

Subject to Change

By Ron Goulart

PENDLETON HAD BEEN away from San Francisco over two months. The airport taxi left him at his place, where he showered and shaved. Then he decided he would walk, down through Chinatown and over into North Beach, to Beth's apartment.

It was a warm Saturday afternoon and he unbuttoned his dacron blazer a block or so into Chinatown. He smiled as he wandered by the bright restaurants and shops, the rows of ivory Buddhas in window after window. On one corner Pendleton stopped and took a deep breath, watching a scattering of tourists taking pictures of each other. Someone had lost a half dozen fortune cookies on the sidewalk and they crackled and spread fragments and fortunes as people passed.

While he was waiting for a signal to change, three small Chinese boys charged a fourth who had ducked around Pendleton. They all ran around the corner and Pendleton looked after them. There was an old curio and toy shop there. He went toward its streaked window, trying to identify the objects. Some kind of procession of tin soldiers made up the main display. The door of the shop opened and an old man with a flared white beard came out. His dark suit hung loose on him and his tie was coming untied as he hurried away.

The old man brushed by Pendleton, nudging him. "Many pardons," he said, cutting across the street. He ran downhill, weaving a little, and into an alley.

The bells over the toy shop door rattled again. "Stop, thief!" shouted the fat Chinese, who came running up to Pendleton. The man shouted again and stopped on the corner, his hands on his hips, looking.

Pendleton crossed the street and turned down the alley the old man had used. This would cut off a block of the way to Beth's. He had kept quiet about the thief because he didn't want to get involved in a lot of delaying questioning.

Halfway down the alley he saw an arm dangling out of a garbage can. Pendleton blinked and approached the shadowed area around the can. He flipped the lid up and the coat sleeve that had been tangled on the edge slipped free and dropped into the can. If the old man was wandering around naked, they shouldn't have much trouble catching him.

Pendleton liked the pre-quake apartment house Beth lived in. In almost any weather he liked to see its narrow, brown wood front waiting there in the middle of the block. He smiled as a big blue-gray gull flew low overhead and then circled up and away behind Beth's building. Pendleton took the rough steps in twos and threes and swung at Beth's bell. There was a folded note for him glued on her mailbox lid

with Scotch tape. It told him she might be delayed a bit and to get her keys from under the rubber-plant pot on the porch and let himself in. He did that, thinking again that Beth's notes always looked as though she wrote them on horseback.

Upstairs he dropped her keys on the small mantle over the small real fireplace. Her bedroom door was slightly open. Just as he noticed this, Beth called out to him.

"I hope that's you, Ben?" she said from her room.

"Where'll I put the ice, lady?" he said. "You're supposed to be out."

"Welcome back. I just got here and I had to change so I left the keys down there in case you got here while I was changing. How was New York?"

"Okay, but I'm glad I'm with the agency out here. How'd you get in without keys?" He sat down on the soft, tan sofa chair he'd given her.

"I have a key to the kitchen way. Is the show all right now?"

"I guess we fixed it for a while. How are you?"

"Fine. And, hey, I have a good part in Alex's new play. It Just happened and I couldn't write."

"You have lousy handwriting, you know," Pendleton called. Grinning, he got out a cigarette and reached into his coat pocket for a book of matches. Something jabbed into the palm of his hand.

"It's because I'm so intense," Beth said, near her bedroom door.

Pendleton winced and pulled a small toy Chinese junk out of the pocket. The price stamp was still on the bottom of the boat, twenty-five cents. The old man must have dropped it in his pocket when he nudged him.

Beth came up behind him. "It's warm in here. Give me your coat. I have a whole new concept about making martinis. This fellow in Actors' Lab told me. You do it with Zen." Her hands rested on Pendleton's shoulders.

"I'll be damned," he said, rubbing his palm with the boat as he stood.

Beth slid her arms over his shoulders and locked her hands on his chest. "What's that, Ben?"

Pendleton turned around in her hold. He tapped her tanned nose with the toy boat and told her about it. "I

suppose I should take it back," he said finally.

Beth laughed. "Makes you a receiver of stolen goods." She took the toy boat and walked to the fireplace. She put it next to her keys and turned to him. She was wearing a light-blue dress with a flared skirt. No stockings, flat black shoes. She'd cut her blonde hair short since he'd seen her last. "Welcome back," she said, smiling.

A light wind was starting up, tapping windows with tree branches, as Pendleton let himself into Beth's darkening apartment. He flipped the light switch on and started for the tan sofa chair, jiggling the keys in his hand. The bedroom door slammed.

"You in there?" Pendleton called. Her note said she'd gone out for some forgotten groceries.

Pendleton opened the bedroom door and turned on the lights. The window beyond Beth's low, blue-covered bed was open and the wind was flapping the curtains against her dressing table. A strong flap caught a lipstick and flipped it into the thick rug.

Edging around the bed, Pendleton closed the window and picked up the lipstick. He left the bedroom door a bit open and went back to the chair. There was a paperback by Eisenstein on the coffee table and he picked that up and read down the contents page.

The wind got stronger and parts of the old building creaked, first something down under him, then something way up and to the right. Now and then there would be a bang from out in back. Pendleton dropped the book and got down on his knees in front of the fireplace and kindled a fire. As the fire took hold, bright sparks popped out into the room.

Something started tapping on the window behind Pendleton's chair. At last, in a lull between creaking and banging, he became aware of a tapping. He looked at the window and the early night sky. The tapping went on.

There was a gray cat sitting on the sill outside. The cat was tangled up in an orange and blue bead necklace. "Lonely out there," Pendleton said. He didn't much like cats, but this one looked sad. He opened the window and the cat jumped in, the necklace falling free and clattering against the wall. "We'll see if maybe Beth's got something around to give to wandering cats." Pendleton reached out to pick up the cat. Sputtering, the animal raked at his fingers and dived between his legs.

Pendleton spun and saw the cat scoot through the open bedroom door. "Hey, you little bastard, you'll knock over things."

He was two steps from the door when it slammed and locked. Pendleton stopped, wondering how the

animal had managed to bang into the door hard enough to close it. He didn't think the cat should stay in there and anyway Beth would want to get in when she got home. He'd pick the lock. Crouching, he reached for the knob. Something clicked and the door swung in. He recognized Beth's terry robe and he looked up and saw her face, very pale.

"Okay," she said. "I guess I was too cute with the key bits. Go away, Ben, and leave me alone. Please?"

"What's the matter?" He was still squatting and her stepping forward sent him over.

"Just go away, Ben. Please, now." She brushed by him and sat in a bucket chair, putting both bare feet down hard on the floor.

Ben got himself up. "You drunk?"

Beth brushed at her hair. "I thought if you were sitting out here and I showed up in the bedroom, you'd think I came in the back way. Or that I was already in there and just hadn't heard you." She bit her thumb. "Just another trick I wanted to try."

"What are you talking about?" He bent and scooped up the bead necklace.

"Go away. That's all."

"Well, why?" He twisted the string of beads around his knuckles. "Somebody else?"

"Yes. Alex." She smiled.

"Alex? That fruiter who runs the Actors' Lab." The string broke and beads splattered away from him. Three landed in the fire.

"Or maybe my Uncle Russ. Did you know we lived with him for three years when I was a kid and I was always having odd fevers and things? He had some kind of quack x-ray business."

Pendleton took Beth's shoulders. "You're sick, is that it?"

"No. Go away, Ben."

"Well, what is it?"

Beth sighed, annoyed. "You know about Method. You have to feel the parts, live them."

"Sure."

Beth shrugged her shoulders until Pendleton let go. "One weekend afternoon—oh, about two or three weeks after the agency sent you off—I was here trying to be an old lady. For an exercise at the Lab. And I was."

Pendleton blinked at her still pale face. "That's swell, Beth. A guy likes to know what his fiancée is up to while he's away."

"I *was* an old lady." She stood with her body thrust almost against him. "See? I changed."

He backed a little. "How about a drink?"

"Don't you get it, Ben? How the hell do you think I Just came in?"

"The back way." Pendleton decided to try a drink on her and then find out who her doctor was these days.

"I was the cat. Now you know about it and can go away, Ben." She let herself fall to the floor and she huddled there, crying.

"How long have you had this idea?" He knelt beside her, running one hand over her back.

"You know who put that silly damn boat in your pocket?" she asked.

"Sure. You were that little old man."

Beth rolled and sat up, her legs tangled in the robe. She took a deep breath. "Listen, Ben. I got a kick out of changing into different kinds of people. It was a help in my work at the Actors' Lab. Then I got the idea it would be fun to try other things. Animals, chairs, tables. One rainy night I was a footstool until it was time to go to bed."

"I was a tea kettle as a boy. Stop kidding."

"I don't know, Ben. It gets sort of vacant all around when you're away somewhere. I had this feeling that I wanted to see if I could just step into a store or someplace and try to swipe something. Anything."

Pendleton found himself starting to shake. He put his arms around Beth. "That was you, then, taking junk from an old Chinese."

"I could change, you see, and take things as all sorts of odd characters. If I was spotted and followed, I'd try to duck in an alley or a doorway and change again. The clothes are extra. Sometimes I could hide clothes in a lot. Most of the time, though, I'd have to change into something new. A bird, a cat. Then I'd

carry what I had stolen in my beak or around my neck." She laughed softly. "Once I copped an umbrella and changed into a big dog and went off with it in my mouth." She twisted slightly in his arms. "I'm sorry. It's all sort of odd and silly. I do it."

"Well, why?"

"I don't know."

"Beth?" He inched up, lifting her with him.

"Yes?" She let him sit her on the sofa chair.

"You have to go see somebody. You have to stop."

She stiffened. "If it was as simple as insanity, I would."

"Please, Beth." He wandered to the fireplace and threw in more wood.

"The stealing *does* bother me. I think the changing is good. I can use it to really go someplace in my acting career. Quit the secretary business altogether. I actually changed to an old woman for one of Alex's one-acters. He thought I'd just done a good job of makeup. I don't believe I want to simply stop, Ben."

"You have to!"

"Don't start shouting commands."

Fendleton sat across from her on the sofa. "Will you promise to start seeing somebody? Maybe I can find out about a good man. Promise you'll see him."

"You going to ask around? Why don't you do a TV spot? 'We are happy to announce that Beth Gershwin is daffy.'"

"Relax, Beth. You decide what you want to do. I won't talk to anybody."

Beth moved to the window. The wind had died. "I don't know, Ben."

"Let it rest. Let's have the drink." He came to her side.

"I think I'd like to be alone for a while."

"I'd like to stay."

"I'd like you to go. Please."

"Beth."

"Go on, Ben." She stared at him, then walked into her bedroom.

She didn't close the door and he followed.

Her robe was spread-eagled on the bed. Pendleton looked around the room. Before, there had been one carved stool at the vanity table. Now there were two.

Pendleton left the apartment and ran down the hall, taking short, shallow breaths. But he couldn't just leave her. He bit his lip and went back through the still open door.

"Come on, Beth. Don't be stubborn," he said into the bedroom, watching the two stools.

He waited an hour. Then he turned off the lights and started to leave. Going out this time, he stepped on one of the wooden beads and almost fell onto the coffee table.

Pendleton slammed Beth's door and went out into the clear night. If she could be stubborn, so could he.

It was almost two weeks before she called him to apologize. She'd got him at the agency. He didn't stay in his apartment much. He kept talking to himself if he did.

You could see the street from the little Italian restaurant they'd agreed to meet in. Pendleton sat at a round table close to the wide window and watched for Beth. There was a slight haze in the afternoon air and most of the secretaries that passed were coatless.

Beth started smiling a quarter of a block from him. She was in a light cotton dress, weaving in and out of the noontime pedestrians.

"Nice day," Pendleton said, standing.

Beth smiled and sat down. "I noticed that right off."

They ordered and Pendleton said, "How've you been?"

"Great." She clasped her hands together on the checkered tabletop. "You were right, Ben. I'm sorry I was mean."

Pendleton moved his glass of water three inches. "Good."

"I've started seeing a very highly recommended analyst. Things are starting to look up. I haven't even had an impulse to filch anything in days."

The food arrived. "It'll take time."

"I have a great part in Alex's next play. It's really a challenge. By Ionesco. Being able to change will help."

Pendleton set his fork down. "Huh?"

"I tried changing into the character last night. It came off fine."

"What are you seeing a psychiatrist for, then?" he asked, his voice low.

"So I won't steal things any more."

He held the edge of the table for a minute, not meeting her eyes. Finally he said, "I see. Well, that's fine, Beth. How've things been at work?"

Beth grinned and told him.

The days were turning cool and the trees had started scattering dry leaves into the wind. On a sharp weekend afternoon Pendleton was killing time in the produce district before driving over to Beth's.

There was a coffee shop open and Pendleton thought about crossing over for a cup of coffee. The whitewashed door of the place shot open and a fat woman with an orange-fringe shawl came out. She was carrying something wrapped up in a paper napkin. She glanced at Pendleton, hesitated a second and then went running off toward a closed warehouse. By the time she reached it, the short-order cook was on the street looking after her. He threw a gesture after her and went back inside.

Pendleton shivered once slightly. He started walking for his car and a block from it he found himself running. He got to Beth's place ahead of the approaching dusk.

The downstairs door wasn't locked, but Beth's apartment door didn't open when he tried it. Pendleton

grunted, slapping his pockets for something to pick the lock with.

The door opened. Beth, in capris and a striped sweater, looked out at him, her head tilted slightly to one side. "Did I hear applause? You're early."

"You know why I'm here early." He pushed into the room. "I thought you were better. What the hell were you doing down there?"

"Where? What's the matter?" She backed across the rug to the fireplace. A small fire was going and she turned to warm her hands at it.

"I just saw you steal something from that diner. Silverware maybe. You want me to search the place?"

Facing him, her lips hardly parted, Beth said, "I should think you would trust me, being we love each other and all. I was rehearsing until a half hour ago and Alex dropped me off. I've been here since then."

Pendleton's hands fell to his sides. "Well, nothing I guess is wrong. I'm Just Jumpy. This changing thing bothers me."

Beth reached out and patted his arm. "It's okay, Ben?"

"Yeah." He sat down on the tan chair and looked up at her.

"Want to eat here tonight, by the fire? I'll have the Flying Something deliver food."

"Good. And send out for a bottle or two."

Beth bent and kissed him. "Trust me again?"

He brushed at her hair and nodded.

Pendleton dropped too much wood into the fireplace and a stick snapped out onto the rug. He gingerly picked up the stick and poked it back into the flames. He went back to the low sofa Beth was on. He found his glass in the dark and refilled it from the pitcher.

Beth reached out with one bare foot and stroked the side of his head. She had put on a dark-blue dress with several stiff lace petticoats and whenever he tried to touch her she made crackling sounds.

"You're really a nice fellow," Beth said, finding his ear with her toe.

"So are you," he said, finishing his drink.

"Maybe we should go ahead and get married."

Ben agreed and poured fresh drinks.

"Ben?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry." She was crying.

"What is it?"

"It *was* me this afternoon. I *have* been doing those things. I never went to any highly recommended man at all."

Pendleton felt tolerant. "So what? Things will work out somehow."

Beth sat up. "I can't stop it, Ben."

Pendleton thought he heard an odd quaver in her voice. "You're not onstage now, kid. Save the phony touches."

Her leg swung round. Just missing his head, and she stood up. "That's your trouble. You're totally incapable of comprehending."

"I comprehend you. You're loony and a liar."

Beth slapped him. "It'll be simpler if I stop being me!"

Pendleton had somehow gotten his arm stuck under the sofa. "Take it easy."

He was aware of a rustling sound and when he got loose and came up he saw Beth naked by the window for an instant. As he looked she changed. Then there were two tan sofa chairs in the room.

Pendleton called Beth's name over and over, but she wouldn't come back. It got cold in the apartment after a time and he threw all the wood he could find in the fire. He crawled over to the martini pitcher and drank from it. He noticed that some sticks had fallen out and landed in the tangle of petticoats Beth had left and he smiled at the disorder of everything and put his head back against the sofa.

Petticoats crackling woke him. Even before he got his head up very high in the room, he was coughing. The room was turning bright, sparkling orange.

"Beth!" he said. "Beth!"

There were still the two tan sofa chairs.

"Beth, sober up now! Come on, change! We've got to get out!"

Nothing happened. Pendleton looked at the chairs a moment. The one on the left. He grabbed it up and wavered to the apartment door. To make sure, he'd have to come up for the other one.

For several minutes it seemed the chair would stay wedged in the doorway. It came free finally and he went back with it and tumbled and twisted down the stairs.

A siren met him in the cold night outside. The engines were already there. The firemen were heading for the building.

Spray fell back across the street where Pendleton took the chair. "Beth, please," he said in a low voice. "Change now." He tried to go get the other chair, to be sure, but they wouldn't let him.

He fell onto the one he'd picked and began crying softly. The siren stopped. Before he let the ambulance people look at him, he insisted that the chair be looked after.

No trace of Beth was found and Pendleton couldn't explain what had happened. After they let him go, he had the chair sent to his apartment.

He put it very carefully in the living room by the liquor cabinet and sat down near it to wait.