

Going Once

By Mark Rudolph

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For days Aaron refused to think about his twin brother's death. He ignored phone calls, deleted messages of condolence from his inbox, and cut short the sympathetic inquiries from close friends. He ignored the pleas of his wife Clara for help with the arrangements, so she had to go alone to the bank, the attorney's office, and the cryogenic vault where Darren's body lay.

But no matter how hard Aaron tried, he couldn't ignore the day he dreaded most, the day Darren's body would be auctioned off, piece by piece, to the highest bidder -- up for sale like the rest of Darren's possessions: his flame-red Peugeot, his collection of 1960s vinyl LPs, and his Beneteau racing boat.

That morning Clara sat with Aaron for over an hour in the breakfast room, his right hand in her tight clasp. Through the French doors, he watched a sailboat drift down the Rio Azul Canal as it headed out to the Atlantic. He wished more than anything that he could be on it, sailing into the blue waters off the coast of Fort Lauderdale.

"Aaron, I loved Darren too," Clara said. "But he's gone now, and this is something we've got to do."

She gazed into his bloodshot eyes, her gray eyes clear and purposeful. "We've committed ourselves, like it or not, and we can't back out now. If you can't handle it, I'll have to do it by myself. But I'd rather not."

"I understand," he said, thinking, *Would you really do it alone?*

"You have to mean it, Aaron. We've got a lot riding on this." Aaron knew what she meant: the CDs she had cashed in to finance the auction, the nonrefundable deposits on the Internet equipment and the conference hall.

"If we fail," she said, "we could end up paying for it for a long time."

They didn't seem to have a choice. Darren had borrowed heavily over the last few years, most of the money for the remodeling of his bar and restaurant in South Beach. And like many young entrepreneurs, he had made the mistake of not insuring the loans. If Clara and Aaron hadn't assumed Darren's debts, the courts would have appropriated the entire estate -- and with for-profit organ

banks being legal now, even Darren's body was considered a financial asset.

"Let's not screw this up, okay?" She tightened her grip, her pink nails sinking into the back of his hand.

What you really mean, Aaron thought, is I better not screw this up. You don't screw up, Clara, and you don't drop the ball. You're usually the one picking it up.

"You can count on me," he said.

Clara smiled broadly and released his hand. Her nails had carved deep crescents into his skin, and he tried to rub them away with his thumb.

When he looked up, he noticed a bright smudge of red lipstick on her teeth and thought she looked both absurd and predatory. Aaron started to tell her but changed his mind, relishing the blatant sign of imperfection.

"We'll get through this together," she said.

He nodded, rubbed his hand again, and focused on the red smudge, hoping she wouldn't see it before they left the house.

Aaron wandered between the rows of empty chairs in the conference hall. The track lights dimmed and brightened, probably the technicians running their usual checks, and the hall seemed to shift and blur under the changing glow. One of the spotlights flashed, popping like the crack of a gun, and Aaron stumbled into an usher, sending the poor woman sprawling to the floor. She cursed under her breath and got to her feet, glaring at him.

Clara ran up, grabbed Aaron by the elbow, and said to the usher, "Excuse him, honey. He's not been himself lately."

"Yes . . . I mean, I'm sorry," Aaron said, finding his voice. "The lights and noise caught me off guard."

The usher shrugged and mumbled something unintelligible.

"You come with me." Clara towed him up the center aisle. "Honestly, Aaron, sometimes I just don't know how to handle you. . . ."

Handle me? he thought. *Is that what I've become after ten years of marriage?*

Just something else to handle?

When they reached the control room, Clara relinquished her hold on his arm and steered him toward a rolling chair.

"Take a minute to pull yourself together, okay? I need to make a short run to the ladies' room, then I'll get us some coffee. You stay." She turned and marched out.

The control room was empty, the lights low. High-resolution workstations lined the back wall; their flat, lucid screens counted off the remaining minutes. In less than an hour, the control room would fill with technical consultants, organ appraisers, and Web site designers -- all working together to ensure success. Online was where they'd make the real money, but the live auction was a necessity.

Aaron dropped to the rolling chair, leaned his head back, and closed his eyes. He recalled Clara's smudged teeth and felt embarrassed for her and ashamed of himself. Now his silence seemed petty and childish -- almost malicious. He couldn't figure out why he had done such a thing. Four years ago, he would have thought it inexcusable.

But I've changed, he thought, and Clara's changed too. Without even realizing it, we've become different people -- not strangers exactly, just different versions of ourselves.

He couldn't blame Clara. When they first met, Aaron had been as carefree and unfocused as Darren, but Clara had seen potential in Aaron, detected a certain dissatisfaction with the direction his life was headed. She had said that all he needed was a little motivation, a little extra push to succeed. Her insights had flattered him, convinced him that she was right.

Years later, it had been Darren who found his niche, while Aaron's investment career stalled, never quite living up to his and Clara's expectations.

Clara had a fifty-fifty chance, he thought. She just picked the wrong twin.

An older man, balding and slightly stooped, poked his head into the room, startling Aaron.

"Excuse me, but I wonder if I'm in the right place."

"I don't know. Who are you looking for?" Aaron said.

Recognition slowly spread across the man's face. "Oh, this must be it. The resemblance is unmistakable. You must be his brother."

"Darren's? Yes, I am."

"Thought so." The man grinned and stepped into the control room. He pulled a palmpad from his coat pocket. "You see, I may be interested in an item, but I don't see it on the list."

Clara strode into the room, carrying two Styrofoam cups.

"Honey, I found a coffee machine down the hall--" She stopped and put on her best smile, the one she usually reserved for her real estate clients. "Can I help you?"

"My wife Clara," Aaron said.

"I was just asking your husband about the list of--"

"I'm the one who put the list together," she said, handing Aaron a cup. "Perhaps I should answer your questions."

"Certainly, certainly," the man said, bobbing his head. "It's just that, well, my question is a little . . . personal."

"Uh-huh." She blew on her coffee.

"Well, there's an item not on the list. I was wondering if you have any information on it, if it's available." He patted a few wisps of gray hair into place.

"I'm sure I can help you. What do you need to know?"

"Measurements."

"Measurements?"

"I mean, they are identical twins, correct? If anyone would know, it would be you."

"I'm not understanding you."

"His penis. Exactly how big is it?"

"Oh, Lord," Aaron muttered aloud. "Son of a bitch."

Clara's smile bled away. A small tremor ran through her, but she quickly recovered, her smile returning almost magically.

"Well, I never considered it an asset." She snickered. "Oh, my! I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"Of course not," the man said. "I'm a bit of a collector of unusual items, very personal items if you understand me. Your brother-in-law was a minor celebrity and I'm interested in purchasing a piece of him."

"Our Darren? A celebrity? I knew he was popular, but--"

"In his younger days, Darren starred in a few films. Art films, I call them . . . though others might use a more tasteless term."

Skin flicks? Darren did porn? Aaron couldn't make sense of it. Why would Darren do such a thing?

"I see." Clara turned her back to Aaron and dropped her voice. "Let's step out into the hall to discuss this."

As Clara led the man away, she glanced over her shoulder and shot Aaron a don't-follow-us look. He shook his head in disbelief.

Is she really considering his offer? No, she can't be. She's just doing damage control, trying to smooth things over. Clara may be capable of a lot of things, but not this.

Aaron tried to drink the coffee, but his hands trembled to the point that he was afraid of spilling it. The glow from the monitors cast a surreal light over the room, and he felt as if he were underwater.

He abandoned the cup on the table and walked out of the control room. Distracted, he wandered through the convention center and finally found himself in the main conference hall again. Technicians bustled about, making last-minute preparations.

Even from the back, Aaron recognized Miguel sitting in the middle chair three

rows down. He walked quietly over and took a seat behind and to the left of him.

"You said you wouldn't be here," Aaron said, leaning forward. "You gave Clara your word."

"I lied," Miguel said quietly, not turning around.

Aaron noticed the silver glitter in Miguel's dark hair, detected the scent of alcohol and stale cigarette smoke. Miguel had probably been out all night with friends, giving Darren the kind of send-off he would have appreciated.

"You're really going through with it." Miguel rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands. "Did Darren mean so little to you? What did he ever do to you?"

"Nothing to me, but he lived like there was no tomorrow. Well, tomorrow came, and somebody has to pay for it."

"You don't have to do this. I talked to my attorney friend about it. You don't have to assume Darren's debt."

What could Miguel possibly understand about the financial obligations Darren left behind? Nothing, that's what.

"Look, Miguel, it's none of your business."

"None of my business?" Miguel's voice became strident. "I lived with Darren for five years. How much longer would it have taken for it to *become* my business, Aaron? Another ten? Twenty?"

"We're trying to save something here, Miguel."

"Who is we?" He turned and looked Aaron in the face. "Not me, that's for sure. You mean you and Clara. What have I got left? Hell, you didn't even leave me his body!"

"Would you keep your voice down?" Aaron said. "Come with me. We need to find a place to talk. You really shouldn't be here, you know."

"Where should I be?" Miguel said, rising from the chair and following Aaron.

Finding an empty lounge, Aaron directed Miguel in, and shut the door.

"You should go home, Miguel," he said as he sat down on a leather love seat. "This is hard enough without you being here."

"I don't have a home anymore. Remember?"

"You know what I mean," Aaron said, realizing Miguel was right. They had had him evicted within days of Darren's death.

Miguel dropped onto the love seat. "I can't just disappear. Darren won't let me. He's with me all the time."

"Stop talking crazy," Aaron said.

"You look so much like him. Sometimes it amazes me. It's almost like Darren's not dead." Miguel closed his eyes and took a very deep breath. "You even smell like him -- like warm, damp earth and bourbon." Miguel laughed softly. Then his head fell forward, and he began to sob.

"Easy now," Aaron said, and put his hand on Miguel's shoulder. "Pull yourself together. This isn't the time for it."

I sound like Clara. Pull yourself together. Not time for it. What the hell am I saying? I've taken so much from him already; do I need to take his grief too?

Miguel leaned into him, rested his head in the hollow of his neck. Aaron's first reaction was to pull away, and he almost did, but something stopped him. It didn't seem right -- to reject Miguel at the time when he needed Aaron's sympathy the most. He carefully slid his arms around Miguel, first one then the other, afraid of what he was doing and unsure of Miguel's response. Miguel relaxed, and Aaron tightened his hold, breathing in the scent of Polo and cigarette smoke.

Miguel leaned his head back, his lips slightly parted and his eyes still closed. His face was blotchy from the tears and showed such a deep anguish that Aaron found it beautiful. The invitation was too much for him; he brushed his lips against Miguel's, the whole time wondering what he was doing, and Miguel responded with such passion that it overwhelmed him. It was as if Miguel were giving him something in a kiss -- not something physical or sexual, but something so heartfelt and immense that Aaron's body couldn't contain it. He trembled from the perfect charity of it.

How long has it been since Clara and I kissed this way? he thought. *Will we ever again?*

"Darren . . ." Miguel whispered. When he opened his eyes, his face crumpled into a mask of disappointment. "No, not Darren. Aaron. You could never be him -- no matter how much I wanted it." Miguel broke away from him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that. I wasn't--"

"I understand," Aaron said, thinking, *I understand the kiss wasn't for me, but I took it anyway. Like everything else I've taken of Darren's.*

"I wish it were true," Miguel said, and stood up.

The door swung open and Clara stepped into the lounge.

"Aaron? I've been looking for you--"

Clara glanced from Aaron to Miguel then back to Miguel.

"Miguel dropped by for a little emotional support. He's just leaving, Clara. Aren't you?"

"I should hope so. He has absolutely no right to be here."

"I'm holding up pretty good, Clara. Thanks for asking." Miguel pushed past her, stopped at the door. "Aaron, if you ever need me, if you ever need to talk, let me know."

"Talk? What did he mean by that?" she said.

"Don't worry about it. I took care of it."

"Well, I'm not worried." She touched her hair lightly as if to fix a nonexistent stray curl. "It's almost time. Are you ready, honey?"

"What did you tell him?"

"Tell who?"

"The guy trying to buy Darren's dick, that's who."

She smoothed the lapels of her pink suit. "I told him we'd think about it. I wanted to discuss it with you later."

"Clara--"

"Later," she said. "We'll discuss it later. Right now, we've got to get out there and sell this puppy." She turned and walked out the door.

A certain resolve began to build in Aaron, a strength that he hadn't felt for a long time. It grew within him, pushing through the miasma of confusion that had been clouding his mind all morning. He held his hands out, looked down at them, and realized they were no longer trembling. The room turned hot and moist, as if a door had opened somewhere, the heat of south Florida flooding in like a sea wave, and Aaron remembered the sailboat he had seen earlier that morning. He no longer envied the people on it: they would be returning before sunset, coming home to confront the rest of their lives.

I don't think I can do this, he thought, and rose from the love seat. Not to Darren. Not to Miguel. Not to me.

Sweat trickled down the inside of his arms. He removed his suit jacket, draped it over the arm of the love seat, and loosened his silk tie. Clara wouldn't be happy, but he would have to deal with her later. He hoped she would understand.

Stepping out of the lounge, he felt a sudden urge to flee, especially when confronted with the few stragglers just coming in, but he couldn't turn back now.

There are no easy exits, he thought. No simple paths in life. You just choose a course and go.

When he entered the conference hall and strode down the aisle, the normal murmur died behind him -- as if everyone sensed a change in the air, a slight shifting of the wind, signaling a new direction. He walked up to the stage and turned to the crowd. The bright lights washed away the faces of the people, and it seemed as if he stood in an empty hall. An expectant hush had fallen over everything. They were all waiting for him, waiting to see what he would do, and Aaron teetered on the cusp of the moment, knowing that he had made his decision. He just needed to act on it.

A nervous cough from the shadows shattered the silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen." His voice wavered on the last word. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Ladies and gentlemen, there's been a change in plans.

For those of you who have come for an auction, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but . . . my brother's body is not for sale."

"Oh, God, no." Clara's voice echoed from the back of the room. "Aaron, please don't. . . ."

He shaded his eyes, trying to spot her in the audience, but it was useless. Shaking his head slowly, he smiled a sad, unrepentant smile.

"Some of you are desperate," he continued. "Desperate for what my brother's body has to offer. You may not live without it. I know that, and I'm sincerely sorry, but I can't sell it to you." He shrugged. "You see, it's really not mine to sell. If it were, I'd give it to you gladly, without asking for your money. Again, I'm very sorry if I have inconvenienced you. And I wish you better luck than you've had here."

As he turned to leave the stage, harsh whispers erupted from the audience. "I knew this was going to be a bust," someone said. "My whole morning wasted for nothing. . . ."

That does it, Aaron thought, and stepped back into the spotlight.

"I almost forgot," he said, "One more thing. For the rest of you. The curiosity seekers and the collectors. The gawkers and the entertainment mongers. Those of you who've tuned in for the show. I do have something for you. It's not much, but I think you've earned it."

Aaron held out his right hand, made a fist, and pointed his middle finger toward the ceiling. There was no mistaking the gesture. There was a sudden intake of breath, and a few strained giggles erupted from the shadows.

"No bids, please. This one's completely on me."

He grinned, wondering how long it would take the technicians to shut down the live feed. The spotlight brightened for a moment. Then the stage went dark.

"You know, I could be really nasty if I wanted to," Clara said. She picked up her wine glass and drained it.

"True. But it wouldn't get you anywhere," Aaron said.

She had let her hair grow out, stopped coloring it too, and the highlights were

gray now instead of the usual harsh blond. The afternoon sun through the restaurant window cast a warm light over her face, and Aaron noticed she was only wearing a touch of lip gloss.

She looks good, he thought. Better than she has in months; but I haven't seen her in a while.

The reopening of the restaurant was taking most of his time. And until now he hadn't felt ready to face her.

"I know that. There's really nothing to fight over, is there?" she said.

"My attorney doesn't agree."

"Mine neither, but he does what I tell him." She chuckled, sighed, and set the wine glass back on the bistro table.

There was an awkward pause. Aaron didn't know what to say to her. Apologies were useless, but he wanted to try.

"Clara, I just want--"

"So. This is your new life. The restaurant, that is. I'm sure the clientele will come back."

"I hope so." He crossed his legs under the table. "Clara, I just want to thank you."

"Thank me? Don't be stupid, Aaron. I got the house, the car, everything we built together. What did you get?" She glanced around the empty restaurant.

"Darren's restaurant. His bills. His life."

I didn't get his life, Aaron thought. That's lost to us all. As for the restaurant, I'll make it mine, but it will take time.

"When you say it that way, it sounds . . . macabre."

"It is, Aaron." She lowered her chin. "Believe me, it is."

She turned, watching Miguel's back as he wiped down the huge mirror mounted behind the bar.

"Was there anything else of Darren's you got out of this?"

"Clara, that's not funny." He stared at her, waiting for her to make another flippant remark. It would've been so typical of her. He was pleasantly surprised when she didn't follow through. "Miguel and I are friends. He needs me and I need his help here."

"It's really none of my business."

"That's right."

Clara shook her head. "When did it happen, Aaron? In all those years, when did I change? When did I become such a . . . such a . . . I can't find the right word."

"I'm not going to help you," he said.

"Well, you had your chance to say it." She checked her watch. "I'm supposed to meet Marjorie at the gym in an hour."

Aaron tapped the document on the table with his finger. "Don't forget this."

She looked down. "Where the hell is my head today?" She flipped through the document and scrawled her name on the highlighted pages. "You can do whatever you want with him. He's been in the deep freeze too long anyway."

"Now who's the one being macabre?" Aaron said.

"Sorry. I say what I think lately. It just pops out. I'm all out of schmooze."

"I bet your clients hate that. Houses don't sell themselves."

"They'll just have to deal with it." She smiled and tilted her head. "I've been making a few changes too."

"And it shows," Aaron said. "You really look great, Clara."

"Now who's the one with the schmooze?" She patted his hand, hoisted her purse strap over her shoulder. "I'm out of here. Take care, fella."

After she left, Miguel walked over to the table.

"That looked like it went pretty well," he said.

"How many times were you going to clean that mirror?" Aaron fluttered the document in the air. "She signed. He's ours now."

Miguel took the document from him, looked at it as if he were expecting it to disappear at any moment.

"I was afraid she wouldn't."

"I knew she'd sign. Clara never tried to back out of anything once she made up her mind."

At least I can give him this, Aaron thought. I can't be Darren for him. I don't want to. But it's something. Something we both want.

"When can we make the funeral arrangements?" Miguel said.

"Tomorrow if you want," Aaron said. "Today, we're working on this place. We only have another week--"

"I know, I know. Can I keep it with me until tomorrow?" Miguel held the document against his chest.

Aaron nodded.

"Thank you, Aaron. I really mean it."

I know you do, Aaron thought. But you shouldn't have to thank me. It should have been yours from the start.

Aaron wanted to say it, but he didn't. He didn't want to ruin the moment. He liked being the one who got things done for a change, the one who got the glory. He shooed Miguel away with a wave of his hand.