

Me and My Shadow

by Mike Resnick

It all began when --

No. Strike that.

I don't know when it all began. Probably I never will.

But it began the second time when a truck backfired and I hit the sidewalk with the speed and grace of an athlete, which surprised the hell out of me since I've been a very un athletic businessman ever since the day I was born -- or born again, depending on your point of view.

I got up, brushed myself off, and looked around. About a dozen pedestrians (though it felt like a hundred) were staring at me, and I could tell what each of them was thinking: Is this guy just some kind of nut, or has he maybe been Erased? And if he's been Erased, have I ever met him before? Do I owe him?

Of course, even if we had met before, they couldn't recognize me now. I know. I've spent almost three years trying to find out who I was before I got Erased, but along with what they did to my brain, they gave me a new face and wiped my fingerprints clean. I'm a brand new man: two years, eleven months, and seventeen days old. I am (fanfare and trumpets, please!) ***William Jordan***. Not a real catchy name, I'll admit, but it's the only one I've got these days.

I had another name once. They told me not to worry about it, that all my memories had been expunged and that I couldn't dredge up a single fact no matter how hard I tried, not even if I took a little Sodium-P from a hypnotist, and after a few weeks I had to agree with them -- which didn't mean that I stopped trying.

Erasures never stop trying.

Maybe the doctors and technicians at the Institute are right. Maybe I'm better off not knowing. Maybe the knowledge of what I did would drive the New Improved Me to suicide. But let me tell you: whatever I did, whatever any of us did (oh, yes, I speak to other Erasures; we spent a lot of time hanging around the newstape morgues and Missing Persons Bureaus and aren't all that hard to spot), it would be easier to live with the details than the uncertainty.

Example:

"Good day to you, Madam. Lovely weather we're having. Please excuse a delicate inquiry, but did I rape your infant daughter four years ago? Sodomize your sons? Slit your husband open from crotch to chin? Oh, no reason in particular; I was just curious."

Do you begin to see the problem?

Of course, they tell us that we're special, that we're not simply run-of-the-mill criminals and fiends; the jails are full of them.

Ah, fun and games at the Institute! It's quite an experience.

We cherish your individuality, they say as they painfully extract all my memories. (Funny: the pain lingers long after the memories are gone.)

Society needs men with your drive and ambition, they smile as they shoot about eighteen zillion volts of electricity through my spasmodically-jerking body.

You had the guts to buck the system, they point out as they shred my face and give me a new one.

With drive like yours there's no telling how far you can go now that we've imprinted a new personality and a new set of ethics onto that magnificent libido, they agree as they try to decide whether to school me as a kennel attendant or perhaps turn me into an encyclopedia salesman. (They compromise and metamorphize me into an accountant.)

You lucky man, you've got a new name and face and memories and five hundred dollars in your pocket and you've still got your drive and ambition, they say as they excruciatingly insert a final memory block.

Now go out and knock 'em dead, they tell me.

Figuratively speaking, they add hastily.

Oh, one last thing, they say as they shove me out the door of the Institute. _We're pretty busy here, William Jordan, so don't come back unless it's an emergency. A BONAFIDE emergency._

"But where am I to go?" I asked. "What am I to do?"

You'll think of something, they assure me. _After all, you had the brains and guts to buck our social system. Boy, do we wish we were like you! Now beat it; we've got work to do -- or do you maybe think you're the only anti-social misanthrope with delusions of grandeur who ever got Erased?_

And the wild part is that they were right: most Erasures make out just fine. Strange as it sounds, we really _do_ have more drive than the average man, the guy who just wants to hold off his creditors until he retires and his pension comes through. We'll take more risks, make quicker decisions, fight established trends more vigorously. We're a pretty gritty little group, all right -- except that none of us knows why he was Erased.

In fact, I didn't have my first hint until the truck backfired. (See? I'll bet you thought I had forgotten all about it. Not a chance, friend. Erasures don't forget things -- at least, not once they've left the Institute. What most Erasures do is spend vast portions of their new lives trying to _remember_ things. Futilely.)

Well, my memory may have been wiped clean, but my instincts were still in working order, and what they told me was that I was a little more used to being shot at than the average man on the street. Not much to go on, to be sure, but at least it implied that the nature of my sin leaned more toward physical violence than, say, Wall Street tycoonery with an eye toward sophisticated fraud.

So I went to the main branch of the Public Library, rented a quarter of an hour on the Master Computer, and started popping in the questions.

LIST ALL CRIMINALS STANDING SIX FEET TWO INCHES WHO WERE APPREHENDED AND CONVICTED IN NEW YORK CITY BETWEEN 2008 A.D. AND 2010 A.D.

***CLASSIFIED.

That wasn't surprising. It had been classified the last fifty times I had asked. But, undaunted (Erasures are rarely daunted), I continued.

LIST ALL MURDERS COMMITTED BY PISTOL IN NEW YORK CITY BETWEEN 2008 A.D. AND 2010 A.D.

The list appeared on the screen, sixty names per second.

STOP.

The computer stopped, while I tried to come up with a more limiting question.

WITHOUT REVEALING THEIR IDENTITIES, TELL ME HOW MANY CRIMINALS WERE CONVICTED OF MULTIPLE PISTOL MURDERS IN NEW YORK CITY BETWEEN 2008 A.D. AND 2010 A.D.

***CLASSIFIED. Then it burped and added: NICE TRY, THOUGH.

THANK YOU. HAS ANY ERASURE EVER DISCOVERED EITHER HIS ORIGINAL IDENTITY OR THE REASON HE WAS ERASED?

NOT YET.

DOES THAT IMPLY IT IS POSSIBLE?

NEGATIVE.

THEN IT IS IMPOSSIBLE?

NEGATIVE.

THEN WHAT THE HELL DID YOU MEAN?

ONLY THAT NO IMPLICATION WAS INTENDED.

I checked my wristwatch. Five minutes left.

I AM AN ERASURE, I began.

I WOULD NEVER HAVE GUESSED.

Just what I needed -- sarcasm from a computer. They're making them too damned smart these days.

RECENTLY I REACTED INSTINCTIVELY TO A SOUND VERY SIMILAR TO THAT MADE BY A PISTOL BEING FIRED, ALTHOUGH I HAD NO CONSCIOUS REASON TO DO SO. WOULD THAT IMPLY THAT GUNFIRE PLAYED AN IMPORTANT PART IN MY LIFE PRIOR TO THE TIME I WAS ERASED?

***CLASSIFIED.

CLASSIFIED, NOT NEGATIVE?

THAT IS CORRECT.

I got up with three minutes left on my time.

My next stop was at Doubleday's, on Fifth Avenue. The sign in the window boasted half a million microdots per cubic yard, which meant that they had one hell of a collection of literature crammed into their single ten-by-fifty-foot aisle.

I went straight to the True Crime section, but gave up almost immediately when I saw the sheer volume of True Crime that occurred each and every day in Manhattan.

I called in sick, then hunted up a shooting gallery in the vidphone directory. I made an appointment, rode the Midtown sidewalk up to the front door, rented a pistol, and went downstairs to the soundproofed target range in the basement.

It took me a couple of minutes to figure out how to insert the ammunition clip, an inauspicious beginning. Then I hefted the gun, first in one hand and then the other, hoping that something I did would feel familiar. No luck. I felt awkward and foolish, and the next couple of minutes didn't make me feel any better. I took dead aim at the target hanging some fifty feet away and missed it completely. I held the pistol with both hands and missed it again. I missed it right-handed and left-handed. I missed it with my right eye closed, I missed it with my left eye closed, I missed it with both eyes open.

Well, if the only thing I had going for me was my instinct, I decided to give that instinct a chance. I threw myself to the floor, rolled over twice, and fired off a quick round -- and shot out the overhead light.

So much, I told myself, for instinct. Obviously the man I used to be was more at home ducking bullets than aiming them.

I left the gallery, hunted up a couple of Erased friends, and asked them if they'd ever experienced anything like my little flash of *_deja vu_*. One of them thought it was hilarious -- they may have made him safe, but I have my doubts about whether they made him sane -- and the other confessed to certain vague stirrings whenever she heard a John Philip Sousa march, which wasn't exactly the answer I was looking for.

I stopped off for lunch at a local soya joint, spent another fruitless fifteen minutes in the library with my friend the computer, and went back to my brownstone condo to think things out. The whole time I was riding the sidewalk home I kept shadow-boxing and dancing away from imaginary enemies and reaching for a nonexistent revolver under my left arm, but nothing felt natural or even comfortable. After I got off the sidewalk and walked the final half block to my front door, I decided to see if I could pick the lock, but I gave up after about ten minutes, which was probably just as well since a passing cop was giving me the fish-eye.

I poured myself a stiff drink -- Erasures' homes differ in locale and decor and many other respects, but you'll find liquor in all of them, as well as cheap memory courses and the Collected Who's Who in Organized Crime tapes -- and tried, for the quadrillionth time, to dredge up some image from my past. The carnage of war, the screams and supplications of rape victims, the moans of old men and children lying sliced and bleeding in Central Park, all were grist for my mental mill -- and all felt unfamiliar.

So I couldn't shoot and I couldn't pick locks and I couldn't remember. All that was on the one hand.

On the other hand was just one single solitary fact: I had ducked.

But somewhere deep down in my gut (certainly not in my brain) I knew, I *_knew_*, that the man I used to be had screamed wordlessly in my ear (or somewhere) to hit the deck before I got my/his/our damned fool head blown off.

This was contrary to everything they had told me at the Institute. I wasn't even supposed to be in communication with my former self. Even emergency conferences while bullets flew through the air were supposed to be impossible.

The more I thought about it, the more I decided that this definitely qualified as a bonafide Institute-visiting emergency. So I put on my jacket and left the condo and started off for the Institute. I didn't have any luck flagging down a cab -- like frightened herbivores, New York cabbies all hide at the first hint of nightfall -- so I started walking over to the East River sidewalk.

I had gone about two blocks when a grungy little man with watery eyes, a pock-marked face, and a very crooked nose jumped out at me from between two buildings, a wicked-looking knife in his hand.

Well, three years without being robbed in Manhattan is like flying 200 missions over Iraq or Paraguay or whoever we're mad at this month. You figure your number is up and you stoically take what's coming to you.

So I handed him my wallet, but there was only a single small bill in it, plus a bunch of credit cards geared to my voiceprint, and he suddenly threw the wallet on the ground and went berserk, ranting and raving about how I had cheated him.

I started backing away, which seemed to enrage him further, because he screamed something obscene and raced toward me with his knife raised above his head, obviously planning to plunge it into my neck or chest.

I remember thinking that of all the places to die, Second Avenue between 35th and 36th Streets was perhaps the very last one I'd have chosen. I remember wanting to yell for help but being too scared to force a sound out. I remember seeing the knife plunge down at me as if in slow motion.

And then, the next thing I knew, he was lying on his back, both his arms broken and his nose spouting blood like a fountain, and I was kneeling down next to him, just about to press the point of the knife into his throat.

I froze, trying to figure out what had happened, while deep inside me a voice -- not angry, not bloodthirsty, but soft and seductive -- crooned: *_Do it, do it._*

"Don't kill me!" moaned the man, writhing beneath my hands. "Please don't kill me!"

You'll enjoy it, murmured the voice. *_You'll see._*

I remained motionless for another moment, then dropped the knife and ran north, paying no attention to the traffic signals and not slowing down until I practically barreled into a bus that was blocking the intersection at 42nd Street.

Fool! whispered the voice. *_Didn't I save your life? Trust me._*

Or maybe it wasn't the voice at all. Maybe I was just imagining what it would say if it were there.

At any rate, I decided not to go to the Institute at all. I had a feeling that if I walked in looking breathless and filthy and with the mugger's blood all over me, they'd just Erase me again before I could tell them what had happened.

So I went back home, took a quick Dryshower, hunted up Dr. Brozgold's number in the book, and called him.

"Yes?" he said after the phone had chimed twice. He looked just as I remembered him: tall and cadaverous, with a black mustache and bushy eyebrows, the kind of man who could put on a freshly-pressed suit and somehow manage to look rumpled.

"I'm an Erasure," I said, coming right to the point. "You worked on me."

"I'm afraid we have a faulty connection here," he said, squinting at his monitor. "I'm not receiving a video transmission."

"That's because I put a towel over my camera," I told him.

"I assume that this is an emergency?" he asked dryly, cocking one of those large, thick, disheveled eyebrows.

"It is," I said.

"Well, Mr. X -- I hope you don't mind if I call you that -- what seems to be the problem?"

"I almost killed a man tonight."

"Really?" he said.

"Doesn't that surprise you?"

"Not yet," he replied, placing his hands before him and juxtaposing his fingers. "I'll need some details first. Were you driving a car or robbing a bank or what?"

"I almost killed this man with my bare hands."

"Well, whoever you are, Mr. X, and who ever you were," he said, stroking his ragged mustache thoughtfully, "I think I can assure you that almost killing people probably wasn't your specialty."

"You don't understand," I said doggedly. "I used karate or kung fu or something like that, and I don't know any karate or kung fu."

"Who is this?" he demanded suddenly.

"Never mind," I said. "What I want to know is: What the hell is happening to me?"

"Look, I really can't help you without knowing your case history," he said, trying to keep the concern out of his voice and not quite succeeding.

"I don't have a history," I said. "I'm a brand-new man, remember?"

"Then what have you got against telling me who you are?"

"I'm trying to find out who I am!" I said hotly. "A little voice has been telling me that killing people feels good."

"If you'll present yourself at the Institute first thing in the morning, I'll do what I can," he said nervously.

"I know what you can do," I snapped. "You've already done it to me. I want to know if its being undone."

"Absolutely not!" he said emphatically. "Whoever you are, your memory has been totally eradicated. No Erasure has ever developed even partial recall."

"Then how did I mangle a professional mugger who was attacking me with a knife?"

"The human body is capable of many things when placed under extreme duress," he replied in carefully-measured tones.

"I'm not talking about jumping ten feet in the air or running fifty yards in four seconds when you're being chased by a wild animal! I'm talking about crippling an armed opponent with three precision blows."

"I really can't answer you on the spur of the moment," he said. "If you'll just come down to the Institute and ask for me, I'll -- "

"You'll what?" I demanded. "Erase a little smudge that you overlooked the first time?"

"If you won't give me your name and you won't come to the Institute," he said, "just what is it that you want from me?"

"I want to know what's happening."

"So you said," he commented dryly.

"And I want to know who I was."

"You know we can't tell you that," he replied. Then he paused and smiled ingratiatingly into the camera. "Of course, we might make an exception in this case, given the nature of your problem. But we can't do that unless we know who you are now."

"What assurances have I that you won't Erase me again?"

"You have my word," he said with a fatherly smile.

"You probably gave me your word the last time, too," I said.

"This conversation is becoming tedious, Mr. X. I can't help you without knowing who you are. In all likelihood nothing at all out of the ordinary has happened or is happening to you. And if indeed you are developing a new criminal persona, I have no doubt that we'll be meeting before too long anyway. So if you have nothing further to say, I really do have other things to do." He paused, then looked sharply into the camera. "What's really disturbing you? If you are actually experiencing some slight degree of recall, why should that distress you? Isn't that what all you Erasures are always hoping for?"

"The voice," I said.

"What about the voice?" he demanded.

"I don't know whether to believe it or not."

"The one that tells you to kill people?"

"It sounds like it knows," I said softly. "It sounds convincing."

"Oh, Lord!" he whispered, and hung up the phone.

"Are you still here?" I asked the voice.

There was no answer, but I really didn't expect any. There was no one around to kill.

Suddenly I began to feel constricted, like the walls were closing in on me and the air was getting too thick to breathe, so I put my jacket back on and went out for a walk, keeping well clear of Second Avenue.

I stayed away from the busier streets and stuck to the residential areas -- as residential as you can get in Manhattan, anyway -- and spent a couple of hours just wandering aimlessly while trying to analyze what was happening to me.

Two trucks backfired, but I didn't duck either time. A huge black man with a knife handle clearly visible

above his belt walked by and gave me a long hard look, but I didn't disarm him. A police car cruised by, but I felt no urge to run.

In fact, I had just about convinced myself that Dr. Brozgold wasn't humoring me after all but was absolutely right about my having an overactive imagination, when a cheaply-dressed blonde hooker stepped out of a doorway and gave me the eye.

This one, whispered the voice.

I stopped dead in my tracks, terribly confused.

Trust me, it crooned.

The hooker smiled at me and, as if in a trance, I returned the smile and let her lead me upstairs to her sparsely-furnished room.

Patience, cautioned the voice. _Not too fast. Enjoy._

She locked the door behind us.

What if she screams, I asked myself. We're on the fourth floor. How will I get away?

Relax, said the voice, all smooth and mellow. _First things first. You'll get away, never fear. I'll take care of you._

The hooker was naked now. She smiled at me again, murmured something unintelligible, then came over and started unbuttoning my shirt.

I smashed a thumb into her left eye, heard bones cracking as I drove a fist into her rib cage, listened to her scream as I brought the edge of my hand down on the back of her neck.

Then there was silence.

It was fabulous! moaned the voice. _Just fabulous!_ Suddenly it became solicitous. _Was it good for you, too?_

I waited a moment for my breathing to return to normal, for the flush of excitement to pass, or at least fade a little.

"Yes," I said aloud. "Yes, I enjoyed it."

I told you, said the voice. _They may have changed your memories, but they can't change your soul. You and I have always enjoyed it._

"Do we just kill women?" I asked, curious.

I don't remember, admitted the voice.

"Then how did you know we had to kill this one?"

I know them when I see them, the voice assured me.

I mulled that over while I went around tidying up the room, rubbing the doorknob with my handkerchief, trying to remember if I had touched anything else.

They took away your fingerprints, said the voice. _Why bother?_

"So they don't know they're looking for an Erasure," I said, giving the room a final examination and then walking out the door.

I went home, put the towel back over the vidphone camera, and called Dr. Brozgold.

"You again?" he said when he saw that he wasn't receiving a picture.

"Yes," I answered. "I've thought about what you said, and I'll come in tomorrow morning."

"At the Institute?" he asked, looking tremendously relieved.

"Right. Nine o'clock sharp," I replied. "If you're not there when I arrive, I'm leaving."

"I'll be there," he promised.

I hung up the vidphone, checked out his address in the directory, and walked out the door.

Smart, said the voice admiringly as I walked the twenty-two blocks to Brozgold's apartment. _I would never have thought of this._

"That's probably why they caught you," I whispered into the cold night air.

It took me just under an hour to reach Brozgold's place. (They turn the slidewalks off at eight o'clock to save money.) Somehow I had known that he'd be in one of the century-old four-floor apartment buildings; any guy who dressed like he did and forgot to comb his hair wasn't about to waste money on a high-rise to impress his friends. I found his apartment number, then walked around to the back, clambered up the rickety wooden stairs to the third floor, checked out a number of windows, and knew I had the right place when I came to a kitchen with about fifty books piled on the floor and four days' worth of dirty dishes in the sink. I couldn't jimmy this lock any better than my own, but the door was one of the old wooden types and I finally threw a shoulder against it and broke it.

"Who's there?" demanded Brozgold, walking out of the bedroom in his pajamas and looking even more unkempt than usual.

"Hi," I said with a cheerful smile, shoving him back into the bedroom. "Remember me?"

I closed the door behind us, just to be on the safe side. The room smelled of stale tobacco, or maybe it was just the stale clothing in his closet. His furniture -- a dresser, a writing desk, a double bed, a couple of nightstands, and a chair -- had cost him a bundle, but they hadn't seen a coat of polish, or even a dust rag, since the day they'd been delivered.

He was staring at me, eyes wide, a dawning look of recognition on his face. "You're ... ah ... Jurgins? Johnson? I can't remember the name on the spur of the moment. You're the one who's been calling me?"

"I am," I said, pushing him onto the chair. "And it's William Jordan."

"Jordan. Right." He looked flustered, like he wasn't fully awake yet. "What are you doing here, Jordan? I thought we were meeting at the Institute tomorrow morning."

"I know you did," I answered him. "I wanted to make sure that all your security was down there so we could have a private little chat right here and now."

He stood up. "Now you listen to me, Jordan -- "

I pushed him back down, hard.

"That's what I came here for," I said. "And the first thing I want to listen to is the reason I was Erased."

"You were a criminal," he said coldly. "You know that."

"What crime did I commit?"

"You know I can't tell you that!" he yelled, trying to hide his mounting fear beneath a blustering exterior. "Now get the hell out of here and -- "

"How many people did I kill with my bare hands?" I asked pleasantly.

"What?"

"I just killed a woman," I said. "I enjoyed it. I mean, I really enjoyed it. Right at this moment I'm trying to decide how much I'd like killing a doctor."

"You're crazy!" he snapped.

"As a matter of fact," I replied, "I have a certificate stating that the State of New York considers me to be absolutely sane." I grinned. "Guess who signed it?"

"Go away!"

"As soon as you tell me what I want to know."

"I can't!"

"Are you still with me?" I whispered under my breath.

Right here, said the voice.

"Take over at the proper moment or I'm going to break my hand," I told it.

Ready when you are, it replied.

"Perhaps you need a demonstration of my skill and my sincerity," I said to Brozgold as I walked over to the dresser.

I lifted my hand high above my head and started bringing it down toward the dull wooden surface. I winced just before impact, but it didn't hurt a bit -- and an instant later the top of the dresser and the first two drawers were split in half.

"Thanks," I whispered.

Any time.

"That could just as easily have been you," I said, turning back to Brozgold. "In fact, if you don't tell me what I want to know, it will be you."

"You'll kill me anyway," he said, shaking with fear but blindly determined to stick to his guns.

"I'll kill you if you don't tell me," I said. "If you do, I promise I won't harm you."

"What's the promise of a killer worth?" he said bitterly.

"You're the one who gave me my sense of honor," I pointed out. "Do you go around manufacturing

liars?"

"No. But I don't go around manufacturing killers, either."

"I just want to know who I was and what I did," I repeated patiently. "I don't want to do it again. I just need some facts to fight off this damned voice."

Well, I like that, said the voice.

"I can't," repeated Brozgold.

"Sure you can," I said, taking a couple of steps toward him.

"It won't do you any good," he said, on the verge of tears now. "Everything about you, every last detail, has been classified. You won't be able to follow up on anything I know."

"Maybe we won't have to," I said. "How many people did I kill?"

"I can't."

I reached over to the little writing desk and brought my hand down. It split in two.

"How many?" I repeated, glaring at him.

"Seventeen!" he screamed, tears running down his face.

"Seventeen?" I repeated wonderingly.

"That we know about."

Even I was surprised that I had managed to amass so many. "Who were they? Men? Women?" He didn't answer, so I took another step toward him and added menacingly, "Doctors?"

"No!" he said quickly. "Not doctors. Never doctors!"

"Then who?"

"Whoever they paid you to kill!" he finally blurted out.

"I was a hit man?"

He nodded.

"I must really have enjoyed my work it to kill seventeen people," I said thoughtfully. "How did they finally catch me?"

"Your girlfriend turned state's evidence. She knew you had been hired to kill Carlo Castinerra -- "

"The politician?"

"Yes. So the police staked him out and nailed you. You blundered right into their trap."

I shook my head sadly. "That's what I get for trusting people. And _this_" I added, bringing the edge of my hand down on his neck and producing a snapping noise, "is what _you_ get."

That was unethical, said my little voice. _You promised not to hurt him if he told you what you wanted

to know._

"We trusted someone once, and look where it got us," I replied, going around and wiping various surfaces. "What about that hooker? Had someone put out a contract on her?"

I don't remember, said the voice. _It just felt right._

"And how did killing Dr. Brozgold feel?" I asked.

Good, said the voice after some consideration. _It felt good. I enjoyed it._

"So did I," I admitted.

Then are we going back in business?

"No," I said. "If there's one thing I've learned as an accountant, it's that everything has a pattern to it. Fall into the same old pattern and we'll wind up right back at the Institute."

Then what will we do? asked the voice.

"Oh, we'll go right on killing people," I assured it. "I must confess that it's addictive. But I make more than enough money to take care of my needs, and I don't suppose _you_ have any use for money."

None, said the voice.

"So now we'll just kill whoever we want in any way that pleases us," I said. "They've made William Jordan a stickler for details, so I think we'll be a lot harder to catch than we were when I was you." I busied myself wiping the dresser as best I could.

"Of course," I added, crossing over to the desk and going to work on it, "I suppose we could start with Carlo Castinerra, just for old time's sake."

I'd like that, said the voice, trying to control its excitement.

"I thought you might," I said dryly. "And it will tidy up the last loose end from our previous life. I hate loose ends. I suppose it's my accountant's mind."

So that's where things stand now.

I've spent the last two days in the office, catching up on my work. At nights I've cased Castinerra's house. I know where all the doors and windows are, how to get to the slidewalk from the kitchen entrance, what time the servants leave, what time the lights go out.

So this Friday, at 5:00 PM on the dot, I'm going to leave the office and go out to dinner at a posh French restaurant that guarantees there are no soya products anywhere on the premises. After that I'll slide over to what's left of the theater district and catch the old Sondheim classic they've unearthed after all these years. Then it's off to an elegant nearby bar for a cocktail or two.

And then, with a little help from my shadow, I'll pay a long-overdue call on the estimable Mr. Castinerra.

Only this time, I'll do it right.

Erasures are, by and large, pretty lonely people. I can't tell you how nice it is to finally have a hobby that I can share with a friend.