

PART ONE

Guy's Story – 1974

ONE

It was a mild September day in the mid-1970's when students were either coming back to campus or getting used to it for the first time. Guy Ridley, bookseller, author of numerous tales, stood by the front door of his shop, which he called Dulcinea's, surveying the street, as he often did during the afternoon quiet spell. After weeks of not having had an idea for a story, the portals of his imagination opened onto a vista he hadn't seen before. He pictured two spectral travelers appearing suddenly on the shore of Lake Otrobe, a mile away, on the other side of the weekday traffic that whizzed along the boulevard.

He could almost hear them speak. "I think you can tell me now, sire, why we've come here." This was the shortest of the pair, chubby, bow-legged, dressed in a leather jerkin and knee-pants with heavy brown shoes.

"A bookseller who lives in this neighborhood looks on me as his one hero. He's in trouble with demons like the ones that plagued us. We'll help him." He was taller than his squire and very thin. He wore a breastplate and round metal headgear with a chip on the visor. He sat on a boulder with a lance across his knees while his companion shook a stone from his shoe.

"We don't have to help everyone, sire. My body wants a rest."

"What are you talking about, my friend? You don't have a body."

"The body I once had would be tired by now."

They heard a noise and saw a flash of light. A lanky, sway-backed horse and a dappled donkey appeared before them, fictional phantoms like themselves, ready for their riders.

"It's time to move on," said the master. "It won't take us long."

"Didn't you notice those moving carts and wagons, sire? They'll mow us down."

"They can't hurt us. We're in the spectral plane now. We move as we please. We'll find our new friend and get rid of his enemies for him."

Pleased with the idea that had come to him, Guy looked ahead to watching it grow. He turned to survey his shop. His mind's eye brought him a scene that looked as if chaos had struck – books tumbling from shelves, his cash register opening and closing with a clangorous sound, plangent discords coming over the loudspeaker instead of the music he and his customers liked, and unclothed figures writhing on every free surface. Voices quavered and whispered the same words over and over.

"Not bad," Guy said to himself with a chuckle. "I can tell stories again."

He imagined, furthermore, that the door opened behind him and the two travelers he'd seen in his mind's eye came in. Quixote and Sancho Panza worked quickly. The disorder seemed to right itself. Books snapped back onto the shelves, the screechy sounds coalesced into the

Beethoven he'd been listening to, and bills and coins that fluttered through the air dropped back into the cash drawer, which closed with a firm thud. He heard faint squealing sounds.

"Fantastic," Guy said and dusted off a replica of a helmet that looked like a tin basin and a papier-maché lance on the wall above his cash register. He was about to reach for a pencil and make a note of what he'd imagined when he heard the bell on the door frame tinkle sedately and a cough behind him.

A woman in her early thirties came in, big-boned, dressed in bright colors. Guy blinked and brushed the dust from his hands. She asked about his ad for an assistant.

"I hire mostly grad students or their wives," Guy said after they palavered a bit. He remembered seeing her picture in the Millard Circle Cryer, next to one of the letters he occasionally sent them. "You're probably overqualified. I know you're a sculptor. You show pieces at Martin Plummet's place, which is newer and a lot fancier than here. Why come to me?"

"I learned I couldn't trust Mr. Plummet," Leila said. "I promise not to complain about your set-up. You could open a gallery here yourself."

"I could do that, yes," he said. He liked the way she asserted herself; her experience would be good for business. "Can you come in four mornings a week and open the store? Your shift will end at two. I'll arrive at one or so and stay till closing at nine. Several of my regular customers drop in according to no set schedule for coffee and to dissect the university's problems. Don't let them bother you. I should also tell you that I've rented the space next door for readings and music to start tomorrow evening. You can help out with that."

Leila explored his stock for half an hour. "If you bought an up-to-date coffee maker and laid out snacks, your friends could pay for what they eat and drink."

The bell on the doorframe rang again. Guy and Leila turned to see a wiry young man wearing rimless glasses, looking brusque and eager to conquer a portion of the world. He, too, had come about the ad.

Up till that day, Guy had hired only one assistant but changed circumstances brought new ideas and new opportunities. He'd just come back to Millard Circle from his father's funeral in Minnesota. He and his brother had agreed to sell their father's properties and his grain business. Guy would have almost enough money to concentrate on his creative work for the rest of his life. He liked the way Anthony Wynward carried himself. Why not two assistants? "Can you work evenings?"

"I can arrange my schedule," he said.

Guy, who had a warm place in his heart for young people looking for love, watched as Wynward and Leila noticed one another. Their eyes widened, their mouths slipped open, they moved a few steps closer. They looked as if they'd suddenly and unexpectedly discovered the other who might fit comfortably at the center of their lives and couldn't wait to test their theory.

"Can you come in tomorrow evening?" Guy explained what they'd have to do to set up for the reading.

After they left, he looked around his shop and let his mind's eye wander to a tableau of Quixote and Sancho, who'd pushed his window-display aside and now sat on the ledge eating

bread and cheese and slices of lamb, a peaceful moment before their next assault on the demons that he imagined were about to torment not just him but the whole city. The knight and his squire would need to get back to work soon, for now that he'd thought of demons, he saw a dark shadow move across his vision and heard a faint echo of voices, like a chorus, and two louder voices arguing, bickering, and finally as one, calling his name over and over and then two words that sounded like "baby food".

"Oh, dear," he said. "This could turn out to be more serious than I intended."

He looked back at the window-ledge, where he saw Quixote put out his hand to receive from Sancho a hunk of cheese and a goatskin half filled with wine. The image vanished when the bell above the doorframe jingled and two newcomers to the university came in, one of whom had never been in a used bookstore before.

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The next afternoon, Guy and a clutch of his regulars bantered about the news of the day. Hanif, the university's microfilm librarian, offered a tidbit that put Guy on his mettle. "I understand that the baby food scandal is back in the news."

"First I heard of it," Guy said.

A team of researchers under the supervision of a biologist on a two-year contract, new to the university, now one of a host of administrators and lucky to be employed, worked on a formula for a large food processing company that wanted a pabulum they could ship quickly and cheaply to third world countries and impoverished areas in the U. S. A flaw in the formula or the way the company developed it caused hundreds of children to fall sick after the first shipment went out. A dozen died.

"Ancient news," Guy said, though always fresh to him, because his wife Gladys, from whom he'd separated on friendly terms but never divorced, was a junior member of the team and had warned her colleagues to beware of shortcuts, but deadlines approached and dollar signs threatened to shrink. Disgusted, Gladys left the team and the university and went to a school in California to pursue her career there. She took the children with her.

"It has come to light," Hanif said, "that Gladys is in town."

"You don't say," Guy murmured. "I told her before she left that I'd follow up on the case. I never did much. Has someone found new information?"

"She's teamed up with Martin Plummet." Hanif meant Leila's former employer, who'd made his living for years writing TV scripts in Hollywood, before he returned to Millard Circle to restart his life by opening a gallery and puttering in the arts. "They're researching the scandal for a documentary they'll sell to one of the networks. Maybe a book and a feature film, too."

"Their own self-perpetuating industry," said Karl from buildings and grounds. "T shirts, coffee mugs, court cases."

Guy had a faraway look as he did whenever he found an idea for one of his sketches. "When did she get here?" he asked.

"Last week," Hanif said. "She'll be in town till the end of the month."

"Ah, yes," Guy replied in a faint, cheerful, purposeful tone, full of wonderment.

After his cronies left, he had no customers until the bell tinkled at six. Guy looked up from the book he was reading, essays by the Spanish philosopher Juan Romero.

Gladys came in, Martin Plummet a step behind. "Good evening, Guy. Sorry to descend on you abruptly. I think you know Martin."

Guy stood up. "Delightful to see you as always. Hello, Martin."

"We have only a few moments," Gladys said as Plummet moved about the shop with an air of inspection. "I wanted to find out how you're doing."

"Fairly well...in some ways."

"Margaret," she meant their daughter, "told me your pa died."

Guy winced at her use of his affectionate name for a man with whom he'd had a multi-layered relationship. He longed for Gladys more than he ever let anyone know, especially the woman in question.

After more information-gathering, Gladys looked at her companion, who gave a quick nod. "Martin and I are looking to expand. We want to buy your shop."

"Not for sale," Guy said. He looked through the window and swore that he saw two figures, a tall lean man with a lance and wearing a round-topped helmet and a shorter pudgier man peering through the window with wide eyes as if still astonished that books that had brought such harm to his master could hold anyone's attention.

Gladys suggested they meet for lunch.

"Splendid." Guy said as he watched his two other visitors move away from the window toward the street corner.

"I'll call you soon," Gladys said and left with her new friend.

Gladys looked fine, he thought, and in control of herself and the men around her as usual. He felt a momentary rumbling in the back of his head and saw flickering motions like the wings of shadowy birds. He heard whispery indistinct sounds and with them came a new wrinkle for his story. Supposing he exaggerated and turned these stray phenomena, which were likely the results of stress and the death of his father after struggling with dementia for years, into two demons who argued with each other as they planned their campaign to rule the city. And then a secondary wrinkle – that the demons were using him to get at Gladys because she opposed their baby-food scheme and wanted to bring the scandal prominence it never had before. In that case, he was pleased to defend his wife from spiritual enemies, as Quixote would have done.

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The patrons, mostly young people, began to drift into Dulcinea's makeshift annex about seven that evening.

Wynward, whom Guy appointed master of ceremonies, made an asset of his sandpaper voice and led the audience in singing. The chief disappointment was that an author who'd promised to come reneged, so Guy dug around in his desk drawer and brought out one of his own sketches that he set in Millard Circle in the early 1960's, after his wife Gladys left for California and he learned what it means to be low in spirit.

BERT

Juliet and Victor talked in awed whispers as they left the Millard Circle Cinema. Their conversation echoed the French film they'd just seen, a romantic triangle that ended with the unexpected suicide of one of the lovers.

"It's probably good Bert didn't come," Juliet said. "It would have depressed him more than he is."

Victor said there was little danger the on-screen infidelities would be re-enacted in their own lives. "Bert has his nose buried in Marxist analysis and the welfare of North America's proletariat." What's more, Bert knew something that Juliet didn't – this was the night that Victor would ask her to marry him.

"It'll be beans and franks for a while," Victor said. They walked along Otrobe Boulevard and stopped at Clara's Korner on the edge of campus for ice cream. "But lean times won't last. I'm going to finish my Ph.D, and find a teaching job. You won't catch me thinking like Bert."

Victor knew that Juliet and Bert had once been friends and that she still had a soft spot for him, even though she never thought of their friendship as a romance and many people would despise him for his views. "He's joining the communist party. He'll finish his degree and then get a job in a factory – background for writing a book. It's hard to say this, but I can't think of him as my friend anymore."

"Why not? The communists he knows aren't his friends the way you are."

They walked by the sycamores on Dulcet St. A tall figure passed them, trim, energetic, the chairman of the biology department. "An ambitious man," said Juliet, who knew him as the adviser of her master's thesis. "His dad owned a laundry in Detroit. You can rise like Dr. Pierce, too." They watched him turn a corner and head into the depths of Millard Circle's outer edge.

"I know his story," Victor said. "I'm better than he is."

The darkness kept him from noticing Juliet's frown that said pride would hurt him – something they needed to work on.

"I want to change the subject," Victor went on. "I've told you I love you and I've never known another woman I've wanted to spend my life with. Is this a good time to ask you to marry me?"

"No, but ask anyway," Juliet answered. "What would you do if I said 'yes'?"

"You just watch," Victor replied, handed her the book he was carrying, and executed two cartwheels. "Something like that, though I'm almost too old, so we better get a move on."

"I like that," Juliet said, "Very sweet. I hate to think of you as old, but when you adopt your pseudo-professional pose, you look as if you've past your 100th birthday."

They embraced in the moonlight, by the sycamores, under racing clouds.

Victor met Bert the next day at Bartleby Commons. Bert greeted him coolly, with a more distracted air than usual. They ate macaroni and cheese beneath a portrait of the school's founding president, resplendent in academic regalia.

"Did you ask her?" Bert said with an unsettled manner.

Victor nodded, taking on a reserve he considered part of the maturity he aspired to. “She said ‘yes’.”

“I’m happy for you, old man.” But was he? Victor, whose field was music theory and hadn’t taken any courses in psychology, could never unravel Bert’s intricacies. “I’ve finally got the most important matters figured out,” Bert went on, cheerful like a brave man who suffers from a searing pain. “Americans have never understood the highest form of politics. We know how one group acts with another, but nothing about improving connections, so drastic changes are coming. Maybe violent ones. Exciting times for some people. There’s nothing worse than stagnation. Life never stands still.”

Victor noticed his short sentences, like the affirmations of public people who know that only a small number will believe them. Plus, Bert’s voice was dull and he sat slumped with his shoulders forward. What was going on with him?

Victor easily guessed what Bert’s father, the senior partner in an accounting firm, would think of his interests, about which Bert might not be so sure as he claimed. “I’ve never understood why you’re in a hurry to break away from a tradition that’s led the world in some ways.”

“Society moves on,” Bert said quietly. Victor remembered that Bert had once admitted to a struggle with melancholy after his mother died and his father remarried soon after.

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After several hours in the listening room at the music department, Victor walked through softly falling evening mist to the apartment Juliet shared with two girlfriends. A familiar, nonsensical idea washed through him – that Millard Circle was the center of the universe, its most important place, and that it aspired to be a beacon for the rest of the country. If you wanted to do well in a neighborhood like that, you had to behave a certain way. Bert would likely become a sidelight in the great campaign. They’d soon fade from each other’s lives and Victor would shed the burden of having to advise him against ill-defined, risk-ridden, blank-wall adventures. Yet he remembered what his parents taught him – not to run out on your friends. *That was back home*, Bert said to himself. *This is here. Important stuff is going on. You don’t let anything drag you down. Not even your friend.*

Juliet brought a chef salad to the table. Victor poured on dressing and stirred the lettuce with a wooden fork. Juliet said she’d talked to her mother. “She was so excited she started to cry. I promised we’d drive to Elkhart this weekend.”

“It’ll go good,” Victor said, half in love with the coziness of the moment. He wanted to avoid complicated subjects, so he didn’t mention Bert. When she opened the oven and the fragrance from a casserole moved through the kitchen, he felt a sharp pain shoot through his brain. He went for the bottle of aspirin in his brief case. Juliet saw his stillness and asked what was wrong. “I’m not sure,” Victor said. “I didn’t want to say, but I know what will happen to Bert. Trouble, then years of being sorry.”

Juliet noticed his scowl. “Bert thinks he’s doing good, and maybe he is. There’s no need for us to live his regrets in advance.”

Victor wondered if she and Bert were still pals and if they'd talked about him. He knew the guidelines she went by – that it's never right to feel superior to anyone, love people and stick with them even if knowing them becomes awkward; help to pull them out of their troubles, including the ones they bring on themselves. One of her ideas that was new to him that – there's a supernatural element in everything that happens. The areas they didn't agree on weren't important, though. Juliet was the one person he'd stick with no matter what.

She asked if he'd invite Bert to be his best man.

"I never thought of it."

"You're almost his only friend. Don't forget, he introduced us to each other."

"I'll probably ask my brother, but I'll do something for Bert he'll like."

Juliet brought the casserole and switched off the overhead lights while Victor lit candles. He saw depths in her eyes he hadn't noticed before – hints of an eternity of light that would survive rain and drought and moments of disagreement.

"It's funny that I'm the one talking about helping Bert," Victor said, "and not the other way around. I told you my grandfather came to America from Europe for a better life. My uncle died protesting against communists in Poland. My dad worked for twenty-five years in an auto plant. He carried a lunch-pail every day. My mom worked part time at the five and ten. Bert's uncles are big shots in various industries, his dad gives money to the art institute uptown. They've had wealth and position for generations. Bert wants to throw all that out and if he gets his way, no one else will ever have a chance. I used to think that the left...." Victor's fingers trembled. Without paying attention to what he was doing, he put a spoonful of mashed potatoes into the ash tray with his pipe.

"Why does he bother you?" Juliet asked. "You know his dreams will never come to pass. So does he." She touched his hand, as if to tell him to watch what he was doing. "It's still warm. Let's go outside. I'd like to look at the moon."

They walked to Lake Otröbe. The glow from a distant steel mill reddened the southern sky. "Industry," Victor said admiringly. "Creating wealth." He began to sputter again on the way back when they passed the apartment building where Bert lived. They looked up at a lighted window. A dark figure with his back to the street sat in a gray armchair, still, his head down. "He's fallen asleep reading," Victor mumbled. "Engels no doubt or Lenin or one of those other thieves. When I find out the name of his factory, I'll write to the manager."

Juliet suggested they go back to her place for dessert.

The phone rang forty-five minutes later. Bert's roommate, confused and loquacious, said that Bert had swallowed too many sleeping pills. An ambulance had just brought him to Burroughs Hospital. The doctors weren't sure they could revive him.

"I had no idea," Victor said, almost a whisper. "It must have happened when I had that shooting pain at dinner." He knew that he couldn't share his next thought with Juliet – that Bert had tried to kill himself to attract their attention. Neither could he tell her about the relief he'd feel if Bert died. He didn't guess, from the searching look she gave him, that she had a pretty

good idea what he was thinking. “If it weren’t for this,” Victor added, “we could say we were the happiest people in Millard Circle – and maybe for ten minutes in the whole world.”

“My dad tells me to expect the unexpected,” Juliet said. “We’ll still be happy if we make up our minds to build a decent, peaceful place – and include Bert, if he survives.”

Victor desperately wanted a few minutes to think – not about Bert, but the significance of what Juliet had just said. Did she intend Bert to be a third presence in their marriage? Why did she like to catch him off-guard with half-hurtful remarks? Should he cancel his part in their wedding?

But Juliet kept on talking and he held his breath. “I once thought I’d marry Bert because of his money and position, but I figured his family would want a society lady, which I could never be. I felt sorry for him, though, when I learned that his people were about to disown him. A few days after that, I talked to your mom on the phone. She said she knew you liked me and that we’d probably stay together because she’d taught you to stick with your friends. You and I have a lot in common, you know. I don’t want a trial arrangement with you. I want us to stay together for the rest of our lives.”

“Yes, they taught me some things pretty good,” Victor said, his voice still low. “Choose your friends well, don’t run out on them. I know one person I won’t abandon – and that’s you.”

Bert’s roommate called again just as they finished washing the dishes to say that the doctors had cleaned out his stomach and that he’d be all right. “Bert wanted me to let you know right away.”

“He may be all right physically,” Victor said doubtfully to Juliet later, as he went through the strangest array of emotions he’d ever experienced. “But what about his head? I had no idea he was thinking that way. What’s he going to do next?”

“I suppose I’ll have to push you to go see him.” Juliet dried the dishpan and put it under the sink.

“Maybe not,” Victor said, still absorbed with his thoughts, while his voice recovered its strength. “What do you say we go together?”

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Some of his listeners surmised when he was done that the well-known New Corinth mystery writer hadn’t agreed to come at all: Ridley simply wanted a captive audience for his manifestly more modest work. This wasn’t true, for the writer in question had got into an argument with a police officer about the nature of drunk driving.

Anyway, Guy collected his papers, thumped the edges smartly on the reading stand, and looked out at a pool of silence.

A woman found a poem in her notebook and read it. Another sang a song she’d just composed. The missing author Ron Klingsor, sober now, arrived with a summons to court in his pocket, just as people were about to leave Dulcinea’s new annex.

