

HOW TO WRITE FICTION FROM A BLIND CHARACTER'S POINT OF VIEW

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Writing a story through a blind character requires some special techniques. The following is a version of my essay that *Disabilities Studies Quarterly* published in 2004 as a companion piece to my story, "Window Offices." I've since merged parts of the story into a novel, but it gave me a vehicle for describing these techniques.

Here's an outline of the story. Jonathan is a blind lawyer in a government agency undergoing a change in administration. Directed to vacate his corner office for one in the shadow of a neighboring building, he recalls his long-ago summer internship when he was told he would be moved from a window office to one without any windows at all. He fought that battle and won, but the experience left him anxious about how his surroundings might influence the ways colleagues and visitors perceive him. (I append the full text of the story for anyone who might be curious.)

Jonathan, a blind lawyer and protagonist of "Window Offices," worries his career has played out its string and that bromides about inner strength will prove empty. This crisis goes to the human condition. But will readers get past his disability?

Literature relies heavily on visual observations, which can be an obstacle when the point of view is that of a blind character. A story is typically told from a single point of view, either in the third person or by a first-person narrator. Even the third-person omniscient perspective is told

one character at a time. Nevertheless, blind writers are not precluded from conveying visual impressions. For one thing, many blind people who once saw continue to conceptualize visually, and it is realistic to have such characters absorb visual information. More importantly, as this essay will demonstrate, a writer need not give visual specifics to create visual effects.

Take the moment when we meet Virginia, Jonathan's supervisor in the flashback section of "Window Offices," narrated throughout from Jonathan's perspective. Without someone telling him about her or Virginia implausibly describing herself when they meet, I cannot have him say much about her appearance. How, then, to give readers an impression of her without compromising verisimilitude?

A possible solution is to tell the reader what Jonathan picks up through his other senses. When she speaks, he could talk about her voice. The problem here is that descriptions of voice quality tend to be either trite or obscure. Our everyday vocabulary for it is small, while musical terminology is highly specialized. What if Jonathan brushes against her in the hallway? Perhaps he notices if she's overweight or slim. He might even surmise what she's wearing. But here the narrator would have to admit to too much guesswork, which would bring the story to a crashing halt. I am already concerned that readers will ask why so much space is devoted to Virginia. But though she makes only brief appearances, her role is central.

This is how "Window Offices" introduces her:

An attorney named Virginia assigned work to the law clerks. She was renowned for keeping a drawer full of bow-ties and a jacket she hooked on the inside of her door, accessories that transformed her from casual of choice to professional of necessity any time court or some other formal situation called.

Readers will recognize that Jonathan has gleaned this information from conversation with

acquaintances. Or possibly he noticed her jacket on her door when leaving her office and she volunteered why she kept it there. Otherwise he has no specific information about her looks, and yet readers will form an image of her. For example, I doubt she's noticeably overweight, if for no other reason than that someone would have said something in Jonathan's presence. Is she pretty? Not movie pretty, I suspect. Again, someone would have said something. But beyond that, Virginia is reckless in her choice of clothes. That could suggest a woman so beautiful that it does not matter how much she neglects her appearance. But bow-ties? Unless Jonathan has heard otherwise, they imply an effect at odds with traditional notions of feminine beauty.

A visual impression can also be suggested through a telling gesture. Here's how a present-day colleague arrives in Jonathan's office:

The trademark thud of shoulder against door heralded the arrival of Lou, his friend and colleague, too proud to knock and too considerate to catch Jonathan by surprise.

Lou's diamond-in-the-rough manner of entering creates the germ of a picture that readers will complete on their own.

These methods for creating visual effects turn out to be mainstream. In a *New York Times* article dated July 16, 2001, Elmore Leonard urges writers to "Avoid detailed descriptions of characters." He elaborates:

In Ernest Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants' what do the 'American and the girl with him' look like? 'She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.' That's the only reference to a physical description in the story, and yet we see the couple and know them by their tones of voice...

It makes sense to let readers picture characters for themselves. How often do people voice regret that an actor's face in the movie adaptation has spoiled the mental image they took away from the novel? Other writers give meticulous descriptions of their characters. But here's a question. After reading Hemingway, Leonard or any number of other authors who emphasize action over adjectives and adverbs, did you feel the absence of description?

Images can also be conveyed through dialogue. Take the only scene in "Window Offices" where we meet the department head at Jonathan's summer job. Jonathan has appeared to protest his reassignment to a windowless office. Here's the entire passage:

Next morning Jonathan got himself admitted to Hal's office. "Can we talk about the office moves?"

"Here, sit down." Hal thumped the back of a chair and returned behind his desk.

Jonathan made sure he was seated securely before going on. "I'm concerned about what people will think about me."

"How's that?"

"Being the one to move into a windowless office."

"Yes?"

"Well, it's going to look like more than coincidence."

"Oh, oh." Hal rose to his feet.

Jonathan tracks Hal's movements from his voice, but has no other direct information that translates into the visual. Putting aside that the subject of this conversation would be different, suppose he were sighted. When telling a friend about it afterwards, would he say Hal's hair was dark or fair, his nose Roman or broken, his lips sensual or half concealed by a moustache? No.

Those details would not be essential to the story as told to a friend, just as they would distract a reader of “Window Offices.”

Then what visual memories would he take away from the encounter? First there is Hal standing by the guest chair and making some motion toward it, and then assuming his seat behind the desk. When he says, “How’s that?” I picture him as puzzled, not yet sure what to make of this visit. His face expresses curiosity, but little tension. Jonathan takes the next step into his explanation, to which Hal says, “Yes?” His expression has turned grave but remains kindly, encouraging Jonathan through his difficulty in expressing himself. At last Jonathan arrives at the problem, and Hal gets it. I can see his face tense with the recognition of his blunder. He jumps up, saying, “Oh, oh.”

Few of these details are given by the narrator, and yet readers will interpret what Hal is thinking and conjure up his facial expressions.

None of this is to suggest that a blind writer is barred from incorporating visual description. In fiction as in real life, blind people get to know salient visual characteristics of the people in their lives. Recalling the participants in a course I took some years ago, I picture the woman with long gray hair who wore colorful scarves in our teacher’s living room, the lanky white-haired man who groaned from back problems when he got up from a chair, the blond man whom all the women said the other women would fall for, and the woman who came directly from work and alone among us wore a business suit. These images pieced themselves together in my mind from my own observations, what the friends I made in class told me and comments people made in class discussion. So when writing fiction, I can pick up on this much detail and still be true to a blind character’s point of view.

Descriptive tags can aid the reader in recognizing characters each time they appear. A

novel with two prominent women characters might have one be fair-haired and the other dark. Or the tag might be a character's taste in clothes, such as Virginia's bow-ties. The author might mention the height and bulk of a certain male character to suggest a powerful presence. A blind narrator could employ similar tags, such as by consciously recalling a visual detail each time a particular character appears. Using more direct perception, such a narrator might bring out a personality trait or verbal tick. Uriah Heep's "umble," in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, comes to mind.

Such tags risk placing limits on our understanding of a character—Uriah Heep never fails to be obsequious—but they need not do so. In everyday life, we might draw a friend's attention to the man with dark hair and red tie, but we do so only to identify him.

Writers have similar methods at their disposal for conveying descriptions of place through blind characters. In the opening scene of "Window Offices," Jonathan imagines what is going on beyond his office's windows based on what colleagues have mentioned over the months and years. Readers will grasp how the windows inspire him to think outside himself. That said, the good news for blind authors is that too much visual detail impedes narrative. It is the rare writer, sighted or otherwise, who approaches F. Scott Fitzgerald's talent for compelling, well-placed description.

One caution. Although entitled to the entire verbal palette, blind writers do well to recognize that words with visual connotations can be jarring when spoken by or attributed to blind characters. In everyday life, blind people say "see" for "understand," "meet," and "notice," but "see" can create a kind of cognitive dissonance in sighted readers who have little experience with real-life blind people. A blind writer aiming for a mainstream audience cannot ignore such expectations and must work with or around them.

When a character's disability is just one aspect of a story, readers are likely to gain a greater understanding of disabled people than they would glean from any manual, textbook or legal opinion. This is because fiction makes readers conscious of the commonality of human experience, paradoxically by portraying distinct, three-dimensional characters. Jonathan is not every blind person. Not every blind person projects the view outside a window. Not every blind law student would protest a move to a windowless office. For that matter, Robbie, the story's other blind character, is also not every blind person.

Through "Window Offices," readers may glimpse, for example, why some disabled people seem overly sensitive. One of the story's subplots involves Jonathan's handling of a fairly routine request for assistance by one of his colleagues, a lawyer named Ray. Sighted readers may be perplexed by Jonathan's unhappiness when Ray sends the email that concludes: "I always admire your wisdom." But the patience of readers who suspend judgment is rewarded when Jonathan explains his annoyance to his trusted colleague, Lou. Does Lou get it? Partly yes, but apparently mostly no. However, experiencing events through Jonathan, readers just might get it, because everyone, disabled or not, has been patronized: students by teachers, teachers by principals and deans, store clerks by customers, parents by their children.

It turns out the situations disabled people face on a daily basis are the stuff of fiction and can make for absorbing reading with or without personal experience of disability. Through identification and lured on by the accretion of details, readers of "Window Offices" will grasp why disabled people care about their work settings. After all, they are no different in desiring the perks of space that other deserving employees look for as they flail away on the workplace ladder. And once in the corner office, how often does a CEO look up from the desk to study the view from the windows?

Afterthoughts

This essay may be subject to at least two objections. First, it may be read as assuming that fiction is about character development, to the exclusion of other forms of fiction—morality tale, action thriller, political satire, modernist experiment, meditation, and so on. True, I contend that fiction can help overcome stereotypes, but as a byproduct. The techniques I propose here apply to fiction of all types.

More problematically, in an essay that implicitly urges sensitivity, some of the techniques I suggest might be deemed sexist or otherwise prejudiced. When a gesture summons up a character's appearance, it is implicitly relying on certain stereotypes. What else am I saying when I write about bow ties and traditional notions of women's beauty? Also, the Western tradition of distinguishing two characters by hair color wouldn't work in societies where hair color is less varied.

I try to be aware of stereotypes in my writing and sometimes play with them. In "California Towhee," a character, Millicent, wears her hair in spikes. When Bobby the accountant makes a snide reference to her hair style, she retorts, "At least mine are on the outside where everyone can see." Yet even as this dialog satirizes assumptions about appearance, readers are likely to form impressions about how Bobby and Millicent each look.

Fiction by even the most socially conscious author is destined to straddle lines of political correctness. Caught up in society as they find it, or as society finds them, authors cannot self-censor contemporary stereotypes out of their work. What they can do is make readers notice.

Reference

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WINDOW OFFICES

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1

It was in a solemn mood that Jonathan contemplated the two views from his room. He'd just learned that the newly elected administration wanted him to move out of his corner office. With the emphasis on new initiatives and new names to promote them, Jonathan and his staff were about to be relegated to the floor's nether regions.

The west-facing windows of his familiar office presided over an old church and the headquarters of a financial powerhouse. Converging in the distance through his north windows were lines of office buildings, those with glass facades from the previous two decades and those mostly brick from an era much longer ago. He guessed back then the brick buildings had been rough-hewn, dusty structures with none of the manicured look of the preserved relics along Pearl Street and off Hanover Square. He'd noticed their addresses in nineteenth century biographies and novels and had no doubt they'd show up through the Twenty-First, hyperlinks and all.

The scene outside changed often, but in patterns. In the morning, light was a burst of brightness glinting off the reams of glass, while on the downtown street came a constant four-lane stream of vehicles. At noon crowds raced around the few canopied street vendors the police hadn't yet driven away. As evening approached, depending on the season and how its rays played on the buildings' materials, reflected sunlight ranged from white to salmon to Edgar Allen Poe red. If severe storms threatened, the atmosphere turned green. On ordinary rainy days, the area assumed the suffocating, inward look that had been Bartleby the Scrivener's New York.

When Jonathan's mind drifted to the teeming life and history spread out below, the windows would momentarily distract him from the case reviews and planning sessions he held in his office. Blindness didn't require him to make leaps of imagination. Some version of what he pictured did exist. He knew from the sheer predictability of events outside his windows, confirmed by the casual observations his colleagues made several times a day, day after day.

The order to move was brought to him by Maria, a young political hire who now controlled the work lives of the experienced staff.

"We're creating a department to implement our new policy initiatives," she said, speaking below comfortable audible level from the other side of his desk. "We're giving the department head this corner office, which means we need to ask you to move to Room 97."

"That department already has rooms upstairs," Jonathan pointed out, as if she didn't know. Those upstairs rooms had been built just three years before, when the previous Administration had announced the very policy now touted as new, albeit with another name.

"We've had to make a number of hard decisions. This is one of them."

A manager herself, Jonathan recognized the approach. Faced with a difficult personnel issue, she'd show sympathy but remain firm.

"And what about the rest of my staff?"

"There are rooms over there they can move into, but they'll be dispersed for a while. We've got several moves going on at once. First we need to know how soon you can switch."

To say when was to consent. "I'll get back to you."

"When?"

She knew his tactics as well as he knew hers. "By Friday."

Five minutes later, he learned from a casual remark by someone in a neighboring office that the new department head had been standing silently inside his door, surveying her domain-to-be, the entire time Maria had been spelling out his fate. They must believe nothing seen, no harm done. He wanted to race to the elevators, ram the button for her floor, burst into her office and demand she explain how she could have done something so unconscionable. But in an office that prized decorum, such conduct would be contemptible. It would be contemptible in his own mind. He was so angry he resolved to resign.

2

Twenty years earlier, at a law enforcement agency a thousand miles away, Jonathan was the first law student to arrive for his summer clerkship. He'd never set foot in the Midwest before, his hiring having been negotiated by telephone and letter. His office's window looked out onto parking lots and other state government buildings, a view his reader, whom he'd found through a newspaper ad, described in an indifferent voice. But Jonathan recognized that even an uninspiring view made the room more than the sum of its four walls.

Over the next two weeks the other summer law clerks filtered in. The last was Rich, the only Easterner beside Jonathan. By then, the other law clerks had staked out their rooms, and everyone had a window. The only room available for Rich did not.

An attorney named Virginia assigned work to the law clerks. She was renowned for keeping a drawer full of bow-ties and a jacket she hooked on the inside of her door, accessories that transformed her from casual of choice to professional of necessity any time court or some

other formal situation called. She had the personality to carry it all off. Though a non-smoker, her convictions were libertarian and she opposed the state's new law mandating smokeless areas in public places. The day it went into effect, early in June, she appeared at a local restaurant for lunch, swept her arm toward the smoking section and regally demanded to be seated with "The really interesting people over there."

The story preceded her return to the office that afternoon, when Jonathan asked, "Aren't you afraid you might have to enforce the anti-smoking law one day?"

"They wouldn't make me if I didn't want to." It was that kind of office, enforcement with a heart. She added, "But I wouldn't turn down the case. I'm an advocate."

It was Virginia who brought Jonathan the news that he was to switch offices with Rich.

"I am? I like it here."

"That's what Hal wants, and what Hal wants, Hal gets." Hal was the department head.

"Why me, do you know?"

"You'll have to ask him."

Jonathan was surprised to find that the pending loss of the window office upset him. True, he could no longer distinguish shadows from light, but he still experienced daylight in a room as airiness, while a dark room could feel as if it were closing in on him.

He recalled views from other windows. There'd been the woods beyond his first college dorm window. In law school, his window had given out onto a driveway and fueled his visitors' speculations about who was driving past. The changing images had allowed his mind to look beyond himself.

But if he could stretch out his imagination in a window office, why not stretch it farther in one without a window? Rich would have the advantage of looking out without need of

anyone's mediation. Jonathan had worked in many windowless offices before, usually in a school library, and it had never occurred to him to complain. Maybe the room exchange made sense. Besides, the window was sealed, so it wasn't as if he were benefitting from fresh air.

A blind lawyer named Robbie had worked at the agency for many years. Virginia offered to introduce them. As Jonathan and she walked over to Robbie's area, an interior part of the floor near the elevators, he was struck by its stillness. After the lively interactions in the hallway occupied by Hal's staff, it had the air of a crypt.

"Hi," Jonathan said, from the threshold. He wondered whether to hold out his hand.

Behind his desk Robbie stood and boomed his reply. Virginia excused herself with unaccustomed softness.

"What kinds of cases do you handle?" Jonathan asked, his elbow against the door jamb.

"It's my job to make sure our contracts are shipshape." In a gravelly voice, Robbie added, "It's a decent gig."

Jonathan said, "I'm down the end of the hall, with Hal."

"And you—what cases have they got you working on?" Robbie sat down.

Jonathan slouched into the door. "I'm looking into a public right of way question."

"If I can ever help out, just holler."

"Thanks, I will." But Jonathan already doubted he would. That troubled him, so he explained the issue and asked Robbie for his ideas.

Robbie expatiated on lessons he was clearly recalling from law school. "Probably nothing you don't already know," he concluded.

He was right, and Jonathan regretted pursuing a subject outside the older man's expertise. Pushing away from the door jamb, he said, "Thank you for your time."

Next morning Jonathan got himself admitted to Hal's office. "Can we talk about the office moves?"

"Here, sit down." Hal thumped the back of a chair and returned behind his desk.

Jonathan made sure he was seated securely before going on. "I'm concerned about what people will think about me."

"How's that?"

"Being the one to move into a windowless office."

"Yes?"

"Well, it's going to look like more than coincidence."

"Oh, oh." Hal rose to his feet.

Later that afternoon, Virginia's larger-than-life personality filled Jonathan's room. "My man, you've done something unique in human history."

"Is that so?"

"You've changed Hal's mind."

Jonathan beamed. Then he thought about the other person affected. "How does Rich feel?"

"I'm here, too," Rich said. "I told Hal I agree with you and I'm happy where I am."

Jonathan thanked him. "Are you okay with it, Virginia?"

"I get it, sure."

Not so sure, Jonathan thought. Her libertarian convictions apparently led to conflicting views. But he mustn't worry about convincing her. He'd won.

3

“Thank you for your time,” Mike, a second year law student, said. Armed with copies of two court decisions Jonathan had given him, he sprang to his feet, eager to go and make the call they’d just rehearsed.

Jonathan turned to the keyboard and readied himself to draft a message to Maria. It was Thursday, four days after her visit. He hadn’t yet given notice of his decision to resign. He was about to test how it would feel to tell her, instead, that he’d move to Room 97.

His computer was set up to read aloud the text on a screen. At his right the speaker hummed, as if to tell him it was waiting. He composed a single sentence, and the synthetic mannish voice recited each word as he typed. Then he pressed the insert and “8” keys on the numpad to hear the sentence as a whole: “I have checked out Room 97 and will move in at the end of next week.” The man in the speaker read it aloud with the same ironic detachment that he displayed whether speaking legalisms or curses. Hardly a ringing endorsement, but acquiescent.

Acquiescent or not, the note would need refinement if he were ever to send it. It would also need the human touch of his part-time assistant, Becky, who’d worked with him long enough to calibrate her reading of his sentences with his intentions. A false note in her reading usually meant a false note in the message. Pity she wasn’t due in today.

His thoughts jumped back to the pre-computer summer twenty years ago that had come to mind last night. What was that lawyer’s name? Robbie. Robbie had been about as old then as Jonathan was now. He’d been cast into a hallway with no other attorneys and only one other person, a typist. Room 97 was nowhere near as remote, and it did have a window.

A year after his summer at Robbie's office and following graduation from law school, Jonathan had returned to his native New York and begun his career at his present government agency. No window offices had been available. That was fine; he was the most junior lawyer. Afterwards the only window offices that became available were set up for two lawyers, and his work with readers required he have his own space. He was patient, dropping only the occasional query to ensure his supervisor understood a window office mattered to him. He got it the year he married. Later still, appointed supervisor in his own right, he got this corner office. After all that, he loathed having to give it up.

He rose and stood before the north window. Mid-afternoon, most of the food stand canopies would be gone. People would be racing along and cars jamming the streets, but it was too early for rush-hour. The sun wouldn't yet be performing its kaleidoscopic tricks.

His staff, perhaps out of loyalty, perhaps believing their boss's office gave them an umbrella prestige, were also upset. They'd checked out Room 97 and reported back to him. Its window looked out onto a tall building across a narrow street. It was so dark that the fluorescent light, which here annoyed his readers and visitors at night and during cloudy winter days, would be on even when the summer sun glared strongest. He'd blend back into that "Bartleby, the Scrivener" world of which his corner office windows gave only a glimpse.

Sitting back down, he kept mulling over the draft message on the screen. How tempting to write Bartleby's refrain, "But I would prefer not to." However, real life Bartleby's got precious few occasions to assert themselves. More often they were making orderly retreats. Bartleby's own obstinacy had led to his ruin.

The beep announcing the arrival of new e-mail shattered his reverie. He deleted the “To” line on the message he was writing to make sure he didn’t accidentally send it upstairs, then saved it to his drafts folder.

“From: Raymond L. Miller,” the arriving e-mail announced. Jonathan arched through the message so the voice synthesizer would read it to him. The head of another department, Ray was asking for suggestions on how to comply with a Freedom of Information query. Someone from the public had contacted him to demand a slew of statistics. “I don’t have an accountant on staff to make all these calculations,” Ray wrote.

Indeed, no staff had been designated to check the records, do the photocopying, collect the twenty-five cents per page fee and mail out the responses. Antipathy toward FOIL, as the law was known around the office, had nothing to do with concealing corrupt actions or mistakes and everything to do with the aggravation of assigning someone to do the grunt work.

Using keystrokes in lieu of the mouse, Jonathan pressed the “reply to sender” option and wrote: “The critical thing is that you don’t track these stats. I recommend you say we don’t maintain the type of records he seeks.”

He normally added something personal to an email message, but in the past Ray had put out Jonathan’s analyses as his own. Resentment made Jonathan terse. He read over the reply and sent it on.

Within moments he got Ray’s “reply-reply,” as the subject line put it: “Thank you. I always value your wisdom.”

The trademark thud of shoulder against door heralded the arrival of Lou, his friend and colleague, too proud to knock and too considerate to catch Jonathan by surprise. Jonathan spoke

without looking away from the computer. “People should realize that giving compliments is as much a privilege as getting them.”

“What’s up, Jon?”

Jonathan swiveled in his chair. “Let me ask you something. If a guy thanked you for your wisdom because you gave him directions to the men’s room, how would you respond?”

“I’d run as fast as a pit bull from a barking Chihuahua.”

“Look at this.” Jonathan rotated the screen.

Lou leaned across the desk to read, then sat down. “This is about a FOIL query?”

“Yes.”

“That’s all? Maybe the time has come to have a talk with Ray.”

“I know he’s trying to do the right thing.”

“So tell him, and tell him why it’s not.”

“I don’t know. If he’d written something vicious, I could be funny about it and we’d become best buddies. But there’s no joking with Ray. Imagine if I asked him if he’d say something like this to any other manager.”

“There you go. He’d see that was sucking up.”

“But I’m not the one who hired him and I won’t be the one to promote him. He has Maria to count on for that.”

“What’s wrong with telling him straight out that going on about wisdom for a dumb little FOIL request is all out of whack?”

“He’d figure I’m super sensitive and avoid me completely, which would take me out of a loop I need to be in.”

Lou yawned and stretched. “You’re fighting too many battles, Jon.”

Jonathan didn't respond. Why was it so difficult to explain? Likewise Maria. She knew it would be offensive to do her dirty work by phone and not inform the person she was calling that his replacement was listening in. Why wasn't it obvious that having someone listen in right there in his room had been a thousand times worse?

He'd considered a discrimination case, but the new administration was neither firing nor demoting him. The pending loss of his corner office wasn't the kind of discrimination the law recognized. It was about rewarding your own people. To Maria and her cohorts, he was a mere hanger-on from the previous administration to whom no debts were owed. If loss of his office made him a victim of anything, it was the passage of time, and that was something you just took.

He sighed. "Lou, I think I have to go along with the move."

4

Leaning with both elbows on the dining table after his wife, Michelle, and he had cleared the dinner dishes, Jonathan said, "Maybe the window's about status and nothing more."

She was also sitting at the table, but far enough away to maintain some detachment.

"I mean," he went on, "how many people do we know have corner offices? How many people have offices with no windows at all?"

"That doesn't matter. They're taking yours away."

"They're also not firing me."

"They'd be too afraid. Imagine if it made the news that they'd fired a disabled lawyer for no reason except to put their butt girl in your place?"

“All that means is if I resign, I’d never get a new job. No one would hire a lawyer who comes with so much legal baggage.”

“Whatever you do, don’t leave.”

“I know—health insurance.”

“And sitting around at home feeling sorry for yourself.”

They were her two standard arguments, both convincing, which was annoying. She’d be willing to carry him even on her fluctuating architect’s income, but her health insurance plan was pitiful.

He said, “I read about someone the other day who threw over his job, sat around on a beach for a couple of months and came up with a great money-making idea.”

“You hate the beach.”

“So I’ll sit in the park.”

“You’re more likely to sit at home. Listen, I don’t think it’s just about status. You didn’t ask for the corner office. Remember?”

“Funny how I couldn’t make up my mind when they offered it to me.”

“Maybe you had some inkling where it would lead.”

He drummed his fingers on the table. “Sometimes I think all I want is to be understood. Isn’t it amazing how we go through life looking for something so simple?”

“‘Understood’ or ‘respected’?”

With Michelle, he had to be as careful with words as he was at the office. “Aren’t they the same?”

“I don’t think so. I can understand why a homeless person might rob someone, but I wouldn’t respect him for it. And I respect the Dalai Lama, but I can’t say I understand him.”

“You’re right, I’m not making sense.”

“Which would you rather have: Understanding or respect?”

“It’s easy for a disabled guy to get respect. All you need to do is put on a tie or open a door for yourself. So I vote for understanding.”

“A window on your soul?”

“Very funny.”

“Me, I don’t care if people understand, so long as you do—and a few other people. What I want is respect—the corner window offices of this world.”

“Touché.”

Michelle sang, “R-E-S-P-E-C-T.”

He grinned as her tune-challenged voice reached up for the second “e” and hurled itself back down the last two letters. “I think you have to be Aretha Franklin to pull that off.”

“You don’t like my singing?”

He reached for her hand. “Your singing is what first made me love you.”

“Like all those other things that first made you love me?”

He had a new thought, or a thought that newly came back to him. “Remember me telling you about Robbie?”

“You only spoke about him and that summer clerkship for an hour at 2:30 this morning.”

“I won’t disturb you tonight, promise.”

“Better believe you won’t.”

“Do you know what one of our interns said today when he was leaving my office?”

“Let me guess. ‘Thank you for your time.’”

“How the hell did you know?”

“That’s what you said to Robbie after that awful conversation. You felt sorry for him, buried away in that deep and dark dungeon and putting on a brave front. One way you’re torturing yourself is by comparing how you talked to him with how people are treating you now.”

“I mean,” Jonathan said, “Mike – my intern—was being completely polite and, you know, respectful. He’s still new enough to be formal. Anyway, do you know what it made me think?”

“No.”

“That my corner office marked the next level after what Robbie accomplished. It’s like a stage in a progression, one generation of the blind picking up from where the previous one stalled and laying the foundation for the next. Robbie got his foot in the door of government employment and I pushed it open a little farther. Maybe the next guys will get their feet in the doors at private law firms.”

“Come on, that’s what they write when you’re dead. You’re not done yet.”

“I’m not?” he said reflexively, and then, “No, I’m not done yet.”

5

It was Friday, the deadline. Becky recited the current version from the screen. “I’ve had a chance to check out Room 97. I’ll need time to pack, but I can be done by Wednesday.”

“Sounds right to me now,” Jonathan said, in front of the north windows, his back to her.

“I think so.”

A professional modern dancer, Becky was one of those New Yorkers who devote most of their talent and intelligence to artistic ventures and the rest to better paying part-time jobs.

“You don’t find it too abrupt?” he said.

“Nope.” She was still leaning toward the screen.

“Or too ingratiating?”

“You mean like too saccharine? No. It’s simple, strong. I wouldn’t change a word.”

He turned around. “So, Becky, ready for Room 97?”

“It’ll be a little dismal.”

“So it needs your pretty smile to jazz it up. You’ll have to work full-time.”

She laughed. “The room will be fine.”

He left the window and sat down at the computer. To send the message, he had only to press the “alt” and “s” keys, but that would feel akin to cooperating in his own execution, as if laying his head on the block or standing immobile before a firing squad. Except this was different. He was cooperating, yes, but if he was the one pressing the decisive “alt-s” combination, it wasn’t his execution.

He held down the alt key, then jabbed at the “s.” “There it goes.”

Sitting back, he imagined the complex machinery that was zinging his dimensionless message to its recipients, twenty floors above: Electricity, copper wires, servers, switches, electrons, data bits, zeros and ones. One day they’d get it.

THE END