here, I'd like to meet personally with Mr. Houseman. Tell him I plan to drop by at ten. I'll call at nine to confirm."

"You're Dr. Graylin, and you plan to see him at ten tomorrow. You'll confirm at nine. Is that all, sir?"

"That's it. Thanks."

The click was the only indication that the faceless secretary was no longer behind the blank screen.

George threw the combosuit on the bed and thumbed it open. He hung up the two suits, washed his face, combed his hair, and wandered down to the coffee shop. He had a Coke and a yeastburger at the counter. Thirteen other business types were slumped around, and the one waitress and the blank faced busboy jerked from table to table to counter.

George picked up a copy of *The3, Denver Post* on the way back to his room.

The portascreen was still buzzing happily. George double locked the door and sandwiched the desk chair under the knob. He tossed the dark gray suit into the laundry section of the combosuit, then dumped it onto the floor. He stretched out on the bed with the paper. After three pages he felt sleepy.

He woke at eight, the bedside light glaring into his face.

There was enough time to shower, shave, and dress.

He ambled down to the coffee shop for a Coke and a cinnayeast. George finished in time to call Houseman's office at five past nine. Ten was fine with Mr. Houseman.

The junior staff economist to the Senior Member of The Council of Economic Advisers managed to mangle the city map and his digestion in finding the builder's office. He arrived at ten ten.

George took three deep breaths before going in.

"May I help you?" Her voice was pleasant. George admired the modified Afro.

"Yes. George Graylin from the Council of Economic Advisers. I have a ten o'clock appointment."

"Go right on in. He'll be with you in a minute."

George sat down in a black leather and chrome chair. The office was spartan. There was an engineering diploma to Theron Oliver Houseman on one side wall. George could see why Houseman used his initials.

“Dr. Graylin?” Houseman was short, wiry, and black. His hair was clipped. Other than the long side burns, he was clean shaven.

“George, just George, Mr, Houseman.”

“Call me Tod. I’m just a carpenter with a degree. What do you have in’ mind?”

“I really don’t know, exactly. Somehow, an economic phenomenon we’re investigating seems to be connected. . . oh, hell, there I go getting tied up in the language again.”

“Briefly, your project seems to have something to do with an increased number of Housing Starts in the Denver area as well as an increased unemployment rate.” George felt that he shouldn’t have to step lightly, but. . . feeling wasn’t always correct.

Tod Houseman surveyed George. Then he laughed, explosively.

“You take some straight talk, George?”

George grinned, partly in relief.

“It’s a roundabout way, but I’d like to tell you how I got started in this business. I meant it when I said I was a carpenter with a degree. I broke into the Union when they started the Philadelphia plan here. After the plan flopped, I decided to stay in the building business. I got the degree at night. Went from framer to framing contractor to builder. After the experience with the Philadelphia plan, I went non Union all the way. For obvious reasons. The Union bigots didn’t want me—not on my terms. And later, I didn’t want them.

“I could build a better, cheaper house without all their rules. Since there are a bunch of non white builders around they couldn’t make it too hard on any one of us.”

Tod Houseman forced a smile. . “It’s still harder than hell not to be bitter. I keep telling myself that bitterness doesn’t help.”

“You were going to say how all this got started,” interjected George.

“Right. I used to build houses in the old style. One day I was going over my cost sheets. The cheapest part of building the house was the frame and the foundation. The two most expensive items are labor and lumber. Labor for plumbing, dry walling, electrical and heating installations, tile, trimming. . . you get the picture.”

“Hm m m,” commented George.

“So I thought, why not do a whole house at the framing stage, and use something besides lumber. And that’s what I’m doing.” Houseman gave an easy smile.

“The idea sounds great. But how do you make your profits? A lot of builders have tried the pre fab route and lost their shirts.” George wanted a Coke.

“The product is simple. I’ll start with that. I work a modular room system. The prefinished rooms are delivered to the site. Then we bolt them together, stick on our precast roof and, siding and we’re finished.” His smile turned into a grin. “It’s working pretty well.”

“Hold on. Where do you get these rooms, and roofs, and uh... siding? You have a factory?”

“Good a term as any. Actually a fat airbubble, portable, with one giant loading airlock. I have three semis with fold down sides that hold the epoxy casting machinery. I drive to the area I’m developing, set up the semis, blow up my balloon, and go to work.”

George was lost. He tried again.

“But you must have huge costs. All the molds, and the plumbing and the wiring...”

“We got that figured out early. Houses have basically only three kinds of rooms. Big ones, middle sized ones, and little ones with plumbing. We have two sizes of each. The living room can be a dining room, or a family room, or a master bedroom, or a double garage. The pullman kitchen can be a bathroom, a laundry room, or a storage room. We mix and match to suit your budget and your taste.” He gave a toothy grin.

“But the trade costs? I had to, call a plumber once, when my sister visited me with a baby and diapers, and he charged me a smalls fortune.”

“That’s the beauty of it. Each room is cast with all the electrical! gizmos, heating and plumbing in stalled.”

“How do you accomplish that?”

“We lay the pipes and electrical cables on prongs inside the molds. Then we pour in the epoxy and let it set two hours before unmolding.”

“What’s the reason for the bubble?” George knew it was a stupid question.

“Besides the manufacturing process, you mean? Each room has to cure inside the warm bubble for about twenty four hours. While it’s curing, we use the time to plug in the heating cooling strips and test the circuitry. Then we cart it off to be bolted together.”

This time it was George who grinned.

“And how many houses can each one of these turn out a day?”

“About ten.”

“I’m impressed.” George swallowed. “But I’d like to ask a few more questions...”

“Go ahead.”

“How did you get around building regulations? You’re using methods and materials that aren’t even mentioned in the codes.”

“My legal beagle found a loophole in the Colorado state statutes. If you can get eighty five percent of the property owners in an area to form a planning district, they can supersede county regulations. On my first project, two years ago, I bought up a bunch of contiguous lower ethno property in Mid Metro District County, put the title in fifty names, mostly friends and relatives, and set up my own planning district.

“No one even noticed. I made about three percent on the deal, selling the houses back to the original inhabitants, but the glue stuck, and everybody was happy. That was the lever that got me into the suburbs.”

“Weren’t people outside the Core a little dubious about plastic houses?”

Tod Houseman snorted. "Right now the cheapest house my competition can build costs forty five thousand dollars for a two bedroom, eight hundred square foot crackerbox. Hell, I can build a three bedroom, sixteen hundred square footer with a two car garage for less than twenty thousand dollars."

"Twice the house for half the money."

"It works well enough."

"Financing?" prompted George.

Houseman nodded. "A problem at first. I started my own bank on the second project."

George shook his head slowly.

"Schools, utilities?" George knew there would be a ready answer, but had to ask anyway.

"Public Service has lines all over the state. I built my own sewage plants. Then I tooled up a special mold on classrooms and built all the schools at once. I leased them to the county at a ten percent return and they thought they were taking me."

George was feeling thirstier. He swallowed.

"Just how many of these air bubble factories do you have?"

"Four."

George multiplied. Forty houses a day. Fifteen thousand a year, and just beginning.

"I see. I think that about does it... I'll be in touch."

"Appreciate your interest, but I could have told you all this on viewer."

"There's no way to tour your areas by viewer," said George. Or get out of the office, he thought.

Houseman grinned again and offered his hand. "Take care, George. We appreciate a healthy interest in our projects."

George shook his hand firmly and wondered exactly what he meant by a "healthy interest."

He stopped for a Coke at the first Vendaserve he spotted, and then, wielding the unwieldy map he'd gotten from the receptionist, George struggled out to Point Ultimate.

As George cruised the area, he began to appreciate Houseman's taste. The exteriors looked like real timber and brick, the shake roofs like cedar. The cluster arrangement left wide areas of greenbelt. The density was offset by evergreens and decking.

Although there was the usual litter of tricycles, mufflebikes, and rockeprams, all the front decks had flowerpots, instead of milk boxes, and every garage door was closed. George pulled over by the exit to study the map. He got lost three times on his way to the Denver Federal Center.

He finally stopped to ask directions.

Trading on an access code he should have forgotten, and the Council's name, he got what he needed through the Denver Data Link.

He headed for the elevator and the FHA office.

“Yes?” She was dressed in bright red and was suitably dumpy.

“I’m Dr. George Graylin from Washington, with the Council of Economic Advisers. Who could fill me in on the local low cost housing market?”

“That would be Mr. Gouger. I’ll see if he’s available.”

Herman Gouger was slight and blond, with a wispy mustache and a lisp.

“What did you want to know, Dr. Graylin?”

George did not say, “Call me George.”

“I’d like a general run out on low cost housing, Federal sponsored and commercial.”

“Well, as I am sure you know, Dr. Graylin, there is a substantial lack of new and approved techniques in the low cost housing market. Because of this dearth of innovation, we have been forced to concentrate the majority of our resources on the multifamily unit.

“Unfortunately, personal and tenant satisfaction are not maximized in such a situation. This has effected higher than desired insurance rates on the mortgage protection for the constructing agencies and a more rapid trend toward obsolescence.”

George smiled. “Translated loosely, people don’t like government subsidized apartments and are tearing them up.”

“Permanence in construction has been a definite and persistent problem,” admitted Gouger. “What about new techniques?” “With the notable exception of Houseman Enterprises, progress has been less than exceptional in that particular line of endeavor.”

How can he keep a straight face, wondered George.

“Who runs this Houseman Enterprises?”

“A black chap who” utilizes a less labor intensive method of prefabricating modular construction for employment in lower income housing. He has set up several companies to promote his products and his developments.“

George remained disinterestedly intent.

“Mr. Houseman remains an enigma to the Federal Housing Administration in that he never consulted with us on the availability of Federal funding.”

“Why?” queried George.

“I presume that not involving the Government in his sundry enterprises enabled him to maximize profits, minimize indecision, and circumvent difficulties inherent in low income housing regulations. Technically, he has no connection with subsidized housing, although. . .“

“Although?” pursued George. “Although the product of his efforts is less expensive and more desirable than any of the Government projects.”

“He builds a better, bigger, cheaper house?”

“Substantially, and the process allows one to select a wide variety of extremely variable color schemes,

even though the choice of actual modules is somewhat limited.”

“You know quite a bit about this,” commented George warily.

“My friend and I were most fortunate in being able to obtain one of the dwellings.”

That clinches that, thought George.

“Do you know if anyone has tried to qualify Houseman’s project for FHA, PC, or VA loans?”

Herman Gouger smiled wryly. “I did. They said that authorization had been delayed. Apparently, construction techniques were not in accordance with...”

“I see,” interrupted George firmly. “I think you’ve answered my needs completely. Best regards, and thank you.”

Gouger pulled at one Tend of his wispy mustache as George got up.

Samuel Sherman Stephenson, IV, was tall and portly. He was also the president of the First Denver Trust.

“Dr. Graylin, my secretary tells me you’re here from Washington?”

“That’s correct, sir. I need some background information. I hoped that the president of the Colorado Bankers Association might be able to help.”

“I’ll try. I’ll try.”

“What can you tell me about a bank called ‘Bank on the Front Range’?”

“Relatively new bank. Builder named T. O. Houseman is the majority stockholder.”

“How big a bank is it?”

“Couldn’t really say.” The banker shook his head ruefully. “Big enough to attract our top black vice president. Houseman owns it, but he also has large, but not majority, interests in four or five other banks.”

“Do you know the other large interests in those banks?”

The banker’s eyes twinkled.

“I suspect, sir, that you already know the answer to that.”

George had to grin.

“Why did you invest in them?”

“We believed in the idea Houseman had; And it’s a good way to generate loans that aren’t snarled in red tape. You know the multiplier effect.

“Our major customers would frown, unofficially, of course, upon our backing him directly. This way, we got him set up on his own and get back a good and continuing return. Getting charters for minority controlled banks is not that difficult. After the first bank, there was little or no risk to us.” He smiled.

George did not. “Thank you, sir, very much.”

He made it to the hotel in record time, despite the one way streets, grabbed his gear, disassembled the portascreeen, and checked out.

He left the Motor Pool car double parked at Stapleton International.

Greater Washington was as uncivil as ever. George had to wait an hour for a cab. His apartment defense screen had shorted out. The electro burglars had taken the television, the stereophone, and two cartons of Cokes. The books in his study had been dumped off the shelves.

George replaced the fused section of wiring, reset the screen, and put the books back on the shelf. He reported the incident to the insurance agency, then to the police. The police scheduled their investigation for 10:45 on the thirtieth.

George marched into the lobby, purchased an overpriced Vendaserve Coke, stomped back inside and went to bed.

He opened the office door just as Mary was putting the Coke on his desk. He pulled the folder on insurance premiums out of his overstuffed file drawer, then checked his Memoranda from James Boulin Chartwell, III. There were only two. Both said, "Let Me Know." and were embellished with the normal inanities about the Great American Economy.

Mary brought in a file. George shoved it into his overflowing In basket, and continued checking the insurance premium schedules. He decided, once again, not to change his thousand dollar deductible to five hundred dollar deductible. He wondered, then stuffed the file back in the drawer and tapped out a number.

"Houseman Enterprises."

"This is George Graylin calling from Washington. Is Mr. Houseman in?"

She didn't say anything. The screen went blank momentarily.

George realized he hadn't played out the charade with the Federal operators to be denied a WAIT line. He shrugged.

"Houseman."

"George Graylin here. From Washington. I wanted to congratulate you on Point Ultimate. I took a look at it yesterday. Are all the other developments that beautiful?"

"I appreciate your interest, Dr. Graylin."

Houseman didn't like small talk. George approved.

"I'll get to the point. First, I presume you're stacking your construction crews with blacks?"

"One hundred percent."

"Second, although you'll sell to anyone, you're targeting blacks?"

"Why do you say that?"

George grinned. "Why else would you supply a basketball backboard with every house? I'm sure you used a black design team, but since I'm not an expert at culture, I could only pick out the feeling rather than the details."

“You still haven’t said why you called.”

“Because, whether you realize it or not,” exploded George, “you’ve got problems. Do you realize that the entire Labor movement is about to land on you? How long do you think that fifty year old loophole in the state statutes is going to last when they get going?”

George Hadn’t thought it would be so hard to get through.

“Look, Houseman, I presume your goal is a total black Community, complete with black tech and industrial centers. I can help you through this morass if you’ll accept Union construction workers when you build your industrial parks. Now do you want help, damn it?” George found himself clenching his fists.

Tod Houseman began to grin.

“Thought I’d make you work for that, boy. I’ve seen too many bureaucrats come up with easy solutions that didn’t work. You do better, fine.”

George wiped his forehead. “I’d rather not explain the details, just yet, but it should work...”

“Keep me posted.” Tod Houseman smiled again. “Economic solutions work.”

George went back to his printouts. Then he leafed through his datebook. He punched out a combination.

“George, you old bureaucrat! Great to see you!” The young man looked at George from across a three foot wooden desk. “What do you want this time?”

“Murray, you’ve been telling me for years that a timber company should diversify. You and your family are already conglomerating, but I have somebody you should talk to. Have you kept a finger on the Denver market?”

“George, have you had me tailed?”

“You’ve seen Point Ultimate?”

“Seen it? Hell, we supplied all the plastic epoxies.”

“Did you know there are plant sites there?”

Murray started in the highbacked Execurocker.

“If you can put together a black staff, go talk to Houseman. Our studies,” George waved a stack of irrelevant print outs, “indicate that it might be the best investment you ever made.”

“Let you know, George. We’ve thought about it a lot.”

“Think about it some more.”

George broke the connection.

He jabbed out another number.

“Export.”

“Bill Bussard there? George Graylin over at the Advisers.”

“No, sir. He’s not in yet.”

“Have him get in touch with me.

He’ll be eternally grateful. At least, after a while, he will be,” George chuckled.

“Yes, sir. Have him return the call.”

George began to doodle. Then he ambled to the console and began to type. He stood and waited. The computer terminal burped and fed George a print out. He studied it, then typed a few more lines. This time the print out was longer. As he studied it, he began to smile.

Back at his desk, he began to rough out the arithmetic.

The viewer buzzed at him.

“Graylin here.”

“Bill Bussard, George. What’s up the fabled sleeve this time?”

“Solutions.” George looked at the print out.. “Call up AB 43598 on your console. Then call Tod Houseman in Denver. He’s a builder.”

“But, George. This is Budget time.”

“Right. This will help get you out of the jam you’re in. Houseman can explain the details. I know the Balance of Trade figures for last quarter.”

“Can I just fly a white flag... oh, hell, what can I lose except my rating.” Bussard faded off the screen.

George marched to the computer console. He had to type the inquiry twice. He erased his own input the first time. The first print out led him into a second, which resulted in a third, which created a fourth.

Three hours later, George felt he’d bridged all the gaps and was ready to play it out.

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“George, That was a Magnificent End Run. You understand why we couldn’t afford to Make a Touchdown, don’t you?”

George understood all too well.

“And I think that you should handle the Housing and Export Portfolios from now on, as well as acting as a consultant to Perron Riccardo on Banking and Labor. You have Handled a Sticky Situation Quite Tactfully.”

James Boulin Chartwell, III poured himself a glass of One Hundred Percent Pure Mineral Water and took a small sip. He looked at George.

“Will you join me in a glass?”

George declined tactfully.

The Not Quite So Junior Staff Economist had barely collapsed behind his desk when the viewer buzzed.

“All right, how? Just how?” It was Gus Bargunn from Union Negotiating. He looked green.

George settled back in his chair to enjoy himself.

“Really want to know, Gus?”

“Yeah, how did you ever get Weasilin to sign that... that...”

“You take me to lunch, I’ll explain.” George was not hungry, but principle was principle.

“All right, the Burr Room at twelve thirty.”

Gus was waiting at the table, impatiently chomping on a cheese stick. George sat down.

“A drink, sir?” intruded the red coated waiter.

“Coke, fresh lime, please.”

“Another Scotch and water,” demanded Gus, “and send the waitress around.”

“Yes, Mr. Bargunn.”

“Know you here, Gus?”

“I’m here often enough. Now how did you get old Weasilin at Headquarters to sign that agreement?”

“I promised him more jobs for construction workers.”

“Are you ready to order, gentlemen?”

“I’ll have the special,” grumbled Gus.

“Steak sandwich, Colorado beef, if you have it,” added George, “with French fries and another Coke. Roquetoast dressing on the salad.”

“Would you like your coffee with dinner or later, Mr. Bargunn?”

“Later.” Gus gestured the girl away.

“You got them to support this deal by promising more jobs? From what I know, Houseman cuts eighty percent of the labor costs with his system. That’s going to increase jobs?”

“Look, Gus, the new jobs don’t have anything to do with low income housing. They’re based on Houseman’s black industrial parks.”

“Run that one by me again,” demanded the Union official.

“All right. Houseman designed each housing area with space for an industrial park, based on the hope that he could bring in black industry or persuade some of the larger corporations to locate branch operations there and staff them with blacks.”

“You mean the guy has been planning a total black environment the whole time?”

“Don’t sound so outraged, Gus. Union labor will build all those beautiful black plants. That’s what you want, isn’t it? More jobs?” George reached for the radishes.

“Just assuming that this massive construction, effort will create more Union jobs, and I’m not too sure of that, but assuming it would,” asked Gus quietly, “just how are you going to get the money for this Great

Industrial Relocation?”

“We’ve already got it, Gus.” George took a satisfying crunch on his radish.

“Yeah? How?”

“We played a little switchy switchy behind the scenes, Gus. We, or I should say, my boss, went to the President and showed him that subsidies for low income housing could be eliminated from the budget. Houseman’s methods are ten thousand dollars cheaper and need ‘no subsidy. Besides, no builder wants to do the stuff; they just do it to keep their Federal Developer ticket so they can keep on the FHA, PC, and VA approved lists.

“Anyway, extending VA, PC, and FHA approvals to plastic housing is all the help the low income buyer really needs. And that’s an Executive decision. The President was delighted. In fact, he muttered a bit about ‘why hasn’t it been done before?’”

Gus showed no reaction to George’s fairly passable imitation of the President. George picked up the Coke as soon as the waiter set it down, took a quick swallow, and went on.

“Then the ‘boss went to bat for Labor. He persuaded the President to budget the money we saved by eliminating the subsidies for the Labor Market. Instead of subsidizing houses, we subsidize new construction loans. But only if Union labor is used. And the Congressional leadership says there’s enough votes to pass it.”

“So Labor gets a few jobs. Great.” Gus’s tone was flat.

“Of course, those loans are designed for those companies who want to spur minority employment.”

“Meaning Houseman’s damn black industrial parks,” finished Gus. “That had to be the fly in the ointment.”

“You can’t complain, Gus. Houseman has to use Union construction workers.”

“Yeah, maybe. But what companies are going to make this kind of move? Even with subsidized loans?”

“How about Sequoya Northwest for starters? Friend of mine, Murray Weiderhausen, his family owns the whole glotch. They’ve been watching Houseman all along. They’re ready to put an epoxy plastics plant in Houseman’s Point Ultimate, with all all black staff. The shift from timber to plastics will help them. Placate the conservationists.”

“Graylin, you got more solutions than a damn chemist. What else?”

“Tossed in a couple more economic goodies, mostly to please my boss. Underdeveloped—excuse me, the rapidly developing—countries can use a cheap house, and exporting Houseman’s process will help Balance of Payments and Balance of Trade. Labor should be happy with extra jobs in the machine tool and plastics Industries.”

George finished the Coke and started on the ice cubes.

“Then I showed your President Weasilin the statistics. Houseman really doesn’t have much effect” on standard homebuilding. He’s strictly low income, and he’ll be plenty busy with that backlog. Moderate and high income house construction won’t be affected.

“In areas where there has been no low income housing, Houseman will actually increase construction

employment. Your Mr. Weasilin seemed satisfied with that.”

“For God’s sake, Graylin. Houseman won’t stay in low income housing forever.”

George sat back. “No, I figure about five years, Gus.”

“And then what do you figure?” Gus Bargunn’s voice was very, very level.

George leaned forward and smiled. “Why, then I figure he’ll take over the rest of the housing market. Or rather, his techniques will.” George pulverized an ice cube with his molars.

“You damn calculating back alley bureaucrat. This agreement you had us sign means that in five years we’ll all be out of work.”

George’s smile became a wide grin. “If you Union men had gotten in the habit of projecting a little more into the future, you could have seen that. But you’ve never looked beyond the end of your next exorbitant contract to see what was happening in this country.

“No, you guys have had it coming for a long, long time. You’ve fought integration. You’ve fought innovation. And you’ve created inflation for longer than anyone can remember.

“But you could have seen what was coming, Gus, if you hadn’t been so short sighted.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Houseman warned you himself.”

“Didn’t you ever look at the way he signs his name, or the way it appears in his ads?”

“Signs his name?”

“Uses his initials. T.O. Houseman, and he capitalizes the M”

Gus wrote it out on the ‘linen napkin. Then he wrote it out again.

He pushed back his chair and stood up.

“If you think we’ll keep that agreement...”

“Cut it, Gus. You and I both know what the courts would do to you under the revised Sherman Anti Trust Act if you broke it. And I can see the headlines now: UNION DENIES WORKERS CHEAP HOUSING.”

Gus folded the napkin carefully and laid it on the table. He reached down, picked up his glass and drained the last of the Scotch.

“Enjoy your lunch, George. The check will go to my office.” He walked steadily out of the dining room and did not look back.

George smiled. There was more. He wanted to see Houseman at work in managing an industrial operation. Gus hadn’t considered that.

George sat at the table, debating. The waitress brought the two platters.

In good conscience, George felt, he really ought to pay the check. On the other hand...

He finished the steak sandwich. It was excellent.

Gamesmanship be damned. He let the waiter take the check for Gus.

Then he ordered the chocolate mint pie. He had that put on a separate check and sent to Mildred.