

The Illusioneer

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This is a crock! Once again, I'm the bright young engineer designated to help old Whitsell with the technical aspects of a project presentation, brooded Walter. It is frustrating being his question-and-answer machine. The guy knows nothing. He's just Larry Fellowes's old high school football chum, not an engineer. An ex-salesman for a manufacturer of boom box systems for teenagers' cars standing up here trying to explain what I have done? I'm going to puke!

The Barker County Commission room was sparsely filled with property owners potentially impacted by the Parker Avenue flood drainage structures planned by Fellowes Engineering. They and the commissioners were up front, with Walter and Byron Whitsell on the stage. In the back, a homeless person who drifted in with the small crowd quietly snored in his chair against the wall.

Come on Whitsell; get it over with! Finish your spiel! You aren't selling boom boxes! God, you don't know shit about drainage! I should be allowed to make the presentation. I did all of the work. This is my project from beginning to end. Just because you are Fellowes's crony doesn't mean you should be up here! Wow, wish I could play golf and had lots of political connections! Are you aware that Whitsell is an anagram for Shitwell? That appropriately describes you, you pompous ass! Oh, Oh, here comes the finale from Whitsell.

“Thank you so much Commissioners and ladies and gentlemen for allowing Fellowes Engineering to present its plans for the Parker Avenue flood drainage structures. This design will eliminate the problems that you faced

during past intense spring and summer rainstorms. Now, if there are questions, feel free to direct them to me.”

“Yes, why Hello Mrs. North. I thought I recognized you in the audience. Hope you don’t still hold a grudge against me for that sound system I sold to your son. It was a bit noisy, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, I forgave you a long time ago, Byron. Notice, however, that I now wear a hearing aid!” said. The small crowd broke into laughter.

“My question is whether some sort of safety barrier was included in the design. You know, to keep kids out or to keep anyone from being drawn into the drainage culverts if they were to fall in during a big rainstorm?”

Whitsell leaned toward Walter, who whispered into his ear.

“Actually, this was one of the things first considered when developing the culvert design portion of the project,” said Whitsell. We reviewed products from many suppliers and asked for the opinions of other cities that used them. The culvert safety coverings we selected, essentially coarse steel grids across the culvert intakes, are the best ones available.”

After a few more questions, the meeting wound down and Walter packed up the displays and the slide projector. Whitsell left with Larry Fellowes, accompanied by two of the developer-controlled commissioners. No one stopped to talk to Walter, still busy hauling and loading things into the company car.

Walter Kostanski was a skilled drainage engineer. His important work kept roads and properties from flooding. When they did flood, he fixed the problem. Yet, he was an almost invisible person in the community. He was so

nondescript that most of the presentation attendees probably didn't realize there were two people standing in front of them. Of moderate build and height, with almost grayish skin and parted light brown hair and clothing in shades of gray, he seemed to blend into the very air around him.

The following day, Walter sat in his office. His seeming invisibility carried over to the blandness of his surroundings: a computer on a clean, organized wooden desk, no fancy screen saver flashing away and doing tricks, his diploma and engineer's license on the wall, and neatly stacked papers and reports on a side desk and on bookshelves. Long rolls of roadway designs and drainage plans stood in a black metal floor rack.

If you walked down the hallway, you might not spot Walter working. Except for 'Doughnut Friday,' he seldom came out, not even to eat his sandwiches and piece of fruit.

Whitsell, as usual, did not drop by to say, "Thanks for the help last night, Walter." He had an all-day golfing meeting with the developers.

Going for a cup of coffee just before noon a week later, Walter heard other engineers rumor-mongering about probable salaries for the next fiscal year. "So, again, it looks like just an average performance rating and a miniscule raise for me. I just can't bottom smooch like these guys to get better pay and recognition," he fulminated to himself. It bothered him that his skills were not recognized or rewarded. He had been with Fellowes Engineering for what seemed like a glacially long period. "There must be something more exciting, more rewarding." A gray glaze moved over his generally bright blue eyes as he slowly walked back to his office.

Walter, intensely involved in his work, had no other life. He often thought, "It would be so much easier if I had someone to share the good and the bad." A

long-ago girl often came to mind. “Impossible,” but he smiled as her face rose in his mind. They had been in grade school and high school at nearly the same time, Molly Stover two grades behind him. Walter liked her, but generally was lost when it came to getting dates.

In a moment of loneliness, he went to Joe Rebum’s nightclub at the edge of town, the Tush Towers. He was surprised to find Molly performing as an exotic dancer with painted-on flowers and large painted leaves covering the most strategic places.

She spotted him watching and came over afterwards. “I know you. You’re Walter from high school.” Petite, yet well endowed, her dark black hair hung down over her shoulders to mid-back, swinging as she walked. What Walter noticed about her first, now that she was clothed, were the deep green eyes and sweet full-lipped smile, with a few freckles high on her cheeks to each side of her pert nose. Amazed and enjoying the envious looks of the bar rats, Walter glowed as he spent a good portion of the evening talking to her.

“I have to leave now, but why don’t we keep in touch,” she said. Walter stupidly replied that he might just do that.

Then one afternoon at work, mind drifting from one project to another, he glanced out of his office window and saw a teenager pass, wearing a T-shirt painted to look like a shirt with collar and tie. He laughed almost audibly; his mind wandered again. Not much work got done. “Wake up Walter, the spring and summer rains are coming; there are storm waters to drain away.” Soon, he had daydreamed the remaining hours away.

However, there was a burning glow in Walter’s eyes and a broad smile on his face as he left the office and climbed into his semi-antique Ford Pinto. His thoughts churned about like a whirlwind as he anticipated what he was going to

do. Parking in front of the local Target store, he entered and walked to where men's pajamas, socks and underwear are displayed. He perused the various items. Walter was a boxer shorts guy, but boxer shorts would not do for what Walter had in mind. Fingering some rather tight but not too tight, silky briefs, he wondered, "What is in the mind of the person who wears these?" Shrugging, he selected dark brown ones, gray ones, dark green ones and black ones, no wild colors.

He threw his purchases into the Pinto and drove to a costume and party shop. He explained his needs to a clerk. "Do you have a type of paint that can be applied to the skin? What I want to do is paint myself."

"Going to a party, huh? Well, most of that stuff is stored in the back for Halloween. Come with me. We have a fair amount and quite a selection of colors." After finding what he needed, he loaded his purchases into his car and headed home.

The next morning Walter called in sick and started his project. Mumbling, "Here goes," he placed the paints and brushes on a table and donned one of the gray briefs. Standing in front of a long mirror, he painted a complete clothing outfit on his skin. Soon he was dressed in an off-white shirt with a narrow-striped blue and red tie, medium gray suit pants, including cuffs and a black belt with a small silver buckle, gray socks with small black speckles, and black shoes. Topping this was a matching, well-fitting, unbuttoned, single-breasted gray suit coat, with a red carnation stuck in the lapel and a navy blue handkerchief in the pocket.

Walter moved the mirror to the farthest corner of the room. He stood as far away from the mirror as possible and squinted. "Now there is one distinguished looking gentleman!"

Rotating, he frowned, seeing what he had known would be a problem. Unable to reach far enough or even see his back or other hard to reach portions of his body, he was unable to complete his attire. Then, Molly came to mind. With much rummaging about, he found her number and called. He wasn't sure how to approach her. "She might just laugh at me!" he thought. After hellos and some bumbling he said, "Molly, I am having a problem painting something and thought you might be able to help, if you have the time."

Molly came over to the apartment after receiving his mysterious telephone call. "Walter, you are one weird freak," said Molly, staring at him. "I don't understand you. I thought you were such a reserved person."

Looking at him she thought to herself, "He's cuter than he used to be. But, he's probably like all the rest of the guys, boring and insensitive."

"I think that I can do to improve on your art," she said. "But first, what is this all about?"

"Today I saw a kid walk by my office window wearing a T-shirt with a shirt and tie painted on it. It sort of jump-started my brain. I thought that it might be fun to paint myself like that and walk down the streets of Centralia. You know, to see how people would react. Molly, I am so bored at work and my boss and others don't really appreciate what I do for them. I need to clean out my brain and my life. I have to do something radically different and exciting!"

"Well, don't expect me to walk down the street with you wearing nothing but paint! I have been in enough trouble already with the prudes in this town."

Walking around Walter a couple of times to see what could be done, Molly said, "Really, not too bad for a first try. However, I suggest that you keep the briefs on." She laughed, "I'm not sure that your cock could be made to look like a

long tie. And, painting it might cause other problems that could not be disguised.”

An excellent body painter, Molly completed Walter’s rear view, re-painted certain front portions and showed him how to make his clothing more realistic with a bit of shadowing here and there and a few wrinkles in the shirt and pants. For laughs, she put a mustard stain on his tie.

“I guess it’s time for the big test,” said a broadly smiling Walter.

Placing a sheet of plastic on the seat, he carefully got into Molly’s car and she drove him downtown. Centralia was not a big town, say 75,000 folks, but big enough that it was a busy place during working hours. It was mid-afternoon. Waiting until a section of the street cleared of cars and people, Walter hopped out, grinned nervously at Molly and began walking down the sidewalk. When a woman approached, he quickly crossed the street to the other side. To his surprise, the woman glanced and greeted him with a “Good Afternoon!” walking on up the street.

“Oh my God, it works!” exclaimed Walter in a low voice. Continuing with his stroll through Centralia, no one paid any attention to him. Some people had puzzled looks on their faces, but continued on their way without looking twice.

As he happily and briskly went around the corner at Baker and Wallace Streets, he bumped boom flat into old Mrs. Lottie Jones, the Baptist preacher’s wife. Knocking her to the ground, he fell on top of her. Her new flowery dress was coated with gobs of the painted off-white shirt, the narrow-striped blue and red tie, the medium gray suit pants with black belt and silver buckle, and the gray suit coat, with its red carnation and blue handkerchief in the pocket.

Aghast and smeared with paint, she screamed repeatedly in her elderly quavering voice, "Help me! A molester is attacking me! Save me Jesus, Oh my Jesus, save me!"

Sitting, cold, in a jail cell at the Centralia Police Station, charged with indecent exposure in this smallish town, Walter thought of his quiet engineer's office and the mind-eating drainage work. Walter compared his life's work to the afternoon's events. "I really enjoyed being a freak!" he said to himself, eyes sparkling with the thought of what he had done.

Sergeant Mulroney, the arresting officer, had to control his emotions after the judge chastised him for his comments when questioned on the stand. "Judge, I have seen all sorts of weirdoes, freaks and pervert idiots in my years on the force, but this dude is one real sicko! I hope you sock it to him!"

Walter was found guilty by the judge and given a warning, as this was his first offense. He was instructed not to walk the streets again, so dressed or undressed. The judge was unable to state exactly what Walter's condition had been.

Walter went back to his employment, his fellow engineers snickering and making fun of him. Fellowes, a member of the preacher's congregation, did not want Walter back. However, his Christian upbringing and his greed allowed him to forgive Walter. There were too many developments and highways requiring a good drainage engineer; you can't just get a replacement off the shelf. Therefore, Walter plugged away, bored to death and still unappreciated.

The nothingness of the office and the memory of what he had done were too much for Walter. He and Molly sat in his apartment talking about what had happened. "Molly, I just can't be the old me! I like the new me! I have to do it again. It makes me feel like someone. It's so fantastically outrageous!"

Appearing on the streets and also appearing in jail numerous times, Walter continued his new life. He loved it. However, Sergeant Mulroney was not amused. He made most of the arrests and was tired of it. The other officers referred to him as, “going on pervert patrol.” He yelled a lot at Walter each time he loaded him into the police car to go in for booking. “Watch that paint, you meathead. I’m the one that has to clean up your crap! Stay on the plastic!”

This was too much for Larry Fellowes, who brusquely informed Walter to clear his office and leave. Walter was stunned, but he had seen it coming.

Now, with no income, he moved in with Molly. This gave her the opportunity to do a better job of painting Walter for his next on-the-street shows.

Walter also dabbled a bit in painting Molly, of whom he was becoming quite fond, actually much more than fond. Once, when he was painting two large sunflowers in two quite nice, chest-high locations, Molly laughed, “Walter, I believe that the petals need more detail, not just the centers of the sunflowers.” Walter, however, kept on painting the centers. “There is no way that the center of a sunflower looks like that, Walter. It doesn’t stick out that far.”

He just laughed, looked into her eyes and kissed her. Soon their bodies and the floor were covered with smears of painted yellow, brown and green flowers and leaves.

Walter became quite an item of interest in little old Centralia. People eagerly looked forward to his next appearance, and it was never in the same location. This frustrated Sergeant Mulroney, as he had to drive all over town responding to complaints about Walter. He became particularly incensed when rowdy street audiences began to boo him as he hauled Walter away.

Between days in jail and days showing off his new Armani painted suits and Paris-styled Ungaro ties and Grethel shirts, combined with sleek Italian shoes, Walter spent time observing bird life, particularly wading birds. He had developed an interest while doing drainage fieldwork. Yet, he had never been able to get close enough to the herons, ibises, and egrets that frequented the grassy wet areas.

Walter thus entered a new phase, completely abandoning his painted-on clothes stage. Sergeant Mulroney didn't know why Walter had stopped his street shows and didn't care to ask; he was just happy that Centralia was once again quiet and sane, the model small town.

Donning his tight little briefs, Walter and Molly painted his body with a camouflage of grasses and reeds and cattails of varying shades and coloration. Molly thought that this new stage was even stranger than the first, but the painting was fun and challenging.

"You know it's one thing to have the hot feverish eyes of a bunch of fat old men watching you dance and a swarm of insects with long, hot stingers and pincers after your flesh. Walter, count me out of this experiment!"

With Molly waiting in the car, Walter walked down to the wetlands along Wilson Pond. Moving slowly into the high grasses near the edge of a pond, he swayed back and forth with the wind and moved into the water, able to get to within five feet of the birds. Then he stood motionless, observing. He was in Audubon's heaven; he felt like a bird or more so like a wild and crazy weed.

In the days that followed, Walter and Molly experimented with various body-painting styles replicating vegetation. He moved through scrublands and forests, through grassy savannas and wetlands. The birds never saw him. He confused a bobcat once and was almost clawed. The cat smelled him but

couldn't see him. He knew something was around and panicked, running into Walter. With a double yowl they both frantically ran in opposite directions, the bobcat daubed with paint and Walter with cat hair sticking to him.

Then, on July 12, a drifter, known only as Swerner, kidnapped seven-year old Maisy Conklin. The entire Centralia Police Department, led by Sergeant Mulroney, cornered the desperate man. The police had been held back four hours by his threats to kill the little girl. Swerner was at an abandoned shack in the woods along Kingfisher Creek. He ran about in front of it with a gun to her head, screaming and shouting, "One step closer and I'll kill her!"

Walter and Molly saw the events unfold on her television. They often sat around watching and going through magazines for 'clothing' and 'nature' ideas. Jumping up after the breaking news, he said to Molly, "We must do something! Paint me to look like the dark woods that I went into two weeks ago. Then we'll drive out there to see what is going on. Hurry! We have to hurry!"

It was a rush job and not the best. Molly dropped him off at the edge of the woods. "My little wood nymph, please take care," she said. Looking into her eyes, he kissed her tenderly. He then disappeared, one with the trees.

Walter spotted the milling herd of law enforcement officers and poorly restrained news media. Beyond was the shack, with Swerner screaming louder than ever and holding little Maisy roughly by the neck with a big dirty hand.

Moving closer to the police, he noticed that Sergeant Mulroney had placed his holstered pistol on the hood of a police car near the woods. He stood nearby preparing a rifle with a sighting telescope.

"Just give me a clear shot when he isn't holding the gun to the girl's head and I'll take him out!" said Mulroney.

“That won’t work, too risky!” said Walter to himself. Moving slowly through the brush and trees unseen, he reached out and took the pistol from its holster.

He moved slowly toward the shack, off to the side of the officers’ line of sight and outside of their probable angle of shooting. He was closer now, but not close enough. There was a slight breeze and he moved slightly with it, swaying like a bush, closer, closer. Walter was now only fifteen feet from Swerner. He smelled his sweat and the alcohol on his breath. He saw the girl’s big frightened eyes and pale skin and red roughened neck. Pointing the pistol, he waited.

Swerner shouted again and started to wave his gun about. Sergeant Mulroney aimed his rifle. Walter fired the already raised pistol. Swerner’s head lurched backward in a volcanic blast of blood and bone bits. Little Maisy fell to the ground, crying.

Walter slowly edged back into the woods, swaying and sliding and moving with the breeze. With all the noise and general uproar from the law officers and voracious news media, he could have crashed through the brush like a bull elephant. An anxious big-eyed Molly was waiting for him.

The police had no idea what had happened. Sergeant Mulroney stood there still aiming his unfired rifle. They checked all guns to see which one had gone off. However, none had been discharged. Sergeant Mulroney then discovered his pistol was missing. There was an intense search of the woods for the pistol and for information. The confused officers and reporters and TV crews had so trampled the area that no evidence could be collected, nor was the gun found. Mulroney continued to look for his pistol, long after the others left. He knew the disciplinary action he faced.

“Molly, what should I do with this gun?” Walter, in his excitement and in getting away, had kept it.

A week later, at ten o'clock in the morning, Walter walked into the Centralia Police Station with the pistol, cleaned of fingerprints. He and Molly had painted him to look like a UPS deliveryman, with a dark brown short-sleeve shirt bearing the UPS logo. Wearing short brown pants, complete to the crisply pressed crease, he stood there in dark stockings and neatly polished brown shoes. He wore a pair of the dark brown briefs. In his hands, he held a package. Old Lieutenant Conrad manned the front desk. He was notoriously inattentive and should have retired ten years ago. He seemed to be dozing. Hearing the door creak, he opened his watery eyes, briefly looked at the UPS man and hoarsely said, “Put it over on that table.” Walter, not risking a signature for the package, complied and walked out the door.

So, my friends, you like to see crop circles? Schmop circles! Forget that kind of stuff, boring! Next time you are on vacation driving across Nebraska along those straight section-line roads, take a close look at the tall tasseled summer corn. Was that one big clump of corn stalks swaying toward a redwing blackbird perched up high on the corn?

On the other hand, you might be driving down a hot lonely blacktop road in the Sonora Desert west of Tucson. Look at that buzzard feeding on a road-kill javelina, next to that strange looking, man-like, Saguaro cactus.

If you are in the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge along Apalachicola Bay in Florida in October, it is time for the annual winter migration of Monarch butterflies going south, off to the cool highlands of central Mexico. What a wonderful mass of dancing and fluttering Monarchs you see near that expanse of stately seaside goldenrod and shrubby groundsel bushes! No! That wasn't a semi-naked woman, or was it?