



An excerpt from *The Cognitive Dissidents*,
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NOTE: The narrator of this story suffers from Werner's Syndrome, which makes him appear older than he really is.

After the stop for gas I went to a couple of thrift shops looking for old folks' clothes. I got lucky at one and found a pair of orthopedic shoes in my size. One sole was built up about two inches and made an attention-grabbing clomping sound on my test drive around the store. They wanted ten bucks for the shoes but with some haggling I got them for seven, and they threw in an aluminum cane, one of those short ones that grips your forearm. I figured the cane and shoes would be just what I needed for a job someday.

Traffic was building to rush hour so I skipped a stop for groceries and drove home, which was a pool house in west Austin. I set my backpack and my thrift shop finds inside the front door, got a soda from the fridge and went to the back door.

I looked out the sliding glass panels, past the pool, to Austin in the distance. The sun was lowering behind me and the windows of the city's glassier buildings glittered with reflected light. Soon they'd be glittering with artificial light.

I sipped my soda and admired the well-kept lawn that sloped down to a fence barely visible among the thickety cedar and oak trees. The hillside was valuable real estate and neighbors were crowded close on all sides, but the wild growth that Dick had kept around the perimeter of his three acres gave a feeling of seclusion.

Dick, known nationally as Swingin' Dick, was my landlord. He's one of the big names in retro furnishings, maybe the biggest. For a hefty fee you can open a Swingin' Dick's franchise store of your own and sell crap from the past at futuristic prices.

From what Dick told me, when he was home once on one of his rare visits, he started out selling Rat Pack kitsch. Hence the reason he called himself

Swingin' Dick, because Dino, Frank and Sammy might have approved of the name back when they were headlining in Vegas. But Rat Packers proved to be too small a market to be profitable, so Dick expanded into general sixties stuff, then he expanded again into the fifties. His franchises sell whatever genuine items the storeowner can scrounge up locally, plus lots of imports.

In his online advertising and in real life Dick likes to shift his personal look between the fifties and sixties. He's older and bald, and when I was living beside his pool he kept his vast collection of fake hair hidden somewhere in the main house. The house was tended by Filipino servants. They flitted around keeping it clean and warding off burglars with an aura of martial arts menace. They didn't like me, but Dick did and I think that was because I was young but looked old, like his Chinese-made furniture. He gave me a break on the rent and I gave his pool a little TLC. I skimmed leaves, chucked in chlorine pellets, and called the real pool guy as needed.

Most of the furniture in the pool house was authentic and vintage. The place had a *Peter Gunn* look from the fifties, but there were also some sixties things, like lava lamps and a waterbed. And clappers. Dick installed them because he thought it would be cool to be able to turn lights on and off by clapping his hands, just like in the TV commercials from his youth. So he installed clappers throughout the pool house but then regretted it as he got older. He told me that the last time he entertained a "foxy chick" in the house, his calcified knee joints kept snapping the lights on whenever he tried to put a move on her.

I made a salad and nuked a turkey potpie, and as it cooked I looked at a job application waiting for me on the kitchen table. The form needed to be filled out before I went in for an interview the next day. I could have done the work while I

ate, but when my turkey was sufficiently irradiated I put it and my salad on a tray and went into the living room to watch TV.

I bypassed a chair that had been modern in Denmark fifty years before. Prior to that it would have been useful in the Spanish Inquisition. I settled on the couch, set my tray on the coffee table and turned on the big-screen TV. It was the only thing in the room that wasn't vintage.

While my potpie cooled I munched salad and channel surfed through laugh tracks, shootouts and infomercials. I paused at a news channel and learned about a rash of deaths in Asia. The cause was unknown but authorities suspected a bad batch of vaccines. A vice-president of the company that made the vaccine was found dead in his Hong Kong office, an apparent suicide.

Clicking around some more I found a *Barnaby Jones* with a few minutes to go, so I set the remote down and went to work on my potpie.

I'd never got in the habit of watching *Barnaby Jones*, and seeing the climax of the one that was on just then reminded me why. It was an episode from later in the series, when Buddy Ebsen was showing his considerable mileage. A bad guy charged him and he juked a half step to the left. The camera cut away and a gray-wigged stuntman took his place. The stand-in did a somersault and a flying kick, and the bad guy crumpled to the ground. When the shot cut back to Ebsen he wobbled like he'd just got his feet back under him. I shook my head and thought how his creaky old joints would have made the living room's clappered lights go paparazzi if he'd actually done the monkey stunt himself. In my opinion he should never have agreed to play Barnaby Jones. He should have exited TV life as Jed Clampett, whittling away on a stick by the see-ment pond and living off his black gold, his Texas tea.

I finished eating, turned off the TV and settled back on the couch to digest and read from an *Ellery Queen Magazine*. I kept a stack of mystery magazines on the coffee table.

The story I read stank, but I didn't know how bad it was until I was halfway in and didn't want to give up on it. You know how it is when you're reading something and realize you don't like it, but you hate to quit because it might get better. Plus you've made the investment of your time and don't want to lose that, so you plow through to the end only to find Hope waiting there with a smirk on its face. You feel like a fool and berate yourself for not having followed your instinct to chuck the whole mess as soon as the writer started with the excessive, superfluous, redundant adjectives and the detailed asides about things that have no bearing on the story at all.

That was the kind of story I read, and when I finally finished it I dog-eared my place in the magazine and went to put a load of clothes in the washing machine in the back of the pool house. Then I poked around on the internet. I looked through the news and read about the vaccine fiasco they'd mentioned on TV. It turned out the dead vice-president's body had two bullet holes in it, one between the eyes and one in the back. But the local coroner (looking mighty nervous in a photo taken at a press conference) still claimed it was a suicide. I thought of all the double-tap suicides I'd read about over the past few years, especially of scientists, but as I was about to research that phenomenon I got distracted by a headline that said "CDC's Skeeters to Vax Cheaters." It was a story about the Center for Disease Control breeding mosquitoes to inoculate a wary public with experimental vaccines. The article said the public's fears were unfounded, and it linked to a story about UFOs and conspiracy theories, but before I could click on that one I remembered the

two guys talking about wrestling at the gas station.

I searched the name “Alma Gorda” and turned up a bunch of information. I learned that Gorda was part of a professional wrestling team and her partner was called The Rocket Scientist. He was small and she was large, really large, well over six feet and heavily muscled. The article compared her to a wrestler named Hoover van Dam, so I searched for information on him and found a video advertised as “NEW!” I clicked on it and saw some cell phone footage of a big, older guy hunched over a plate in a fancy French restaurant. He was wearing light gray sweats but had a dark blue tie knotted around his neck, probably on account of a dress code. The other diners wore suits and evening gowns.

Van Dam picked up a snail and crunched down on it shell and all, and while he chewed somebody approached him. It was a fan, a woman who said she used to watch him on TV when she was a little girl. Van Dam’s head snapped up and he sprayed bits of snail shell when he said, “Destroy me?” He stood up and snarled, “I destroy *you*, with Van Dam Floodgate!” He balled his fists, and shoulder muscles rippled beneath his sweatshirt. The people at the surrounding tables got up and backed away. The restaurant went quiet, aside from the sound of Van Dam huffing deep, bellows-like breaths. They came faster, and faster, and then he roared with rage. The fan was still standing near him and she covered her head with her arms, but fortunately for her the only floodgate that Van Dam opened was the one restraining his bladder. The restaurant’s customers began calling for their checks but Van Dam was oblivious to what had happened. He picked at his darkened sweatpants and said it felt good to work up a sweat again.

I went to put my clothes in the dryer, came back to the living room and looked out the back

door. It was almost dark and the lights of Austin twinkled silently in the distance. The silence cried out for music, so I dug through Dick's LPs, but none of the psychedelia from yesteryear seemed suited to the moment. I wanted something less intrusive and looked at the old reel-to-reel tape recorder that was on the shelf above the console stereo. I couldn't recall what tape was in it, but when I punched Play I heard the sound of soft jazz. Perfect. It was a recording of Lola Albright, the actress who'd been Peter Gunn's girlfriend on TV. The album was a collection of songs that she'd sung on the show. One song faded out and was followed by an upbeat version of "How High the Moon."

The job application on the kitchen table was still waiting for me, so I sat down to work on it. I was going to apply for a "greeter" job the following morning. The insurance company paying me to apply was upset that a big retail store was regularly collecting a hundred thousand dollars a pop on life insurance policies taken out by its employees. The store hired a disproportionate number of old people and got them to make the store the beneficiary in case of demise. My job would be to find out if something was being done to hasten those demises. I agreed to do the investigation for a fee plus a bonus if I learned anything worthwhile.

In the "benefits" section of the form it said that since my starting wage would be so low, I might qualify for free food (food stamps). Free medical treatment (in case of injury by meteor or volcano) would also be provided. And then there was the hundred thousand dollar life insurance policy. It was offered at no cost to me and I was encouraged to name the company as beneficiary rather than risk putting my relatives in a higher tax bracket. I filled in the name of the company and drew a little smiley face after it.

The back of the form asked about medical

issues. I checked No for the healthy things and Yes for the unhealthy, then under “other conditions” I listed lightheadedness, blackouts, disorientation and heart palpitations. Any more might have sounded like bragging, so with a shaky flourish I signed a bogus name, and then I yawned. I remembered my clothes in the dryer but decided they could wait until morning. Wrinkled clothes on a man of my apparent age could only help me in the job interview.

I went to the bedroom and undressed to Lola Albright singing “I’ve Got a Crush on You,” then I performed my ablutions, turned the music down and rode the waves to the middle of the waterbed. I was almost too tired to clap the lights off. The bedside lava lamp wasn’t hooked up to a clapper, and I fell asleep watching its glowing red shapes writhe like Lola’s curves in slow time to “Dreamsville.”