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# Standing In Line With Mister Jimmy

**James Patrick Kelly**

So I'm walking down Hope Street on my way to the parole office and Mister Jimmy's playing my favorite, "Brain Sausage" by the Barking Fish, and I see this line. At first I think I'm having another flashback because it's mostly suits, in all the colors of gray. Silver ghosts in ash gray; mouse gray women, smog gray, sidewalk gray— maybe a couple of real misfits in navy blue. You know, the kind of yawnboys who sit at desks all day and talk to computers in Tokyo.

So why should I care, except that I recognize a scattering of ralphs from Southie? One old grope of mine, Tweezer, is near the end, and she's got on a white shirt and that stupid little ribbon tie she has to wear when she flips nineteen-cent McKrillwiches and over it is this sports jacket the color of a recycling sack with sleeves down to her knees. I guess it must have been dark when she stole it.

Mister Jimmy goes, "She's the one who wanted to be a dancer," but I remember. I'm not as stupid as he thinks I am. "Check it out, Chip," he goes, and because he's my ThinkMate, I do. "Hey, Tweeze, where's the party?"

She looks too tired to flirt, like she's been sleeping in somebody's closet again, because she doesn't go "Hi, Chip," or "I'm the party," or anything. She just stares through me like I'm made of glass.

Then there's a hand tapping my shoulder and the suit behind me goes, "No cutting, mister. End of the line is way back."

I brush the hand off without bothering to look. "Snap off, jack. My sister here is saving my place. Right, Tweeze?"

She goes, "You ain't my brother," and her face is like a wall and I realize something has happened to her. Maybe it's the clothes, or the company she's been keeping.

The suit in front of us is giving me the hard eye, as if he's remembering me to describe to the cops. And the hand comes back. It's heavier this time. I think about biting it, but Mister Jimmy goes, "Better not, Chip, or we'll be late. Let me look into this," and he starts playing my favorite, "Double-parked on Trouble Street" by 54321, and the music walks me out of there. But I'm still putting Tweeze down for payback.

Anyway, the line is a lot longer than I thought. It ripples down Hope Street, a wool-blend snake with a couple of hundred heads and no personality. When it takes a right on Chelsea Avenue, it changes. As I walk alongside I can't help but sense an edge to it that's sharp enough to draw blood. For beautiful people they're in an ugly mood. Maybe they're not used to lines. This one stretches three blocks down Chelsea until it passes an Infomart and turns down an alley which I never knew was there before. I've got to see this—there's a handful of other ralphs wandering down the alley who feel the same way. After all, you don't usually find that many suits so far from downtown. So we scope the front of the line, which stops at a white-painted steel door hung on a steel frame built into the brick wall. No sign, no buzzer, no handle, no keyhole. Could be the back door to the Infomart but Mister Jimmy thinks no.

Now this door bothers me—did I say it was white? I mean spotless, whiter than the pope's sheets. That

kind of clean is hard to find in the city. Still, Mister Jimmy is telling me this is probably a whole bunch of nothing and I might believe him except that the pigeon-gray suit at the head of the line is watching this door like it's going to have his baby right there on the pavement. And the woman behind him is sweating even though it's a cool spring day and the alley is in deep shade. And the people behind her are practically vibrating. Then the door opens and everyone who's not in line crowds over for a peek.

You know how, when you get a headful of glitter, you can stare at something ordinary and it gets like more and more real until it pulses into that weird, sparkly hyperreality that means you're flashing? I see a long hallway lit by a single naked bulb. There's another white door at the far end. The cement floor has just been hosed down because there are still puddles around the drain. Someone has painted the words "Live" and "Free" on either wall. The building's breath is moist and warm and it smells like the corners of basements. The lucky leader mumbles as he steps through and I pull Mister Jimmy out of one ear so I can hear, "... full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit . . ." The suit takes the plugs of his own ThinkMate out and slips them into his pocket as he walks down the hall, and just before the door shuts behind him I think I see the puddles start to sparkle like I'm having a flashback.

The woman next in line pulls out a limp handkerchief and wipes her forehead.

"Hey, Jackie!" One of us innocent bystanders goes up to her. "What are you waiting for? "

She glances at him and tightens her grip on her attache case like she wants to hit him with it but thinks twice because she's got better things to do—like worry about the door opening.

Someone next to me goes, "They don't say. They won't answer questions." A guy in a croaker goes, "New drug, maybe?" and a couple of people nod but then someone else goes, "Nah, you don't stand in line in broad daylight waiting for drugs," and the first guy goes, "Maybe it's so new, it's still legal."

A suit farther back in line calls out, "Leave her alone."

"Hey, jack, I was just asking . . ."

"Line up and find out for yourself."

A couple of newcomers come snooping down the alley. "What is this anyway?"

So I go, "Mass hallucination—watch out, it's catching." I laugh when they pull up short. The woman twists her handkerchief as she waits her turn.

Now I really do want to find out what's happening here but, like Mister Jimmy says, the clock is ticking so I head back to the street. I mean, there are all kinds of lines. Food lines, job lines, ticket lines, tram lines at rush hour, lines in front of stores whenever there's something you can afford, which isn't often. Line up to get your check from the state and again to get it cashed. They say when you're on maintenance you should get on every line you can find. Maybe that works for the good citizens but I haven't got the patience. Still, I've never seen two hundred yards of jacksuits before, homeowners with leather shoes and credit cards. Whatever's behind the door, it's worth something to people who already have a lot— and to ralphs like poor Tweezer, who's wearing a man's sports coat. I keep waiting for Mister Jimmy to break in with the answer or advice or a song or something but he's quiet. A line with a secret. Yeah, sure I'm interested.

The Department of Corrections is in a building as ugly as Cleveland but not quite as big. Check-in sprawls across the entire seventeenth floor and it's the usual uproar. You have to take turns breathing as all the prolees squeeze toward the wall of receivers while their moms and lovers and accomplices try to

look invisible as the cops thump by in their immense blue body armor, dragging handcuffed prisoners behind them like yellow duckies. I spot some ralphs I know, but I'm not here to party. I've made good time. I got the page at 9:00 and it's only 10:37. The parole office gives you two hours on a random check, so I'm not really worried as I place my palm flat on the reader and fit my concuff into the receiver. Then the little green screen flashes. *Ved Chiplunkar, 1102298, report to Room 1841*. Damn, I don't want to chat up some case hack, I just want to get verified and get out. Anyway, Mister Jimmy plays the Screws' "Meat Sins" while I search for Room 1841 and that helps a little.

In a previous life, Room 1841 might have been a toilet, but now it's a windowless pus-yellow cubby that is almost big enough for a desk, two folding chairs, a terminal, and a skinny woman whose plastic ID says she's Angela Sternwood. She isn't much older than me but she's already got a job and a whiskey-colored suit and a string of fake pearls. She's easy enough on the eyes although she is a little beaky and I hate scented earrings.

"Tell me about yourself, Ved."

"Read the file—or are they hiring illiterates now?"

"I want to hear it in your own words."

It's a dumb line but I'll forgive a redhead almost anything so I go, "Name's Chip. I'm twenty-four and I've got two convictions, one for possession of glitter, one for mugging a suit so I could score some glitter. My cuff says I'm clean. I wish it was wrong."

"You graduated from South High and were accepted at War Martyrs Junior College but you never went. Why?"

"Didn't like the school colors."

"And you've been cashing maintenance checks since, let's see, '22?"

I ignore that because Mister Jimmy finally tracks down her public file. "DOB is 4/11/06—younger than you, Chip! She's a citizen, lives at 2381 Green Street up in the Heights, and she's been working here less than a month, probably still in training."

She goes, "Would you please take your plugs out, Chip?"

I ignore her some more.

"Says here you haven't even tried for a job since your last check-in."

"I'm allergic to clocks." When I laugh, she looks nervous. "You're new at this job, aren't you?"

"Why do you say that?" She chews her lip. "Anyway, we're here to talk about you."

Mister Jimmy goes, "Keep on her, Chip. She's so raw they're probably still evaluating her on closed circuit. Who knows, maybe if she doesn't sell you a suit they'll fire her."

She goes, "So you like taking maintenance? You live well on eighty-seven dollars a month?"

So I give her my best hope-to-grope smile. See, I don't really want to argue with Angela Sternwood. I want to take her out dancing and put my hands on her ass and later take her back to my place. Or, better, her place—she probably has hot water.

She goes, "I said pull the damn ThinkMate so I can talk to you!" I've got her squirming now.

Mister Jimmy goes, "Better humor her, Chip," so I do.

I drop the plugs onto the desk and reach inside my shirt. "Want the system unit too?" It's in a pouch that hangs from a chain around my neck.

"No." She pulls a tissue from a drawer, picks up a plug with it, rubs the ear wax off, and reads the label. Mister Jimmy is a genuine Matshushita. I can tell she's impressed because she goes, "Pricey tech for someone on maintenance." She pushes the plug back toward me. "Where'd you get it?"

"My pa left it to me instead of a ranch."

"Any idiot can make jokes, Chip." She checks the screen of her terminal. "Okay, what gang are you running with these days?"

"No gang—just me and Mister Jimmy against the world."

"Mister Jimmy?"

I nod at the plugs on her desk and she goes, "You know an Elvis Malloy?" "Uh-uh."

"Elvis Malloy was arrested at 12:48 last Tuesday night. Seems he's working this puppet house on Harmony Street in Southie, slipping into booths while the Johns are busy slamming their robots through the orgies. He lifts at least six wallets, maybe more—not everyone reports, of course. Then somebody spots him. He flies out the front door with this naked guy after him and it just so happens there are two cops having coffee across the street. Malloy runs twelve blocks, flinging the swag into the crowds he passes. The cops catch him eventually but there's no evidence on him and nobody turns anything in, which isn't surprising considering the neighborhood."

"So Malloy wins the Nobel Prize for stupidity. So?"

Her mouth twists as she thinks this over. I can tell she's getting wrinkled at me. I don't think she's happy in her new job. "I'm sorry you're playing it this way, Chip, but it's your choice." She swivels the monitor around so I can see. "One of the cops who gave chase was rigged for vid. It's new tech, a pilot program. The computer enhancement takes time but we get some really cute pictures." I'm highlighted on the screen, framed between a floating ad window for Coors and a weather gypsy wearing three hats and seven coats. I'm staring at a brown wallet on the sidewalk in the foreground, also highlighted. "What do you think, Chip? Like it for the yearbook?"

I need Mister Jimmy's advice but I don't dare let her know that. "So I'm there. So's he." I point at the gypsy. "Talked to him yet? And probably others off camera. Where's your case? I never touched that wallet."

So then she loses her temper. "I don't need a case, mister. There's a time stamp on this vid that puts you on Harmony Street at 12:32 A.M."

"What? You're calling me on a curfew violation?"

"That's right. Maybe if I thought you were trying to turn yourself around, we could work something out." She raps the keyboard and the terminal mutters and suddenly a pink slip is sticking out of the printer slot like a paper tongue. "But you're not and you've got an attitude." She tears the slip out. "I take it you don't follow the news? Too bad. The feds are gearing up to build that new Friendship Highway through Mexico to keep our troops supplied. They've set manpower quotas for each state, which we're supposed to meet from our maintenance rolls. The governor says to sweep the streets and you're just the kind of trash voters tend to notice." She hands me the slip. "Report to the Reed Armory on National

Unity Square before noon tomorrow. Don't forget your sunblock."

"Wait a minuted" I jam Mister Jimmy back in and together we read the pink work order, which says I'll be getting my mail at Jaltipan Work Camp in the Provisional State of Veracruz for the next six months. Mister Jimmy goes, "That's the steamiest part of the jungle, Chip. They get a hundred inches of rain a year. I won't last two minutes in that kind of weather."

"This isn't fair," I go. "I'll appeal. You call this justice?"

"You want justice?" she goes. "Get a job." She stands up and brushes right past me and out the door with her big nose puckered like I'm a bad smell. I think about punching it for her but, as Mister Jimmy points out, that will only make the trouble I'm already in seem like a week at a disney.

So I hit the street again, feeling like I've just been force-fed a brick. I wander into the business district, the only living ralph in a desert of suits, and I'm headed nowhere with a scheduled layover in Mexico where the rain is a blunt instrument. Every so often I whang my concuff against one of the pipes set along the curb that used to have parking meters back when gas cost less than vodka. Doesn't hurt the cuff—that's indestructible—but it makes my hand sting, which reminds me of what's coming if I don't think of something fast.

So why should I follow the news when it's always the same? "In Washington today the suits announced that taxes are too high and the president called on the poor ralphs of America to bend over one more time." *Whang*. Besides, I can tell that bitch would've been a frozen turkey in bed anyway. I gave her my best lines and she never even smiled. *Whang*. No question I have to show up at the Armory or else the alarm on my concuff will start shrieking and probably turn my brains to soup even before the cops come to haul me away. *Whang*. No, the only way to dodge Mexico is to get off maintenance and the only way to get off maintenance is to get enough money to live and the way to get that kind of money is to get a job but jobs are scarcer than ninth-grade virgins even if you do own a suit. Which I don't. *Whang*. Yeah, good advice, Mister Jimmy. Keep on her. She's new, see if you can push her around.

He goes, "We're in trouble, Chip. That climate rots electronics. You can't take me down there; I'm not designed for it."

"So I'll stash you somewhere. Hey, I'm pissed too."

"For six months, Chip? Six months of no input and I'll go crazy. And what if you don't come back? It's possible."

"Then I won't care, will I?" Problem is, you can't just turn a ThinkMate off like some stupid computer. I don't know why, exactly—Mister Jimmy is in charge of understanding all that tech stuff.

"You can lend me to someone, Chip."

"Who do I know would give you back?"

I'm so busy arguing with Mister Jimmy that I almost crash into this jack in a tuxedo except he sees me first. He puts his hands together like he's praying and then spreads them apart and somehow in the space between them he's projecting this window that says:

*Desperate?*

*Now you know Bad Times can ruin Good People.*

*You can't Achieve Success until you admit Failure.*

*If you're ready to Give Up*

*We Can Help. Proper Dress Required.*

*Wednesdays only. No homeless Please.*

"Snap off, I'm broke." I try to go around but he stays in my way. "You hear me? Maybe Jesus saves, but I don't."

But he won't let me pass until I notice him. Okay, so he looks like some groom who took a wrong turn at the wedding. He's wearing a high-necked white shirt and a cummerbund. His tux is black and there's a white carnation in the silk lapel. He's a little newt of a man with a peaceful, almost goofy expression you don't see much in the city. Maybe his bow tie is too tight and he's not getting enough oxygen.

So I'm thinking here's another flashback, which is okay because at this point I could use a little free hallucination, and then it occurs to me. "Hey, this have anything to do with the line on Chelsea Avenue?"

He claps his hands again and between them are the words:

*Live Free*

He shows me a smile that has about eight teeth too many. He says nothing.

"I was down there this morning. No one would tell what they were waiting for."

Still giving me his headlight smile, he claps his hands one last time and the window closes. He says nothing. "So what's this all about?" He turns the smile off and shrugs.

"I'm asking you a question, man. What's behind the damn door?" Mister Jimmy realizes I'm getting wrinkled at this jack so he tries to smooth me out with "Vegetable Kingdom" by Round Woman Square Men. But I don't want violins, I want answers. When I grab his lapels and shake him, his flower falls out and he makes this weird gurgling sound.

"Talk to me, you stupid jack."

So he opens his mouth and shows me all those perfect teeth again except there's nothing behind them but a pink hole. He's trying his best to say something but it sounds like he's swallowing a snake. I let him go. I tell him to shut his mouth but he won't. It's as if he wants to be sure I see his glistening stump waggle, as if he's *happy* someone cut his tongue out, as if it's the secret of his success and he wants to share it with me.

I spin away but he keeps after me, "*Ah-ahh-er-ah!*" and shoves an envelope into my pocket and then maybe he realizes I'm about to hit him because he pulls back.

I take a few steps before I turn again but by then he's disappeared. It's like the street has swallowed him. Suits bump by me on their way to lunch as ad windows glide over our heads. Business as usual in skyscraper land, so why am I shaking? Because what I really need now is about 10 cc's of glitter. Yeah, I'm that desperate—my brain feels like it's swelling up inside my head from too much thinking, and I've been on the verge of a flashback all morning. But I know Mister Jimmy is right when he reminds me that if my cuff shows positive for flash they'll ruin me at the Armory tomorrow. I laugh because I guess I just qualified for the line on Chelsea Avenue. This is the worst day of the worst life ever lived, and since I can't get anything I want, maybe I *should* give up. So I take out the envelope and open it and there's Ben Franklin giving me the green eye and on the flip side the words "In God We Trust" have been circled in red. Maybe the reason I can't feel my feet touching the sidewalk is that I've never held a hundred-dollar

bill in my hand before. It's not as intense a flash as glitter, but it'll do.

Expose that much money to the air in Southie and the ralphs will smell it and come swarming, but maybe this happens all the time downtown because the suits pay no attention as I slide the money into the pouch next to Mister Jimmy's system unit. I start home with the clock running down and the score Questions 32, Answers 0. The obvious play is to forget what just happened and spend the little time I have left pissing this miracle down all my favorite toilets in the city. I'm really tempted but Mister Jimmy goes, "Chip, if you've got to pick between a suit and a shovel, there's a Salvation Army over on April 11th Street," which is not the advice I'm hoping for, even if it makes sense.

"But what the hell am I lining up for?"

"Maybe a chance to get out of Mexico. So far all I know is that a Live Free Foundation was established as a tax-exempt charitable trust in New Hampshire four years ago. There's no annual report and somebody got the IRS to seal the returns but at least we know they file so they're probably legitimate. I say we have to check it out."

Now I'm worried because "probably" is a luck word and my luck is usually bad. What I really want is a sure thing except the only one I've got is six months of laying blacktop in green hell. I guess Mister Jimmy has a point: when you're desperate, you take chances.

So an hour later a new Chip trick-or-treats down Chelsea Avenue, disguised in a gray woolen suit and a blue shirt and plastic loafers. I've shortened the pants and fixed the ripped lining with Kmart fashion tape but there was nothing I could do about the shoulders. The whole outfit cost only twenty-three bucks and they even threw in a tie the color of dead pizza. So I'm properly dressed and I've got seventy-seven bucks left from the angel in the tux and nine from the wallet Elvis Malloy threw away on Harmony Street together with my life savings of twelve and I'm wondering how much luck ninety-eight dollars will buy. Mister Jimmy is finishing "Contents Under Pressure" by Vinnie's Ear as I come up to the line.

I watch for Tweeze but she must have already gone through the door. The line is shorter—the end is near the corner of Hope and Chelsea, in front of Tibawi's Discount Flooring Outlet. I almost don't get on because of the old lady carrying the dog. I hate dogs, especially rich people's greedy, stupid, useless dogs. This one is losing patches of its wiry fur and it smells like an old couch someone left out in the rain.

The lady turns and scopes me and I scope her and I guess neither of us likes what we see. She probably doesn't approve of browns—or blacks or spanics or asians. She's wearing a cement-colored jacket over a matching skirt and there's a silk scarf around her neck held together with a fat gold ring that I bet I could get fifty bucks for, if it's real. She has gray hair so fine you can see her pale scalp. There's a glaze of dried dog slobber on her sleeve.

I go, "Hi." She says nothing. She doesn't seem very desperate. Maybe she couldn't get tickets to the opera.

She nods at me, shifts the dog into a more comfortable position, and faces forward again. The dog scrabbles up and watches me over her shoulder.

The line creeps forward. Business is terrible at Tibawi's Discount Flooring Outlet. The price tags for the oriental rugs draped in the display window have faded in the sunlight. Up ahead, the lawn and lowlight moss carpets are turning yellow around the edges. A wide bearded man with all the charm of a hammer stands behind the door and scopes us like he's thinking of closing up and getting in line too. He'd better hurry and make up his mind because now there's a fidgety guy in a charcoal three-piece behind me. Two more men are arguing about palladium futures on the Mercantile Exchange as they settle in behind him. Then a ralph in a silver and black Raiders jacket comes up and asks what we're waiting for and the old

lady goes rigid. When I see the glitter in the ralph's eyes, I decide I'm not talking to this flashface about my troubles. They're none of his damn business and, besides, thinking about them only makes me crazy. I'm not admitting to him or anyone that I don't exactly know why I'm here. Hey, I don't exactly know why I was born or where my mom went to or why shit stinks, okay? I'm not happy about being ignorant but there it is. So I tell him to snap off except it takes a while for him to understand what with all the beautiful sparks flashing inside his head. As he leaves, I scope the suits in line behind me and, even though they glance away, I'm sure they're glad I got rid of the ralph because they didn't want to answer questions either. You don't admit to strangers that you're desperate—it's hard enough admitting it to yourself. But I can smell their fear, or maybe it's my own stink I smell. I wonder if this is what happened to Tweezer. The line has a grip on me. I'm not sure I can get away anymore.

Anyway, we're all the way up to the corner when Angela Sternwood stalks by without noticing me. Maybe it's my new suit but I doubt she's seeing much at all. She's so angry that her knees don't bend when she walks and her face is all wrinkled like she's thinking of things she wished she had said to someone. Not me, I hope. I almost fall into the street when she gets in line.

"Sternwood!" I lean way out and wave, trying to get her attention. "Hey, Angela!" She's too busy drilling holes into the sidewalk with her eyes and then the line swings me around the corner onto Chelsea. The dog sneezes and the old lady coos and kisses it. Maybe she feels safer with me now because she goes, "He's sick, poor baby, but I know they can cure him," but I don't want to talk to her. I want Angela. It takes maybe thirty seconds before I overdose on curiosity and walk back. Mister Jimmy's shriek is like a nail in my ear so I yank him out. Hey, the line's moving along and I'm only losing nine places.

I go, "Shouldn't you be downtown taking milk money away from orphans?"

She gives me a look that's about as friendly as a fist—then she recognizes me. "Oh, *no*. What the hell are you doing here?"

"I was in line up ahead. I came back to keep you company."

Her eyes get shiny. "Jesus. I don't deserve this." A tear trickles down her face. "Leave me alone."

I like the way she cries. Some people gush, others sniff and try to hold off, but most of them are just crying for the crowd. Angela's tears are her own. She's not ashamed of them, she's not proud—they're something that happens sometimes when the world smacks you in the face and there's no one you can hit back.

"Hey, you'll never get to know me if you keep sending me away." I don't tell her I'm attracted to women who ask me to leave them alone.

"Listen, ralph, I don't like you in a suit any better than I liked you in a T-shirt."

"Seems to me we're standing in the same line."

She doesn't have to answer because the line gathers itself and we press forward. When I pop Mister Jimmy back in, he has calmed down. We shuffle around the corner and down Chelsea maybe ten yards before everything bunches up again and stops. People mutter and groan and straddle their briefcases and glance at their watches and go up on tiptoes to see ahead. The suit in back of me starts whistling like he's on his way to the circus. He's bald but he's got a gray beard so thick it looks like his head is on upside down. The guy in front of Angela opens a readman and cups his hand so that only he can see the screen.

Meanwhile I scope Angela from behind. She has the long slender fingers of a guitar god—no rings—and the kind of leg muscles you don't get sitting on a couch in front of sitcoms. Her red hair is cut to a silky



brush. I decide I could find my way past her nose. Sure, I'd grope her, if only she wasn't who she was.

Eventually she gets tired of pretending I'm not staring. "Where'd you get those clothes? The Salvation Army?" Her tears have dried up.

"I found them on the sidewalk on Harmony Street."

"You shouldn't make so many jokes, Chad. People who are really smart don't try so hard to prove it. You know, if you had played straight with me I wouldn't have sent you to Mexico."

"Maybe I'm not going. Maybe that's why I'm on line here."

"You think they'll take you?" She shakes her head. "Well, maybe they will. You want to hear what kind of trouble jokes can get you into? I made a joke today, because you made me angry." She frowns. "No, it wasn't only you; it was the hundred prolees I saw before you. None of you wanted anything to do with me. You wouldn't let me help, you insulted me. But of all of them, Chad, you were especially irritating, because you have a brain and you're wasting it."

Mister Jimmy goes, "Want to know why she's here? I checked her public files. Congratulations, Chip, I think you just got your new case hack fired."

"They didn't care that I gave you the pink slip, you know. I've got quotas to meet; that's what they hired me to do. But they said I got too involved with the interview. I made this joke, you see. I told you to remember your sunblock, and so Friday is my last day. They said that I wasn't professional enough. They want case officers who can maintain proper distance."

She's the one who hurt me, right? So I should enjoy watching her fall into a hole—but I can't. Maybe it's because people all around us are eavesdropping. The jack behind me is practically resting his beard on my shoulder. I'm sure they've already decided that we're both losers. I go, "Seems like they make it awfully easy for a ralph to fuck up in this city."

"I'm no ralph." I should've known she'd be insulted. "I went to junior college, I passed the civil service exam. These people aren't ralphs."

"What are they doing here, then?"

"The same thing you're doing."

"Trying not to go to Mexico?"

That shuts her up for a while. The line drags us past the Chelsea Drugstore and Superior Public Showers—*Our Water Guaranteed 100 Percent Nontoxic*. The fragrance of hot oil as we go by Felipe's Fish Fry reminds me that I haven't eaten yet today. I'm hungry enough to pick onion rings out of a dumpster.

"I'm sorry, Chad." Angela slumps with her hands in her pockets and her head down, not giving me much of a target. "I'm more sorry that I got fired, but I guess I'm sorry for what happened to you too."

"Sure, except it's Chip."

"What?"

"Name's Chip, not Chad. What's wrong with taking maintenance like the rest of the world? At least until you find another job."

"You don't understand." She shook her head. "Once there's a maintenance flag in your files, personnel assumes you're probably employment impaired. I'd be lucky to find something at minimum wage. Maybe if I had some savings I could live off while I searched on JobLink . . . but I don't and I've got rent, food, net, transcard. I owe five more years on my student loan."

So that's why the only work they ever offered me was scraping gum off bus seats. Mister Jimmy is trying to distract me with "My Career (in Air Conditioning)" by Cheap Wine, which normally makes me laugh, except he should've told me I never had a chance for a real job. But just when I'm ready to call him on this, the suit in front of us gets careless and tips his readman so that I can see. One screen has my angel's message about Bad Times and Giving Up, the other has the same words, but arranged in different order like they're some land of code. I nudge Angela. "See that?" I whisper.

"So?" She shrugs. "It's all over JobLink." She speaks loud enough for the suit to hear and he slaps the readman shut. "Come to think of it, where did you see it? You're on maintenance, you can't afford to subscribe to the net."

"A guy walks up to me in the street and opens a pocket window. I get a peek and that's all. He doesn't say a word and then he's gone." I leave the \$100 out because I've got more audience than I want, even if they are all rich suits. "I'm still waiting for someone to tell me what it means."

"*Space*, my friend." When the jack with the beard leans forward, I can smell all the bars on DuPont Street. "We're bound for the new L5 colony, *Freedom Station*."

Angela rolls her eyes toward the corner of the sky where lunatics play house. She goes, "All I know is that some foundation with more secrets than the CIA started running the ad about a week ago. A guy from the sixteenth floor answered it last Wednesday and he must've gotten some offer because he never even bothered to come back and clean out his desk."

"Isn't it *obvious*?" The spaceman butts back into our conversation. "Live *Free*? If we're going to survive as a species we have to *free* ourselves from the gravity well. Break the chains of Earth. The Department of Space needs the *best*, the brightest and the bravest. The new *pioneers*." What's obvious is that he's one of those ravers who have everything figured out—wrong.

"That's not what I heard." The suit behind him speaks up. "My cousin lives in New Hampshire and she says that the Liberty Party is building a new co-op up in the White Mountains and they're supposedly recruiting business people to help run it."

"I've been watching since nine this morning," someone else goes. "I've circled the block I don't know how many times. So far a couple of thousand have gone in—at least that many—but nobody's come out. Don't they reject *anyone*?"

"I heard it was the Charismatics. They'll take anyone they can get."

"You think *God* is waiting behind that door?" The spaceman sniffs. "Sure it's not the Blue Elves? Listen, *Freedom Station* opens in just three years . . ."

I go to Angela, "Maybe they can't leave."

"What?"

"Maybe they're rounding up warm bodies for the army. Or wasting everyone who steps through the door? *Boom*." I shoot the spaceman with my finger. "Instant population control." I don't necessarily believe it, I'm just saying it to get a reaction. They're quiet for about three seconds and then they all turn

on me, their voices sharp with fear.

"The cops wouldn't just stand by . . ."

"... such a thing as the Constitution."

"Things are bad, but not *that* bad."

". . . the brain drain," goes the spaceman. "Maybe if all they wanted were people on *maintenance* ..."

Mister Jimmy goes, "Easy, Chip, these are suits. They're not built for trouble; scare them and they might do something stupid."

"Okay," I go, "okay, you're right," and I hold up my hands to surrender but they're too nervous to take any prisoners. What saves me is a couple of asian ralphs in mirrorshirts who are swaggering down the street like they're trying to decide which one of us to mug first. As they approach, everyone stops arguing and gives them the hard eye, including me. I'm surprised at my reaction, but it's like I have no choice. I'm in line too, aren't I? We've come this far together and we've all got our places to protect and no ignorant street trash is going to stop any of us from getting where we're going.

One ralph asks the other, "What these jacks waiting for, man? Personality transplants?" The other snickers.

Nobody says anything after they pass. We scuff along for a few minutes in silence and the line loosens its grip on me. There's nothing to do but think, which is a pain. Mister Jimmy tries to help by playing my favorite, "Go Away Please Stay" by Lezbeth. It doesn't work. When I look back there's at least fifty suits lined up behind me but I feel like they're standing on my chest. What we need is a theme song. *Get in line, everything's fine here in the line with a mind of its own*. I ought to write that down and send it to Lezbeth except that's not something suits do. I don't belong here. Mister Jimmy reminds me of Mexico and tells me we're getting close to the end but then I think about a drain on a cement floor and those puddles. I know I just made that stuff up about shooting all of us. Still, it sure looked as if they had just cleaned up a mess, didn't it?

Mister Jimmy goes, "They're not killing anyone. This is America, Chip, and these are taxpayers. Cash cows—they can't afford to slaughter the herd. Besides, we haven't got any choice."

"So why should I trust you? You never explained about how taking maintenance meant I couldn't get a real job. You're supposed to tell me this stuff but, no, I have to hear it from Angela."

He goes, "Your dad was taking maintenance when you were born, Chip, and you started taking it on your own long before you got me. I didn't want to discourage you. Besides, it's not true that you can't get a job; it's just harder."

"You should've told me."

Angela glances over her shoulder. "You talking to me?" "Nah, I'm arguing with Mister Jimmy."

"Who's winning?"

It's no contest, I'd much rather talk to her than Mister Jimmy. When her earring catches the sunlight, it leaks perfume that must be laced with pheromones because it's all I can do to keep from putting my arms around her and nibbling. "What I don't understand," I go, "is why you're here. You could hit a friend for a loan to hold you over."

She pauses, inviting me to slide up beside her. "I graduated last month," she goes. "I only just moved here."

"Someone with your looks and you haven't got an old grope you could call?"

"It's been a rough month." She gives me a lemon smile. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay, how come you don't wear a ThinkMate?"

"I like to make my own decisions."

"Well, maybe you're smarter than me."

"Or you're lazier than me. You ever take that thing off?"

"Why?" The idea surprises me. "Like when?"

"When you watch vid—I don't know. At night, before you go to bed."

I bump gently against her. "Want to find out for yourself?"

She flushes and moves ahead of me again.

I can't decide whether she's teasing me or not. Mister Jimmy plays "Burning the Snow" by Penile Colony, which I decide I don't like as much as I used to. I tell him I don't want to hear any more music for a while. It's getting colder now as the sun touches the skyline. Whirlwinds of trash stir in the street. The line can't make up its mind anymore. It moves in spasms. Sometimes it surges, then it'll stop and catch its breath before crawling forward again. Probably some of the suits ahead are giving up and going home to meat loaf and clean sheets. They're not desperate enough. Angela doesn't seem that desperate. I wonder if I am.

One big push carries us across Martyrs Street and we're almost there. Up ahead the yellow Infomart window floats over the sidewalk and the come-on scrolls across in letters tall enough to start for the Celtics. *Infomart. . . more than just facts . . . knowledge.* The rest of the block is taken up by a used-robot store called Machine Age. You can buy robot vacuums and lawn mowers, mobile video and smartcarts that will follow you anywhere, three-wheelers and food processors that'll turn a dollar's worth of soy paste into a meal for seven—if none of them are very hungry. There's a window full of ThinkMate clones and next to it are the puppets, lean sports models in bright uniforms and leering sex machines with big lips and glossy stain-resistant skin.

Just ahead three suits peel off the line and scuttle back toward us like cockroaches someone is trying to squash. After they clear out I see that what scared them was a couple of cops in full riot armor. There's a patrol wagon with intimate seating for twenty parked in the alley. I guess even suits get arrested once in a while. These cops look strange to me although I'm not sure why exactly until Mister Jimmy points out the two bulges on their helmets, one for the spotlight, the other for the lens. They're IDing people at random. Looking for criminals in a line full of desperate people—it's such a good idea that I'm surprised the cops thought of it. "Be smooth, Chip," Mister Jimmy goes. "You're legal until noon tomorrow." I touch Angela's arm. "That the rig they got me with?" One of the cops clunks down the sidewalk, stops about ten feet from us, and asks a suit to say his name.

Angela goes, "Yeah, only they use infrared at night. When they cross-reference your voice print with your picture, they can access all your G3 files right down to the dailies in under ten seconds."

Maybe I'd be worried if I'd understood what she said but information tech is Mister Jimmy's

responsibility. Besides, the suit with the readman is frightened enough for both of us. He's pale as bread as he turns to Angela. "They can read *dailies*?" He's practically hissing.

She nods.

He tries to lunge past me, but as long as I'm wearing a suit I decide to play good citizen. I manage to stay in the way just long enough.

"Excuse me, sir." This cop could arm-wrestle a backhoe. "Were you going somewhere?" He doesn't have any problem holding onto a limp suit.

The cop IDs the jack as Lawrence Prendergast, DOB 7/9/88, an employee of Atlantic Trust wanted for questioning on a charge of unauthorized use of a credit instrument. When the cop pats him down, he finds that Larry's paunch is actually a money belt stuffed with enough cash to buy a round of drinks for the entire city. Three minutes later, Larry's been cuffed, read his rights, and loaded into the wagon. From the way the suits around me are staring, I doubt any of them have ever seen justice up this close.

"He's *lucky* they caught him here," goes the spaceman, "because on *Freedom Station* there's *no jail*. The budget was too tight." Nobody says anything. We don't want to encourage him. "You break the law up there and you'd better be able to breathe *space*." He laughs at his own joke. Somebody has to.

We finally reach the top of the alley. Colors are washing out in the twilight and it's hard to tell people from shadows. Soon the city will be gray enough to hide us all but by then it'll be too late. The white door has turned the color of bone. We're about fifteen yards away—twenty, maybe thirty people are ahead of us. Each step I take is a battle and I'm not sure anymore this is a war I want to win. Mister Jimmy goes, "Steady, Chip, I can't do this without you.

We're almost home."

I focus on the back of Angela's neck and follow her fragrance through the gloom. I must be losing it because I'm standing in line to jump off a cliff with a bunch of strangers and instead of panicking, like any normal person, I'm hallucinating about how I'd feel if her head was on a green pillow and her eyelids were fluttering shut and her lips had parted for me. She's a jack suit and I'm a lazy ralph, but suddenly it's the most important thing in the world that she's a thrill I'll never have as long as I stand in this line. I touch her arm and she turns and now I have to speak even though Mister Jimmy tells me to keep quiet and I can't think, except words take me by surprise and I listen in amazement to what I'm saying.

"You lied when you said you didn't have any savings. Maybe it's not enough but you have something. You're not the type to let yourself go broke. How much, Angela?"

"Why should I tell you?"

I laugh because a snub from her steadies me more than all of Mister Jimmy's cheerleading.

"I'm not worth ripping off," she goes, "if that's what you're thinking." She waits for me to answer but I don't. It's up to her to decide if she trusts me. "Almost thirty dollars. Why, Chip?"

I'm thinking now and Mister Jimmy doesn't like that because that's not my job. "Chip, Chip! What is this?"

Up ahead the ugly little dog starts to howl. Maybe it's afraid of the dark. I unbutton my new blue shirt, draw out the pouch, pull my money from next to Mister Jimmy's system unit. I show it to her. "Thirty and ninety-eight is a hundred and twenty-eight. You could stay in my apartment for six weeks on that, easy. The rent's paid through May. So you live in a dive and you eat slop and you blow off your loan and

spend the rest searching for a job on the net. The worst that can happen is that a couple of Wednesdays from now you line up again, only this time you go through the door broke. So what? Thirty bucks doesn't buy first class on the shuttle, believe me.

"Excuse me, ma'am," goes the spaceman, "but I hope you're not going to listen to this man. Are you *seriously* suggesting ..."

I whip around and backhand him across the mouth. "Say one more word, jack, and I'll rip that beard off and stuff it down your throat." I glare at him and I know he's going to take it. Like all suits, he's got the backbone of a banana. The suits behind him mutter and disapprove but they're too busy thinking line thoughts to cause trouble now.

The dog's frantic yelping is cut off when the door shuts. I doubt it was appropriately dressed. The silence echoes in the cold. Angela hasn't budged and there's a gap between her and the suit in front of us.

"Move up," someone yells.

"Let's go." The line is impatient.

"I don't know what to say," she goes.

"Make sense? Not bad for a lazy ralph?"

"You're not joking?" I'm close enough to see her breath. I think about what it would be like to taste it. "You'd do that for me?"

"Sure and I'd do it for me too. I've got a life here. Maybe it stinks, but it's mine. You said Friday's your last day. What if you show up for work tomorrow and take me off the work roster and put me back on maintenance?"

"Brilliant, Chip," Mister Jimmy goes. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"I can't do that," she goes.

"Angela, the street price for deferral is two hundred, so don't tell me it can't be done. Now I haven't got that much so I'm asking a favor—from a friend. What are they going to do, fire you?"

She considers. "Where are you going to live?"

"Where the hell do you think? In my apartment with you."

I couldn't tell at first what she thought of the idea.

"Yes," goes Mister Jimmy, "and after Friday you can dump her whenever you want."

It's not his fault that he doesn't understand. He's like the line, he doesn't have an imagination. Still, I have to pull his plugs out and curl my hand around them.

There's only one suit between Angela and the door. She glances at him and then back at me. "I'm not sleeping with you."

"No?" I don't think she can see me smile. It doesn't matter. "Well, you'd better decide in a hurry because you're next and I'm sure as hell not charging through that door to rescue you."

She hesitates and I realize I'm losing her. Maybe Mister Jimmy is a better judge of character than I gave

him credit for. I can feel his tinny scream buzzing in my fist.

"This is *illegal*," goes the spaceman. "I'm calling the police. Don't do it, young lady. You're turning down the *chance* of a lifetime." When I turn around to snap him off I realize I've made another mistake. He's backed out of reach and even in the dark I can see that he's holding a gun, or at least something that looks real enough to freeze me. "I'm not going to let *either* of you do this to yourselves. You're young. You've got your whole *future* in front of you."

I back away from the gun but it follows me. "Go ahead and shoot, you jack. Like you say, the cops are right around the corner. They like desperate people, desperate people are some of their best customers. The door is open, spaceman, but we're getting out of line. That makes you next. Better hurry or the shuttle will leave without you."

He looks at the open door, the naked bulb, the long cement hallway. There are more puddles than there were in the morning and they're *all* glittery. The line yells at us. "Move, *move*." The spaceman marches to the doorway like a war hero accepting his medal, turns, and levels the gun at me.

In the light from the hall the gun looks even more real. When I stare at the barrel, it *sparkles* with reality because the flashback I've felt coming all day has finally arrived. The gun starts singing to me, "Come with us, Chip, come with us now. We've got everything you want and all you need to know." And the music walks me toward the white door, which I finally realize opens onto the flash that never ends. "Can't let you go," sings the gun. "We love you so." And it sounds just like Mister Jimmy so I have to, I have to except that Angela kicks the door shut.

There's a sound like a gunshot that shatters my flashback. I stagger and Angela catches me and I put my arm around her. Maybe it's only the other door slamming.

I watch as everybody in line moves up one, and then I peel Mister Jimmy's contact lens from my right eye and drop it into the pouch with the plugs and the system unit.

Angela steers me toward the street. "Anyone want to buy a ThinkMate?" I go to the suits still waiting in line. "Hey, genuine Matshushita!"