

Fred would normally relish the quiet house after Susan left and throw himself into continuing to work on his writing. But, comfortably established on the bed with his laptop at the ready he digressed a bit. He started to wonder if there was any significance to the fact that Aaron had not sent him a Father's Day card. He sifted through his memories and could not recall Aaron ever not doing so. Indeed, Aaron's Father's Day cards were one of the things Fred looked forward to each year. Aaron always wrote something genuine and uniquely personal expressing his gratitude towards Fred's fatherhood that admittedly Fred enjoyed greatly. Fred never discussed this with other fathers, but there were times when Fred had nagging suspicions that he had failed in some way, that he was not "good enough", and that he had shortchanged Aaron somehow in the father-son dynamics. He did not dwell on such thoughts really – they were more like occasional nagging suspicions. But Aaron's touching Father's Day cards seemed to always allay his fears. He actually saved past cards in a special box he kept in his bottom desk drawer. If he got bitten by his self-doubts, he would sometimes get the box out and read some past testimonies of his appropriate and appreciated fatherliness.

He decided not to bring the issue up to Aaron the next time they saw each other. It was really no big deal. With all that was happening and Aaron's focus on both work and becoming a father himself, he could imagine that Aaron just plain forgot. Or maybe there was just a problem with the mail. Fred even wondered if Tony might have purloined it somehow as just another poke at him. Fred admitted to himself that after all Father's Day is an artificially created "holiday" primarily designed to sell greeting cards and presents more than anything else. It was part of an acceptable but unnecessary capitalist celebration of life ensconced in American popular culture.

"Bang, bang, bang!" startled Fred with a reflexive jump. Someone was almost violently at the door and Fred instantly suspected that it might be Tony.

"Mr. Korman!" came a deep husky voice outside. "Mr. Korman, I gotta talk to you," the man outside insisted.

Fred did not recognize the voice, but he knew it was not Tony's. He yelled out as loudly as he could, "Come in!" and unlocked the door hoping that the sound of the lock disengaging would complete the message that whoever was there was invited to enter.

On guard with his phone at the ready for a quick 9-1-1 call, Fred watched a bald-headed, heavily tattooed, near beast of a man gingerly step into the vestibule and look around to check out the layout of the house. The man was probably six feet four inches tall as he crouched a bit carefully walking into the living room. He was heavily muscled like someone who spent hours at gyms with free weights. When he saw Fred on the bed in the family room, he almost tipped-toed towards him.

"Mr. Korman, you probably don't remember me."

Fred's pounding heart was slowly decelerating as he sensed no real danger. There was something familiar about the fellow.

"Come in, come here, let me get a better look at you," Fred said as if to resolve the identity issue and get to the subject matter of this intrusion.

As the fellow approached, his raspy voice started to explain. "I'm Leonard ... Leonard Freshwaters. I was one of your students years ago, remember?"

Fred motioned for Leonard to sit down and scrutinized him closely. "Ah, you do look a little familiar," he admitted. "But that was probably fifteen years ago."

"Yes, Mr. Korman, it was. A lot has happened since then," Leonard almost sighed.

"So, how did you know where I lived and what brings you here leaping out of our collective past?" Fred asked.

Looking out Fred's back windows into the backyard, Leonard reminisced, "Well, I remembered the barbecue here you and your wife threw for a few of us to celebrate our earning our GEDs. Do you remember that? I sat over there near the barbecue pit," he continued pointing outside. "You and your wife were at the picnic table when Alphonso came rushing in with a lemon cream pie." Leonard began to chuckle, "and Phil stuck out his foot and tripped him. The pie went flying across the yard and barely missed you at the table."

Fred's mind raced back into time and how could he forget nearly being creamed by a lemon cream pie? Yes, he took considerable pride in his habit of trying to reward and further encourage his students to pursue better and more productive lives with something beyond the walls of the detention center by approaching ordinary communal behavior. He remembered how hard he had to fight the authorities to allow him to host such events pleading that the young successful students needed to begin to discard their captivity as they sought to transition to their lives on the outside.

"Wow, that was a long time ago," Fred confessed. Leonard's countenance quickly soured and darkened a bit. Fred sensed that he had something serious on his mind. Realizing that Tony might be listening, Fred worried that Leonard might say something incriminating.

"How bout we remove ourselves to take in some of that luxurious sunshine out there at the picnic table?" Fred suggested.

"Sure," Leonard agreed and stood up to get ready to go. "Need any help?" he asked Fred as he was lifting himself up and into his wheelchair. "Nope, that's alright, I've had plenty of practice doing this. But if you could get the door, that would be much appreciated."

"You got it, boss," Leonard shot back.

"You've changed quite a bit – filled out so to speak," Fred said as they began to make their way out the door and down the ramp Aaron had built for Fred. Fred felt better as they situated themselves outside – hopefully beyond the possibly prying ears of Tony.

"Yeah, Mr. Korman. I didn't exactly go straight and narrow after I was released as you tried to get us to. I got mixed up with the wrong set of friends and ended up doing five years in prison for car theft."

"Sorry to hear that."

"While in, I took up bodybuilding – mostly for self-protection. I got myself into the not-to-be-messed with crowd. After that, I took up competitive weightlifting. Won some competitions and money doing it. From there I got a job at the gym I worked out at and right now I am taking some classes at the community college in exercise science and kinesiology. All the while, I remembered your lessons and encouragement. You'd be proud of me."

"Well, I am proud of you. It seems like you are getting your life together." Fred said. "Do you want anything to drink? I've got coffee, tea, water, juice, and some beer – though it is a little early to start drinking."

“Naw, that’s alright. I’m good,” Leonard said noticeably more comfortably but still a bit on edge. “This isn’t exactly a social visit.”

With his curiosity piqued, Fred tried to get to the heart of the matter. “Then why are you here so suddenly after all these years.”

Leonard hesitated a minute. “I’ve come to warn you.”

“Warn me?”

“Yes. I try not to associate with most of the old crowd but sometimes they come into the gym. One of them, who I will not name, told me that some guy has put a contract out on you.” Leonard was looking straight into Fred’s eyes to measure his response.

Given all that was happening and the status of the relationship with Tony, Fred was not as shocked as he might otherwise have been. He just nodded a little, accepting that things had advanced further than Fred imagined.

“I don’t know all the details,” Leonard continued. “But it has something to do with getting you alone somewhere and making it look like an accident.”

Fred collected his thoughts and turned on his phone recorder.

“Would you mind repeating what you just said?”

Leonard hesitated. “I can’t be involved in this. I’m just telling you what I’ve heard.” But he did basically rephrase the essentials of the plan to have Fred killed.

Having gotten what he wanted; Fred turned off the recorder.

“What’s this all about, Mr. Korman. I can’t imagine anyone wanting to kill you.”

“It’s complicated. I think I know the guy at the bottom of this,” Fred sighed. “He’s a cop and he’s been harassing me and my family for months now.”

With an incredulous tone, Leonard almost squeaked, “A cop?”

“Yeah, one of the bad guys, actually,” Fred affirmed.

“Wow, this is weird.” Leonard continued. “What are you going to do?”

“To be honest with you, Leonard, the only way out of this is to turn the tables on him.”

“Meaning what?” Leonard tried to follow Fred’s logic.

“I May or may not have much time left, but I’d like to keep all that I might have,” Fred said with his mind going deeper into his problem-solving mode. “This guy and I are really in a situation where one of us has to disappear or vanish.”

“Well, looking at you right now, you are in no position to tussle with anyone. Can you even stand or walk?” Leonard asked.

“I can stand for a little bit and maybe walk a little. But you are right. I cannot physically do much to defend myself or to eliminate any threats.”

Leonard thought for a minute as what Fred said sunk in. “Right, so maybe I can organize something to put the Fear of God into this guy.”

“Leonard, I appreciate the support but just trying to scare him would probably backfire. It would just put him and his friends up against you and your friends. Since they wear badges, I don’t think it would end well for you,” Fred said assessing the prospects. “No, this needs to end completely. This guy needs to die.” Fred actually shocked himself as he heard his own words.

The recent spate of police on civilian and civilian on police violence and shootings had turned Fred’s stomach. He shuddered at the possibility that he might unleash a chain reaction that would lead to either.

“Look, Mr. Korman, you have done so much for so many of us over the years it would not be hard to get allies in this fight,” Leonard assured Fred. “In fact, knowing that a policeman is involved, I know some people who would off him just for sport.”

“Killing someone can never be a sport,” Fred insisted. Yet, he did admit that Tony had made harassing him and Susan and inflicting pain on them seemed to be almost a sport to Tony.

They both just sat there surveying the dying flowers in the garden due to inattention. Leonard broke the silence. “Well, you think it over, Mr. Korman. I can arrange everything from a friendly dialogue to something more final like having him fall off a cliff. You let me know what you would prefer, and we’ll get it done,” Leonard promised as he pulled his huge frame up out of the chair and obviously prepared to depart.

“Thanks, Leonard. Your support is much appreciated. And it was good to hear about where and what you are doing these days,” Fred said extending his arm to shake hands with Leonard. “I’ll get back to you if I decide to go down that road.”

“Who is this creep anyway?” Leonard was curious.

“I hope you don’t know him,” Fred began to answer. “He’s a police detective and I would not want you to be on his radar. You are working too hard to keep yourself in the straight lane.”

“Maybe so, Mr. Korman, but I still would like to know who your curse is.”

“Tony Rossi,” Fred sighed.

“Tony Rossi?” Leonard gasped. “That piece of shit? I don’t know him directly but word on the street is that he’s as crooked as a corkscrew and has a bad habit of strong-arming the streets. And if you stand up for yourself, he has a hair-trigger.”

“That pretty much thumbnails him,” Fred confirmed Leonard’s characterizations. “But I am not sure what I can or should do to get him off my back. You steer clear of him, though. You would not want to be on his list of to dos.”

“Ok, Mr. Korman. I’ll give him a wide berth. But I’m willing to help out if you want.”

Leonard looked around and reached for a sheet of paper on Fred’s stand.

“Mind?” Leonard half inquired as he picked it up along with a pen and began writing something down. “Here’s my number if you want to get in touch and or discuss this matter again,” he said handing Fred the note.

“Thanks,” Fred said not sure if he was really grateful.

“Good to see you again. Hope you get better,” Leonard threw over his shoulder as he advanced to the door.

“That’s unlikely, Leonard, but thanks anyway,” Fred bounced back at Leonard. “Take care of yourself.”

Leonard had parked his car down the street a little from Fred’s house and as he was walking towards it he noticed what he perceived as the tell-tail signs of some sort of surveillance going on. “Looks like somebody’s keeping an eye on Mr. Korman?” Leonard muttered to himself. “Wonder if it’s the pig that he’s messed up with,” Leonard almost whispered. “Maybe this is something serious after all.”

As Leonard got into his car, he came up with who he thought would be the perfect candidate to help Mr. Korman out and erase his tormentor. “Z, that’s who would do it,” he convinced himself.

Z was not the fellow's real name. It was his nickname resulting from dual realities that he was of some Eastern European extraction and spoke with a heavy accent. Z, and nearly everyone else, thought that he was "the" quick and final resolution of any tussle or conflict that he might enter. Only, when Z said the word "the" it sounded like Z. There was no doubt in Leonard's mind that Z could dispatch anyone he wanted to quickly, efficiently, and without leaving any evidence behind. Leonard and Z had a nodding acquaintance when they were both in prison and recently Z had begun to show up at the gym. Leonard knew there would be no direct links between Z and Mr. Korman and if he were careful the intermediate linkage through himself could be concealed.

Pulling away from the curb, Leonard passed the "stake-out" car and the fellow in it tried to look nonchalant by reading a book. "Yep, definitely a cop – more like a detective," Leonard thought. "Z hated cops and would probably jump at the opportunity to do some good by eliminating one. Tony Rossi, Z would think him a feather in his hat if he offed him."