

=====

The Two Old Men
by Kage Baker

=====

Copyright (c)2000 by Kage Baker
First published in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, March 2000

Fictionwise Contemporary
Science Fiction

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the purchaser. If you did not purchase this ebook directly from Fictionwise.com then you are in violation of copyright law and are subject to severe fines. Please visit www.fictionwise.com to purchase a legal copy. Fictionwise.com offers a reward for information leading to the conviction of copyright violators of Fictionwise ebooks.

It was Sunday, January 26, 1961, and Markie Souza was six years old. He sat patiently beside his mother in the long pew, listening to Father Gosse talk about how wonderful it was to have a Catholic in the White House at last. Markie knew this was a good thing, in a general kind of way, because he was a Catholic too; but it was too big and too boring to think about, so he concentrated his attention on wishing his little sister would wake up.

She was limp on his mother's ample shoulder, flushed in the unseasonable heat, and the elastic band that held her straw hat on was edging forward under her chin. Any minute now it was going to ride up and snap her in the nose. Markie saw his opportunity and seized it; he reached up and tugged the band back into place, just incidentally jostling the baby into consciousness. Karen squirmed, turned her head and opened her eyes; she might have closed them again, but just then everybody had to stand up to sing *_Tantum Ergo Sacramentum_*. The little girl looked around in unbelieving outrage and began to protest. Markie put his arms up to her.

"I'll take her out, Mama," he stage-whispered. His mother gratefully dumped the baby into his arms without missing a note. He staggered out of the pew and up the strip of yellow carpet that led to the side door. There was a little garden out there, a couple of juniper bushes planted around a statue of a lady saint. She was leaning on a broken ship's wheel. It had been explained to Markie that she was the patron saint of sailors and fishermen. Markie's daddy was a fisherman, and when he'd lived with them his mother had used to burn candles to this saint. Karen's daddy wasn't a fisherman, though, he only cut up fish at the big market on the other side of the harbor, and Markie assumed this was why Mama had stopped buying the little yellow votive candles any more.

Karen tottered back and forth in front of the statue, and Markie stood with his hands in his pockets, edging between her and the juniper bushes when she seemed likely to fall into them, or between her and the parked cars when she'd make a dash for the asphalt. It was a dumb game, but it was better than sitting inside. Every so often he'd look away from the baby long enough to watch the progress of a big ship that was working its way across the horizon. He wondered if his daddy was on the ship. The baby was quick to make use of an opportunity too, and the second she saw his attention had wandered would bolt down the narrow walkway between the church and the rectory. He would run after her, and the clatter of their hard Sunday shoes would echo between the buildings.

After a while there was singing again and people started filing out of the church, blinking

in the light. Markie got a firm grip on Karen's fat wrist and held on until Mama emerged, smiling and chatting with a neighbor. Mama was a big lady in a flowered tent dress, blonde and blue-eyed like Karen, and she laughed a lot, jolly and very loud. She cried loud too. She was usually doing one or the other; Mama wasn't quiet much.

She swept up Karen and walked on, deep in her conversation with Mrs. Avila, and Markie followed them down the hill from the church. It was hot and very bright, but the wind was fresh and there were seagulls wheeling and crying above the town. Their shadows floated around Markie on the sidewalk, all the way down Hinds Street to the old highway where the sidewalk ended and the dirt path began. Here the ladies in their Sunday dresses shouted their goodbyes to each other and parted company, and Markie's Mama swung round and began a conversation with him, barely pausing to draw breath.

"Got a letter from Grandpa, honey, and he sent nice presents of money for you and the baby. Looks like you get your birthday after all! What do you want, you want some little cars? You want a holster and a six-shooter like Leon's got? Whatever his damn mother buys him, honey, you can have better!"

"Can I have fishing stuff?" Markie didn't like talking about presents before he got them -- it seemed like bad luck, and anyway he liked the idea of a surprise.

"Or I'll get you more of those green soldiers -- what? No, honey, we talked about this, remember? You're too little and you'd just get the hooks in your fingers. Wait till you're older and Ronnie can show you." Ronnie was Karen's daddy. Markie didn't want to go fishing with Ronnie; Ronnie scared him. Markie just put his head down and walked along beside Mama as she talked on and on, making plans about all the wonderful things he and Ronnie would do together when he was older. She was loud enough to be heard above the cars that zoomed past them on the highway, and when they turned off the trail and crossed the bridge over the slough her voice echoed off the water. As they neared their house, she saw Mrs. O'Farrell hanging out a laundry load, and hurried ahead to tell her something important. Markie got to walk the rest of the way by himself.

Their house was the third one from the end in a half-square of little yellow cottages around a central courtyard. It had been a motor court, once; the rusted neon sign still said it was, but families like Markie's paid by the week to live here year in and year out. It was a nice place to live. Beside each identical clapboard house was a crushed-shell driveway with an old car or truck parked in it, and behind each house was a clothesline. In front was a spreading lawn of Bermuda grass, lush and nearly indestructible, and beyond that low dunes rose, and just beyond them was the sea. Off to the south was a dark forest of eucalyptus trees, and when Markie had been younger he'd been afraid of the monster that howled there; now he knew it was just the freight train, he'd seen where its tracks ran. To the north was the campground, where the people with big silver trailers pulled in; then the bridge that crossed the slough, and the little town with its pier and its general store and hotels.

It was a good world, and Markie was in a hurry to get back to it. He had to change his clothes first, though, and he didn't like going into the house by himself; but Mama looked like she was going to be talking to Mrs. O'Farrell a while, so he was careful not to let the rusty screen bang behind him as he slipped inside.

Ronnie was awake, though, sitting up in bed and smoking. He watched Markie with dead eyes as Markie hurried past the bedroom door. He didn't say anything, for which Markie was grateful. Ronnie was mean when he had that look in his eyes.

Markie's room was a tiny alcove up two stairs, with his bed and a dresser. He shed the blue church suit and the hard shoes, and quickly pulled on a pair of shorts and a cotton shirt. Groping under the bed he found his knapsack. His father had bought it at an Army Surplus store and it had an austere moldy smell, like old wars. He loved it. He put it on, adjusting the straps carefully, and ran from the house.

"Bye, Ma," he shouted as he ran past, and she waved vaguely as she continued telling Mrs. O'Farrell about the fight the people in the next house had had. Markie made for the big state campground; it was the place he always started his search.

There were certain places you could always find pop bottles. Ditches by the side of highways, for example: people pitched them out of speeding cars, in fact a lot of interesting stuff winds up in ditches. Bottles got left in alleyways between houses, and in phone booths, and in flower planters where the flowers had died, and in bushes on the edges of parking lots. The very best place to look was at the campground, just after one of the big silver trailers had pulled away from a space, before the park attendant had emptied the trash can. Beer bottles were worthless, but an ordinary pop bottle was worth two cents on deposit, and the big Par-T-Pak bottles were worth a nickel. Five empty Coca-Cola bottles could be redeemed for ten cents, and ten cents bought a comic book or a soda, or two candy bars -- three if you went to Hatta's News, Cigars and Sundries, which carried three-cent Polar Bars. Ten cents bought two rolls of Lifesavers or one box of Crackerjacks, or ten Red Vines, or five Tootsie Roll Pops. Markie knew to the penny what he could do with his money, all right.

The original point of getting the money, though, had been to hand it to Mama in triumph. For a moment he'd completely have her attention, even if she were talking with the other women in the court; she'd yell out that he was her little hero, and engulf him in a hug, and briefly things would be the way they'd been before Karen had been born. Lately this had begun to lose its appeal to him, but the hunt had become more interesting as he got older and better at it, and then one day an idea had hit him like a blow between the eyes -- buried treasure! He could save all those dimes in a box and keep it buried somewhere. He was still incredulous at how long it had taken him to think of this, especially since he lived at the beach, which was where people buried treasure.

He thought seriously about this as he scuttled between the campsites, scoring a Bireley's bottle from one trash can and two Frostie Rootbeer bottles from another. The Playtime Arcade had little treasure chests you could buy with blue tickets, real plastic ones with tiny brass locks, but he was too little to play the games that gave out blue tickets and scared to go in the arcades anyway. Well, there were cigar boxes and glass jars and tin cans; any of those might do for a start.

He spotted a good-sized cache of Nehi bottles at one campsite, but the campers were still there; an elderly man and woman seated in folding chairs, talking sadly and interminably about something. He decided to go into the dunes a while, to give them time to leave. Sometimes people wandered into the dunes with pop bottles, too, though usually all there was to find were beer bottles or little whiskey bottles in screwed-up paper bags. Once in a while the sand would drift away from old, old bottles, purple from time and the sun, and those could be sold to the old lady who ran the junk shop on Cypress Street. She'd pay ten cents per bottle, very good money.

So he struggled through the willow thicket, which was swampy and buzzing with little flies, and emerged into the cooler air of the dunes. Trails wound here through the sand, between the lawns of dune grass and big leaning yellow flowers. He knew all the labyrinths between the rows of cypress or eucalyptus trees that had been planted there, a long time ago, when somebody had built a big hotel on the sands. There was a story that one night a storm had come up and blown away the big dune from under the hotel, and the hotel had tipped over like a wrecked ship in the sand. Sometimes the winter storms would blow away enough sand to uncover some of the lost stuff from long ago: old machinery, a grand piano, a box of letters, a Model T Ford.

All the last storm seemed to have uncovered was clamshells. He wandered out from the edge into the full sunlight and the sea wind blew his hair back from his forehead. It was funny: he couldn't hear the waves at all, though they were crashing white with the spray thrown back from their tops. He couldn't hear any sound, though there were little kids playing at the edge of the water, and their mouths were opening as they yelled to one another. He looked around him in confusion.

He was in the place at the edge of the dunes where the trees had died, a long time ago, and they were leafless and silver from fifty years of salt spray, with their silver branches still swept backward from the winds when they were alive. There was a little line of bright water

running in a low place beyond the edge, with some green reeds and a big white bird with a crest standing motionless, or moving its neck to strike at a silver fish or a frog. On the other side of the water the high dunes started, the big mountains of sand where there were no trees, only the sand changing color, white or pink or pale gold, and the sky and the pale floating clouds and their shadows on the sand. That was where the old man was sitting. He was looking at Markie.

"Come here, boy," he said, and his voice was so loud in the silence Markie jumped. But he came, at least as far as the edge of the water. The white bird ignored him. The old man was all in white, a long robe like saints wore, and his hair and beard were long and white too. His eyes were as scary as Ronnie's eyes.

"I want you to run an errand for me, boy," he said. His voice was scary, too.

"Okay," said Markie.

"Go into the town, to the arcade with the yellow sign. Ask for Smith."

"Okay," said Markie, though he was scared to go inside the arcades.

"Give him a message for me. Ask him how he likes this new servant of mine. Say to him: My servant has set himself to feed and clothe the poor, and to break the shackles of the oppressed, and to exalt the wise even to the stars. He has invoked the names of the old kings and the days of righteousness. Why should he not succeed? You go to Smith, boy, and you ask him just that. And go along the beach, it'll be faster. Do it, boy."

"Okay," said Markie, and he turned and fled. He made no sound floundering through the hot sand, but as he got to the hard wet sand there was noise again: the roar of the surf, the happy screaming of the little kids playing in the water. He ran up the beach toward the town and never looked back once.

By the time he reached the town and climbed up the ramp from the beach, he had decided to turn in his pop bottles at Hatta's and go home along the state highway. Just as he'd made up his mind on this, however, he passed the yard where the Anderson's big dog slept on its tether, in the shade under a boat up on sawhorses. The dog woke and leapt up barking, as it often did; but to Markie's horror the tether snapped, and the dog came flying over the fence and landed sprawling, right behind him. Markie ran so fast, jolting along the hot sidewalk, that a bottle flew out of his knapsack and broke. The dog stopped, booming out furious threats, but Markie kept going until he got around the corner onto Cypress Street and felt it was safe to slow down.

"Okay," he gasped, "Okay. I'm just going to turn in my bottles and _then_ I'm going to the arcade, okay?"

There was a rumble like thunder, but it was only somebody starting up a motorcycle in front of Harry's Bar.

Markie limped into Hatta's News, Cigars and Sundries, grateful for the cool linoleum under his feet. Mr. Hatta wasn't there; only sulky Mary Beth Hatta, who had lately started wearing lipstick. She barely looked up from her copy of *Calling All Girls* as he made his way back to the counter. "Deposit on bottles," he mumbled, sliding his pack off and setting the bottles out one by one.

She gave a martyred sigh. "Eight cents," she told him, and opened the cash register and counted a nickel and three pennies into his sweaty palm. On his way out he slowed longingly by the comic book rack, but her voice came sharply after him:

"If you're not going to buy one of those, don't read them!"

Ordinarily he'd have turned and responded in kind, lifting the tip of his nose or maybe the corners of his eyes up with his fingers; but he remembered the old man in the dunes and it made him feel cold all over, so he hurried out without word or gesture.

At the corner of Pomeroy Avenue he turned and stared worriedly down the street. This was the Bad Part of town. There on the corner was the Peppermint Twist Lounge, and beyond it was the Red Rooster Pool Room, and beyond that the Roseland Ballroom, where fights broke out every Saturday night. Further down toward the pier were the penny arcades; Playland, with its red sign, and the other one with no name. Its yellow sign just said

ARCADE.

Markie wasn't ever supposed to go over here, but he had. For a while after his daddy had moved out Markie had been able to see him by walking past the Red Rooster, looking quickly in through the door into the darkness. His daddy would be at the back, leaning listlessly against the wall with a beer bottle or a pool cue in his hand. If he saw Markie he'd look mad, and Markie would run; but one day his daddy hadn't been there any more, nor had he been there since.

Markie looked in, all the same, as he trotted down the street. No daddy. Markie kept going, all the way down the street, to stand at last outside the doors of the arcade with the yellow sign. He drew a deep breath and went in.

The minute he crossed the threshold into darkness, he wanted to clap his hands over his ears. It was the loudest place he'd ever heard. In a corner there was a jukebox booming, telling him hoarsely that Frankie and Johnny were lovers. Next to that was a glass booth in which a marionette clown jiggled, and as its wooden jaw bobbed up and down a falsetto recording of *The Farmer in the Dell* played nearly as loud as the jukebox. From the back came the monotonous thunder of the skee-ball lanes, and the staccato popping of the shooting gallery: somebody had trapped the grizzly bear in his sights and it stood and turned, stood and turned, bellowing its pain as the ducks and rabbits kept racing by. There were pinball machines ringing and buzzing, with now and then a hollow double knock as a game ended, and a shout of disgust as a player punched a machine or rattled it on its legs. In a booth fixed up with a seat and steering wheel, somebody was flying as grey newsreel skies from the last World War flickered in front of them, and the drone of bomber engines played from a speaker. There were big boys standing around, with slicked-back hair and cigarettes, and some of them were shouting to each other; most of them were silent at their games, though, and dead-eyed as the waxen lady in the booth who swung one arm in a slow arc along her fan of playing cards.

Markie stood shivering. Big boys were scary. If you were lucky they ignored you or just flicked their cigarette butts at you, but sometimes they winked at their friends and grabbed you by the arm and said Hey, Shrimp, C'mere, and then they told you jokes you couldn't understand or asked you questions you couldn't answer, and then everybody would laugh at you. He turned to run outside again, but at that moment a car backfired right outside the door; with a little yelp he ran forward into the gloom.

Then he had to keep going, so he pretended he'd meant to come in there all along, and made for a small machine with a viewscope low enough for him to reach. Silver letters on a red background read *IN THE DAYS OF THE INQUISITION*. He didn't know what the last word was, but underneath it in smaller letters were the words *One Cent*, so he dug in his pocket for a penny and dropped it in the slot, and looked through the little window.

Clunk, a shutter dropped, and by yellow electric light he saw a tiny mannequin with its head on a block. Whack, another mannequin all in black dropped a tiny axe on its neck, as a third mannequin robed in brown burlap bobbed back and forth in a parody of prayer. The head, no bigger than a pencil eraser, dropped into a tiny basket; just before the light went out Markie could see the head coming back up again on a thread, to snap into place until the next penny was dropped into the slot.

Markie stepped back and looked around. There were other penny machines in this part of the arcade, with titles like *SEE YOURSELF AS OTHERS SEE YOU* and *THE PRESIDENT'S WIFE*. He felt in his pocket for more pennies, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him; in all the noise he'd been unable to hear any approach. He turned and stared up at someone very tall, whose face was hideous with lumps and pits and sores.

"Whatcha lookin' for, peanut?" the person shouted.

"Are you Smith?" Markie shouted back. "I got to say something to Smith."

The person jerked a thumb behind them. "Downstairs," he told Markie. Markie followed the direction of the thumb and found himself descending into darkness on a carpeted ramp, booming hollowly under his feet, that led to a long low room. It was a little quieter down here.

There were dim islands of light over pool tables, and more dead-eyed boys leaned by them, motionless until an arm would suddenly flash with movement, shoving a cuestick forward. Markie was too short to see the colored balls rolling on the table, but he could hear the quiet clicking and the rumble as they dropped into darkness.

At the back of the room were more pinball machines, brightly lit up, and these did not feature little race horses or playing cards, like the ones upstairs; there were naked ladies and leering magicians. There was an old man seated between two of them, resting his arms on the glass panels. Markie approached cautiously.

This was a wizened old man, heavily tattooed, in old jeans and a T-shirt colorless with dust. The dust seemed to be grained in his skin and thick in his hair and straggly beard. He wore pointed snakeskin boots and a change belt full of nickels, and he was smoking a cigarette. His eyes were heavy-lidded and bored.

"Are you Smith?" Markie asked him. The old man's eyes flickered over him.

"Sure," he replied. It was hard to hear him, so Markie edged closer.

"I talked to this other man, and he said I was supposed to tell you something," he said, loudly, as though the old man were deaf. Smith took a long drag on his cigarette and exhaled. It smelled really bad. Markie edged back a pace or two.

"Oh yeah?" Smith studied his cigarette thoughtfully. "So what's he got to say to me, kid? He bitching about something again?"

"No, he says --" Markie scratched a mosquito bite, trying to remember. "He wants to know how you like his new servant, the one that breaks chains and stuff. He says he talks about old kings and rightness? You know? And he wants to know why he shouldn't, um, s -- s-succeed."

"He does, huh?" Smith stuck his cigarette behind one ear and scratched his beard. "Huh. He's baiting me again, isn't he? Jeeze, why'n't he ever leave well enough alone? Okay. Why shouldn't this servant succeed?" He removed the cigarette and puffed again, then stabbed the air with it decisively. "_Here's_ why. His father was unrighteous, and his sins are visited on his kids, right, unto the third and fourth generation? Aren't those the rules? So there, that's one reason. And this man is an adulterer and lusts after the flesh, right? Reason Number Two. Hmmm ..." Smith pondered a moment; then his eyes lit up. "And when his son was born dead he despaired in his heart! Sin, Sin and Sin again. That's why his big-shot servant should fail, and you can tell him so from me. Okay, kid? Now beat it."

Markie turned and ran, up the ramp and out through shrieking darkness, and into the clean daylight at the foot of the pier. He pounded to a stop beside the snack stand and caught his breath, looking back fearfully at the arcade. After a moment he wandered out on the pier and looked south toward the dunes. They seemed far away and full of strange shifting lights. He shrugged and ventured further along the pier, stopping to watch with interest as a fisherman reeled in a perch and gutted it there on the spot. There were four telescopes ranged along the pier at intervals, and he stopped and climbed the iron steps to look into the eyepiece of each one, and check the coin slot to see if anyone had jammed a dime in there; no such luck. Further on, he stopped at the bait stand and bought a bag of peanuts for five cents. Just beyond the bait stand was a bench with a clean spot, and he settled down and proceeded to eat the peanuts, dropping the shells through the gaps between the pier planks and watching the green water surge down below.

The last shell felt funny and light, and when he opened it he found inside a little slip of paper printed in red ink. GET GOING, it said.

He jumped up and ran, heart in mouth, and clattered down the stairway to the beach. Near the bottom of the ramp he had to slow down, hobbling along clutching at his side, but he was too scared to stop.

All the way down the beach he watched the place with the silver trees, and he couldn't see the old man's white robes anywhere. The same little kids were still playing on the sand, though, and when he put down his head and plodded across the soft sand the same silence fell over everything; so he was not really much surprised, coming to the foot of the first dune,

to lift his head and see the old man leaning against one of the dead trees.

"All right, boy, tell me what his answer was," said the old man without preamble.

Markie gulped for air and nodded. "He says -- your servant should be failed because of his father, and the rule about the two and three generations. And he's committed adultery about the flesh, and his son died, and that's why." Markie sank down on the sand, stretching out his tired legs. The old man put his head on one side and stared fixedly into space for a moment.

"Hmm," he said. "Point taken. Very well. Go back and find Smith. Tell him he may therefore afflict my servant with wasting disease, and set scandal to defile his good name; and yet further, that he may confound his judgment among the nations. Go, boy, and tell him that."

Markie didn't want to go anywhere, and he was just tired enough to open his mouth in protest; but before he could make a sound he felt the soft sand begin to run and sink under him, and in terror he scrambled away on all fours. It didn't seem wise not to keep going once he'd started, so once he reached the hard sand he got to his feet and limped away down the beach, muttering to himself.

He left the beach and had started up the ramp at Ocean View Avenue before he remembered that the Andersons' dog was loose. Turning, he picked his way along the top of the seawall, balancing precariously and stepping around the loose bricks. Jumping from the end, he wandered through the courtyard of another small motel, pausing to duck into its row of phone booths and carefully checking to see if any change had been left in the Coin Return compartment. If none had, sometimes a punch at the Coin Return lever sent a couple of nickels cascading down; this was another good way to get money. The third booth rewarded his efforts mightily. Not only did he coax a nickel out of the phone, somebody had dropped a dime and it had fallen and stuck between the booth's ventilation slits near the floor. Markie's fingers were little enough to prise it out. He pocketed his small fortune and strolled on along the seafront, feeling pleased with himself.

At the snackbar at the foot of the pier he paused and bought a bottle of Seven-Up. The laconic counterman took off the bottlecap for him and thrust a straw down the neck. Markie carried the bottle carefully to the railings above the sand and sat with his legs dangling through the rails, sipping and not thinking. When the bottle was empty he held it up to his eye like a telescope and surveyed the world, emerald green, full of uncertain shapes. The view absorbed him for a while. He was pulled back to earth by the sound of shouting. One of the shouting voices belonged to Ronnie. Markie scrambled back from the railings and turned around quickly.

Ronnie and another man were over in the parking lot, standing one on either side of a big red and white convertible, yelling across it at one another.

"You were drunk!" the other man was telling Ronnie.

"_Fuck_you!" Ronnie told the man. "I haven't had a drink in two years! Fuck you!"

"Oh, that's some great way to talk when you want your job back," the man laughed harshly, pulling open the car door and getting inside. "It sure is. So you haven't had a drink in two years? So what exactly was that you puked up all over Unit Three, you goddam bum?" He slammed the door and started up his car.

"Come on, man!" Ronnie caught hold of the car door. "You can't do this! I've got an old lady and a kid, for Christ's sake!" But the man was backing up his car, shaking his head, and as he drove away uptown Ronnie ran after him, yelling pleas and threats.

Markie slunk into the arcade, and for a moment the din was almost welcome; at least nobody was fighting in there. He squared his shoulders and marched down the ramp, down into the room where there was no day or night.

Smith was waiting for him, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. His cigarette was canted up under his nose at a jaunty angle.

"You deliver my answer, kid?" he inquired. Markie nodded. Smith leaned back and exhaled slowly, two long jets of smoke issuing from his nose. He closed his eyes for a

moment and when he opened them his attention was riveted on Markie, suddenly interested. "Hey. What's your name, kid?"

"Markie Souza."

"Souza, huh?" Smith narrowed his eyes and pulled at his beard. "So you're a Portugee, huh? Boy, your people have been cheated by some experts. You know it was the Portuguese who discovered the New World really? And a lot of other places, too. They never get credit for it, though. The Spanish and the Italians grabbed all the glory for themselves. Your people used to have a big empire, kid, did you know that? And it was all stolen from them. Mostly by the English, but the Spanish had a hand in that too. Next time you see some Mexican kid, you ought to bounce a rock off his head. You aren't all Portuguese, though, are you, with that skin?" Smith leaned forward again, studying Markie. "What are you? What's your mother, kid?"

"She's Irish," Markie told him.

"Well, Irish!" Smith grinned hugely. His teeth were yellow and long. "Talk about a people with good reasons to hate! Kid, I could sit here for three days and three nights telling you about the injustices done to the Irish. You got some scores to settle, kid, you can't grow up fast enough. Any time you want to know about Irish history, you just come down here and ask me."

"Okay," said Markie faintly. The smoke was making him sick. "But the man said to tell you some other stuff."

"What'd he say?"

"That you can do bad things to his servant. Waste and disease, and, uh, scandal. And something about confining his judgment of nations."

"All right," Smith nodded. "All right, that's fair. Will do." He made a circle out of his thumb and index finger and held it up in an affirmative gesture. "But ... ask him if he doesn't think we ought to up the ante a little. So what if I punish one sinner with good intentions? He's the leader of a whole people, right? Aren't all his people jumping on his little bandwagon with their Camelot and all that bullshit? But how seriously do they believe in what they're saying? Shouldn't they be tested too?"

Markie didn't know what to say, so he nodded in agreement. Smith stuck his cigarette back between his teeth and laced his gnarled fingers together, popping the knuckles.

"O-kay! We got a whole nation suddenly figuring out that racial injustice is bad, and poverty is bad, and reaching for the stars is good, right? Except they damn well knew that already, they just didn't bother to do anything about it until a pretty boy in the White House announced that righting all wrongs is going to be the latest thing. _Fashion_, that's the only reason they care now. So what'll they do if this servant of his is taken out of the picture? My bet is, they won't have the guts to hang on to those high ideals without a figurehead. What's he want to bet? You go ask him, kid. Does he want to test these people?"

Markie nodded and ran. It was a lot to remember and the words kept turning in his head. He emerged into the brilliant sunlight and stood, dazzled, until he realized that he was still clutching the empty Seven-Up bottle. With a purposeful trot he started up Pomeroy Avenue. The phone booth behind the Peppermint Twist lounge yielded a Nesbitts bottle, and there were two Coca-Cola bottles in the high grass next to the Chinese restaurant, and three pennies lying on the sidewalk in plain view right in front of the Wigwam Motor Inn. He was panting with triumph as he marched into Hatta's, and the cool green linoleum felt good under his bare feet. He lined the bottles up on the counter. Mary Beth looked up from her magazine. She was reading _Hit Parade_ now.

"Eight cents," she announced. "Are you ever going to buy anything in here, junior?"

"Okay," he said cheerfully, and moved down the counter to the candy display next to the big humidor. The front of the display case was tin rolls of Lifesavers, carefully enameled to look like the real thing. He pretended to grab up a roll of Butter Rum and tugged in feigned surprise when it remained riveted in place. The patience in Mary Beth's eyes was withering, so he stopped playing and picked out five wax tubes filled with colored juice. Mary Beth

gave him his three cents in change and took up her magazine again. He stepped out on the hot pavement and hurried down to the beach.

There was supposed to be a way to bite holes in the wax tubes and play music, once you'd sucked out the sweet juice. All the way down the beach he experimented without success, and his teeth were full of wax by the time he looked up and noticed that he'd reached the silver trees again. He plodded across the sand. The old man was standing by the little stream, watching in silence as the big white bird speared a kicking frog.

"Tell me what he said this time," said the old man, without looking up.

"He said Okay," Markie replied, staring at the dying frog in fascination. "And he wants to bet with you about the people with Camelot and everything. And Fashion. He says, what if the man gets taken out of the picture. You want to test them? I think that was what he said."

"A test!" The old man looked up sharply. "Yes! Very well. Let it be done as he has said; let the people be tested. When he has done unto my servant as I have permitted, let him do more. Let him find a murderer; that man's heart shall I harden, that he may strike down my servant. Let the wife be a widow; let the children weep for their father, and his people mourn. Will they bury righteousness with my servant, and return to their old ways? Or will they be strong in the faith and make his good works live after him? We'll see, won't we? Go back to Smith, boy. Tell him that."

"Okay," Markie turned and plodded away across the sand. His legs were getting tired. He needed more sugar.

He stopped in at Hatta's on his way back down Cypress Street. Mary Beth looked up at him in real annoyance, but he dug a nickel and five pennies out of his pocket and smacked them down on the counter.

"I'm buying something, ha ha ha," he announced, and after a great deal of forethought selected a Mars Bar. As he wandered back down Pomeroy he ate the bar in layers, scraping away the nougat with his teeth and crunching up the almonds in their pavement of hard chocolate. When the candy was gone you could always chew on the green waxed paper wrapper, which tasted nice and felt interesting between the teeth. He was still chewing on it when he passed the Red Rooster and spotted Ronnie inside, ghastly pale under a cone of artificial light, leaning over a green table and cursing as his shot went wrong. Markie gulped and ran.

Down in the underground room, Smith was watching a fly circle in the motionless air. As Markie approached him, he made a grab for it and missed.

"Shit," he said tonelessly. He noticed Markie and grinned again.

"Well, kid? Did he take me up on it?"

Markie nodded and sat down, rubbing his legs. The red carpet felt sticky.

"He says -- yes, test. He says he'll let you find a murderer and he'll make his heart hard. He says let his children cry. He says we'll see about the people and faith."

"So_ I'm_ supposed to get him a murderer?" Smith leaned back. "That figures. I don't have anything else to do, right? So okay, I'll get him his murderer. This is gonna take some work to get it just right ... but, Hell, I like a challenge. Okay." He unrolled his shirtsleeve and took out a pack of cigarettes, and lit one; Markie didn't see just how, because the cloud of smoke was so immediate and thick. Smith waved it away absently and stared into space a moment, thinking. Markie got up on all fours and staggered to his feet, drawing back Smith's attention.

"I bet he's not paying you anything to run all these messages, is he?" Smith inquired. "Hasn't even offered, huh?"

"Nope," Markie sighed.

"That's him all over. Well, kid, here's something for you." Smith leaned down and fished out something from a brown paper bag under his stool. He held up a brown bottle. "Beer! Big kids like beer."

Markie backed away a pace, staring at it. Ronnie had made him taste some beer once; he had cried and spit it out. "No, thank you," he said.

"No? Nobody'll know. Come on, kid, you must be thirsty, the way he's made you run around." Smith held it out. Markie just shook his head. Smith's eyes got narrow and small, but he smiled his yellow smile again.

"You sure? Well, it's yours anyhow, you've earned it. What do you want me to do with it?" Markie shrugged.

"You want me to give it to somebody else?" Smith persisted. "Okay? What if I give it to the first guy I meet when I go home tonight, huh, kid? Can I do that?"

"Okay," Markie agreed.

"Well, okay then! Now go deliver my message. Tell him I'll get him his murderer. Go on, kid, make tracks!"

Markie turned and limped out. He went slowly down the stairs to the beach, holding on to the sticky metal handrail. It was late afternoon now and a chilly wind had come up; all along the beach families were beginning to pack up to go home, closing their striped umbrellas and collecting buckets and sand spades. Mothers were forcing hooded sweatshirts on protesting toddlers and fathers were carrying towels and beach chairs back to station wagons. The tide was out; as Markie trudged along shivering he saw the keyholes in the sand that meant big clams were under there. Ordinarily he'd stop and dig up a few, groping in the sand with his toes; he was too tired this afternoon.

The sun was red and low over the water when he got to the dead trees, and the dunes were all pink. The old man was pacing beside the water, in slow strides like the white bird. He turned his bright glare on Markie.

"He says okay," Markie told him without prompting. "He'll get a murderer."

The old man just nodded. Markie thought about asking the old man for payment of some kind, but one look into the chilly eyes was enough to silence him.

"Now, boy," said the old man briskly, "Another task. Go home and open the topmost drawer of your mother's dresser. You'll find a gun in there. Take it into the bathroom and drop it into the water of the tank behind the toilet. Go now, and let no one see what you've done."

"But I'm not supposed to go in that drawer, ever," Markie protested.

"Do it, boy!" The old man looked so scary Markie turned and ran, stumbling up the face of the dune and back into the thicket. He straggled home, weary and cold.

Mama was sitting on the front steps with two of the other mothers in the courtyard, and they were drinking beers and smoking. Mama was laughing uproariously at something as he approached.

"Hey! Here's my little explorer. Where you been, boyfriend?" she greeted him, carefully tipping her cigarette ash down the neck of an empty beer bottle.

"Hanging around," he replied, stopping and swatting at a mosquito.

"You seen Ronnie?" Mama inquired casually, and the other two mothers gave her a look, with little hard smiles.

"Uh-uh." He threaded his way through them up the steps.

"Well, that's funny, because he was going to give you a ride home if he saw you," Mama replied loudly, with an edge coming into her voice. Markie didn't know what he was supposed to say, so he just shrugged as he opened the screen door.

"He's probably out driving around looking for you," Mama stated. She raised her voice to follow him as he retreated into the dark house. "I don't want to start dinner until he gets back. Whyn't you start your bath? Don't forget you've got school tomorrow,"

"Okay," Markie went into the bathroom and switched on the light. When he saw the toilet, he remembered what he was supposed to do. He crept into Mama's bedroom.

Karen was asleep in the middle of the bed, sprawled with her thumb in her mouth. She did not wake up when he slid the dresser drawer open and stood on tiptoe to feel around for the gun. It was at the back, under a fistful of Ronnie's socks. He took it gingerly into the bathroom and lifted the lid of the toilet tank enough to slip it in. It fell with a splash and a clunk, but to his great relief did not shoot a hole in the tank. He turned on the water in the big

old claw-footed tub and shook in some bubble flakes. As the tub was filling, he slipped out of his clothes and climbed into the water. All through his bath he half-expected a sudden explosion from the toilet, but none ever came.

When he got out and dressed himself again, the house was still dark. Mama was still outside on the steps, talking with the other ladies. He was hungry, so he padded into the kitchen and made himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and ate it, sitting alone at the kitchen table in the dark. Then he went into his little room and switched on the alcove light. He pulled out the box of comic books from under his bed and lay there a while, looking at the pictures and reading as much as he knew yet of the words.

Later he heard Mama sobbing loudly, and begging the two other mothers to stay with her, and their gentle excuses about having to get home. Heart thudding, he got up and scrambled into his cowboy pajamas, and got under the covers and turned out the light. He lay in a tense knot, listening to her come weeping through the house, bumping into the walls. Was she going to come in and sit on his bed and cry again? No; the noise woke up Karen, who started to scream in the darkness. He heard Mama stumbling into the bedroom, hushing her, heard the creaking springs as she stretched out on the bed beside the baby. Markie relaxed; he was going to be left in peace. Just before he fell asleep, he wondered where Ronnie was.

Ronnie had played badly in the back room of the Red Rooster, all afternoon. He'd come out at last and lingered on the streetcorner, not wanting to have to go home and explain why he wasn't going in to work the next day. As he'd stood there, an old man had come up and pressed a bottle of beer into his hand and walked quickly on, chuckling. Ronnie was too surprised to thank him for the gift, but he was grateful; so he went off and sat on the wall behind the C-Air Motel, sipping his beer and watching the sun go down. From there he went straight into Harry's Bar and had more, and life was good for a while.

But by the time he crawled into his truck and drove out to the old highway, he was in a bad mood again. He was in a worse mood when he climbed from his truck after it ran into the ditch. As he made his way unsteadily through the darkness, a brilliantly simple solution to his problems occurred to him. It would take care of the truck, the lost job, Peggy and the baby, everything. Even the boy. All their problems over forever, with no fights and no explanations. It seemed like the best idea he'd ever had.

He crept into the house, steadying himself by sliding along the wall. Once in the bedroom he groped around in the dresser drawer for a full two minutes before he realized his gun wasn't in there. Peggy was deep unconscious on the bed, and didn't hear him. He stood swaying in the darkness, uncertain what to do next. Then he got mad. All right; he'd show them, and they'd be sorry.

So he left the house, falling noisily down the front steps, but nobody heard him or came to ask if he was all right. Growling to himself he got up and staggered out to the woods, and lay down on the train tracks with a certain sense of ceremony. He passed out there, listening to the wind in the leaves and the distant roar of breakers.

The freight train came through about twenty minutes later.

At www.fictionwise.com you can:

- * Rate this story
- * Find more stories by this author
- * Get story recommendations