

THE WALL

After more than a year of architectural and political disagreement, the section of transparent wall rose up along the border, yet ran for only a few miles separating American from Mexico. “It’s only the beginning. You can believe that,” the President tweeted from one of his many golf courses in the east.

Eighteen feet high, the wall was situated between moats containing alligators in slimy waters in which gentle wave action was provided by buried, water tight machinery activated at a distance. You could see right through it at certain times of the day, could spend awhile observing those standing on the other side, looking at you and shifting their bodies in order to view that variety of things behind you. Then the sun might sink or rise, casting a glow on the wall’s surface, and you could see only your own face looking back at you from what, moments before, had been the other side.

Alfred often walked along the wall in the later afternoon and early evening, the transparent surface opaque, the sun again, and nothing visible but the shadow of his own passing. He was born and raised in Bisbee, Arizona, just four miles from the small border town of Naco. Poor as a church mouse, he lived out a lonely existence in his parents’ ramshackle dwelling, “up the divide,” at the end of Tombstone Canyon Road, the house tucked into the first pines. His father was dead. His aged mother had returned east to live with her sister, and now the house, three rooms outfitted with failing plumbing and occasional electricity, was his.

Alfred was sixty-two years old and existed on a few dollars of disability garnered as result of a hip-cracking fall on unrepaired pavement at the door of the pool hall on main street. Repair was the responsibility of the town, and so this bit

of money came his way. He walked with a pronounced limp, and he had no job, unless the gathering of bottles and cans for deposits could be named as such.

He got to the wall, on his thumb, three afternoons a week, and in short order was riding the four miles in the cars of the same three people.

Jack Bean was a cowboy plain and simple, he road the range, a gas powered one in a restaurant in town that specialized in huge stakes with all the fine fikin's. He spoke of the old days, and though he was ten years ahead of Alfred the two got along on bits of common memory.

"Shit fire," Jack often prefaced his comments. "Once'it those durn javelinas a'most shat on my rollup walst I was sleepin'. Buggers were thet close! Was workin' fence line up in them Mule Mountains." "Shit fire...," and so on. His weekly trips to the border were for tacos and refried beans at a restaurant he thought better than the one he cooked in.

Second was Betsy Derulo, who ran the town's pool hall and liked the cheap whiskey found in the numerous bars in Naco. She was dry as a bone at work, but rased a little hell down south, dancing with Mexican ranch hands to the strains of mariachi music.

"Y'all enjoy that walkin' down there?" She came from N'Awlins originally, having married a mine worker who dumped her for a younger woman after only six months, stranding her in Bisbee, far from home. She was smart and had handled her situation with intelligence and vigor.

"Yes," Alfred said. "I like to a lot. It's quiet, mostly, and the sun on the wall casts lonesome shadows.

"Y'all lonesome?" Betsy asked.

"Maybe," Alfred answered, and they rode for a while in silence.

Finally, there was Mr. George, a black man, one of only a few in town. He

was a free-lance accountant, exceptional with figures, and he enjoyed some late afternoons at the Turquoise Valley Golf Course in Naco, near the border on the American side. He was close in age to Alfred and played to a handicap of six.

“So, another day,” he’d say on every trip. “A pleasant walk along the wall?”

“Yes sir,” Alfred would reply. “And for you? Some golf?”

“Can’t say that I won’t,” Mr. George would answer, glancing at him with a broad smile.

This afternoon it was Betsy.

“See y’all later, hot shot,” she said to Alfred’s back, as he limped away.

The sun still bathed the wall on the American side, but across the border, where Secondino and Julian rested, shadows extended to cover the moat and the nervous gators. They had carried the duffle down a dusty trail for a least a half mile, and both were exhausted when they reached the wall and the shadows that hid their activities, which at the moment consisted only of deep breathing.

“*Que hora es?*” Julian coughed.

“Almost six-thirty almost, *ese*,” Secondino replied in the same breathless fashion.

They had just under an hour, a short time really, given the heft of the sixteen foot ladder, the plywood platform, and the riggings, a rope, a pulley and the grappling hook, they’d hidden in a gully thirty yards away. Wayne Shorts would be there at seven-twenty, when darkness had just set in, but before the bright lights atop the wall came on.

That bumbling *idiota* emissary, Secondino thought. Why do they send this *cabron?*

Wayne Shorts was the clumsy son of a powerful mine executive whose

connections ran all the way to Los Angeles and back east to New York City. He had a blind spot for his son, and this is why he tutored him in the trade, though a bundle of concern murmured like the faint sound of crickets at the back of his brain. For a while he had used him for packaging, patiently showing him the ropes, and only now, on this warm June day, did he send him off for his first transfer.

Wayne had a terrible headache, too much booze and little sleep in the night before, and dressing he managed to get both feet into the same leg of his Levi trousers. “Son of a Bitch,” then stumbling, kicking at the pants, then falling to the floor, banging his head against the edge of his night table. Stunned, he lay there for a while, then freed himself from the Levi grip, grabbed onto the mattress, and pulled himself to his feet. Blood was in his eyes, yet he managed to make it to the kitchen, where he pressed the superficial cut with a sheet of paper towel.

At first, his truck wouldn't start, so he lifted the hood and gazed into the engine and its mechanics, understanding nothing, so he slammed the hood, kicked one of the tires, climbed behind the wheel, and tried again. There was a cough, then a roar as he jammed down on the gas pedal, then released it, and the engine settled down into an idle. His girl friend, Wicked Molly, stuck her head out the door.

“Quiet, knucklehead! I'm tryin' to sleep!” though it was late in the afternoon.

Bleary eyed, blood seeping at the edge of the bandage he'd awkwardly applied, he grinned at her, waving as he drove away. Slow, he thought, cars passing him on the two lane road as he headed for the border. Still, he arrived too early. American Naco, and he pulled off into the parking lot of a Mexican bar. Hair of the Dog? No way, he thought, then settled back into the seat, blinked a few times, and fell asleep.

Meanwhile, Alfred, limping along in deep thought, though observant, the wall rising in the slowly sinking sun on his right. The alligators were no longer restless, possible sleeping, at least sunning themselves at day's end. The cactus was still in bloom, red and pink flowers bursting from green stems, riding off into the distance, once the last houses had ended, and he was walking along the narrow sandy trail in the desert, the wall somewhat ludicrous in this place. A few animals, a family of coyotes off in the far distance making their way to somewhere, a desert fox, and a thick Gila monster sliding into his den. The peaceful, ominous desert, a place for thought and digging, not into the past, but what's up in the present that might define the future. Limping along, at times stumbling, then righting himself, at least that, if not his life. There must be something, to do, to change. Even at sixty-two, there were years ahead. But for this damned limp, he was healthy. It certainly wasn't time he needed. He had plenty of that. It was something else. A woman possibly? A hobby? He didn't know, but he knew the town was a dead-end.

He had lived in Bisbee all of his life, and had traveled, on his thumb again, to Tombstone to look around and to St. David for swimming, and once he had traveled in Tucson, ninety-six miles away, in the band bus. He played the oboe of all things, but beat on the drums at the football games. He had no friends: who in the hell plays an oboe in a border town? One girlfriend. They held hands. He never kissed her. Then all the years went by. His dead father. His absent mother. He'd lived his whole life with his mother and father in this decaying house, and now, no longer a child, he'd been left alone, and for him loneliness was not sadness, or absence, or all the life-long objects -the sink, the table, the wooden spoon-accusing him in some way. Loneliness was who he was.

He shuffled along the path. The sun was almost gone.

“Callar, Hombre.” Secondino was whispering, looking down from his perch on the ladder, the grappling hook in his right hand. Julian had been moving, making a tinkling as he brushed against a rivet. Then Secondino tossed up the padded hook with the rope and pulley attached so that it might grab the top of the wall, which it did.

The time had almost come. Secondino was up on the ladder because of his height and ears. Julian hooked the platform onto the ascending rope and slowly pulled it up, so that Secondino might get a hold on it, then reach up and affix it to the wall. They called it *el trampolin*, and it was designed to clear the moat. Then Julian sent up the duffle, and Secondino slid it carefully along the narrow platform as far as he could reach. .

“Lo oigo. I hear him.” Secondino whispered down. “Hand me the stick.” Julian got on the second rung of the ladder, slowly, then tucked the stick end into Secondino’s palm.

Moving along without any furtiveness, almost casual. That’s odd, Secondino thought, but he pushed up the stick to touch the duffle and waited in the near silence, listening carefully to the shuffling steps. Another odd thing, they seemed to be moving almost automatically, that there was no question of their pace, that it was inexorable, that there would be no stopping. Yet he kept the stick pressed into the bottom of the bag. The steps were approaching. One, two, three, he thought. The steps were almost there. One, two, three, and he poked the stick hard into the duffel. It teetered for a moment. That always happens. Then it fell out of sight on the wall’s other side, and hit with a thud and a groan.

“Madre de Dio! Julian whispered, did you hear that.

“Maybe he tries to catch it,” said Secondino

“I hope he is Okay.”

“Of course he is, *ese*. He is a *profesional*.”

“*Bueno*,” Julian said without much conviction.

They packed up their gear then and stowed it in the hiding place. Then they moved off into the desert before the wall’s lights came on.

Alfred woke with a start, recognizing immediately where he was and knowing what had hit it. It was right there at his side, as if the two were in bed and had woken quickly.

He was picked up by Betsy for the ride back. It was dark now, and the bundle he lugged was shapeless, and from a distance appeared harmless. He pushed it into the back seat of her Honda and climbed aboard.

“Y’all are for sure not looking too good.”

“I can believe that.”

“What’s in the bag?”

“Just some bottles and cans I picked up along the way.”

“They is awful quiet.”

“Rags. I tucked them in there. Don’t want to make a racket.”

“Uh-huh.”

They spoke little on the way back to Bisbee, and though it was quite dark on the road, Betsy managed to glimpse the bruise at Alfred’s temple, and when she asked about it, he said it was nothing, he had tripped and fell, but he was okay now.

Tombstone Canyon Road was almost empty, and she drove up the divide to Alfred’s place, keeping her lights on as he climbed out of the car and fetched his duffle. She watched him as he lugged it up onto his narrow porch, then opened the

door and pushed it into the house. Then she turned the car around.

“Bottles and cans, my ass,” she said aloud, as she drove away.

Three Airstream trailers sat in a row near the edge of the massive open pit copper mine, one of the largest in North America. The first two were worn and dirty, and might just as well have been located in a down at the heels trailer park somewhere in a poverty stricken area near Tuscaloosa, Alabama. The third in the row was pristine, its aluminum body shined to a fare-thee-well, and inside the floor was covered by a rich red five by eight hand stitched carpet from Lebanon. Prints of miners engaged in various jobs, or just posing, hung from the curved, metal walls. They had been attached so that each one was tilted slightly forward, and to the observer it appeared that at any moment the various miners might fall out of the frames and crash down to the floor. A large mahogany desk, with some files and various papers upon it in good order, occupied much of the area beyond the door, so that anyone wishing to get to the end of the trailer and the small bathroom had to turn to the side and edge between desk and wall. It was a very tight fit. At the end of the trailer there were two leather chairs and a love seat pushed in against each other, too big for this space that the owner might have dreamed to expand by overloading it, thus pushing the trailer's walls out and away. Wayne, sitting stiffly, occupied one of the chairs, his hands gripping tight to the arms.

“Son of a Bitch!” Paul Shorts ejaculated into the air of the over burdened space as he paced the few feet behind his desk, too a fro.

He was a small, plump man in a light green seersucker suit, ludicrously double breasted. His thin dark hair was combed over to cover his receding crown. He needed a haircut, and spikes stuck up in tiny trees suggesting a sparse forest on his head. He wore a bow tie that matched his suit.

“I needed a God dammed haircut!”

He did indeed.

“And they called me out even before Gene got started. And *you!* Where in the hell were you?”

“Well, my truck...”

“Yeah, yeah we know about the truck, outside of that bar in Naco.

“On the American side though.”

“What?! Who gives a shit about that? Where the hell were you? The drop off!”

Wayne squirmed in his chair. “Well, I was early, so I parked and waited until it was time. I never went in the bar. I had the engine running and the air on. It was very hot. Must have been some fumes leaking in, so I must have gone unconscious, and when I came back to myself it was too late. I’ll have to get the truck checked out.”

“Bull shit, bull shit, and more bull shit. You fell asleep! Give me something. I need something.”

“Well, I went to the drop off place. It was dark by then, but the lights were on, and I searched, but there was nothing.”

“Okay. But did you see anyone? Do you know of any one?”

“Well, there is this one guy. He walks along the wall a lot. I didn’t see him thought.”

“A name.”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay then, recognizing you’ve screwed up everything, you’re gonna find out this guy’s name, quickly, and your gonna get it to me. This is a simple assignment, and I don’t want to learn of a single fuck up. And if I do, you’ll be

leaving the fold.”

“What fold?”

“You’re family, asshole! That’s the fold! One mistake and you’ll be no son of mine!”

He doesn’t really mean it, Wayne thought.

In an unprecedented visit to a place where he was unaccompanied by his cadre of zealous, vacant eyed supporters, the President stood before that small section of the wall, the whole of which he had promised would be completed more than a year ago and was now extended out to no more than a few miles. His Vice President stood beside him, well, back a foot or two, and the only others present were the twenty or so Mexicans who had gotten the word of this secret visit and a few members of the carefully vetted press. Between them and Potus was the gang of secret service guys, young men mostly, in suits that had heated up so that the skins under them were soaked with sweat. Their eyes, blinking in the moisture, darted around, looking for danger that wasn’t there. The VP was grinning below his cap of gray, not a hair out of place. He had it trimmed every day. He was waiting for the President to speak, which he soon did.

He was leaning forward slightly, squinting to see through the transparency, as if to catch the eye of some Mexican drug dealer, but all he saw were the shadows of old women moving along, heading for stores or home. Dressed in his typical light grey tailored suit, the mistaken color only exaggerating the bulk of his soft body, as he gazed the sun brought down its mid-day slant and revealed the image of his own face in a mirror. His mouth formed a pucker, as if he might lean in and kiss himself. And his hair? Nothing to be said about that.

“Very, very beautiful. That I can tell you. Incredible. So good.”

“Yes, sir, it is,” said the VP. There was the beginning of a laugh that turned into a cough coming from a someone in the audience behind the Secret Service guys.

“And this is just the beginning,” the President said. “There will be more, very, very soon. You can count on that. It will be perfect. One of my finest achievements. As I promised. I will be announcing it next Monday. Well, sometime next week. Count on it. And you, in the back there, Mexicans, but Americans, we love you, I love you, and America loves you!”

“Didn’t you say we can count on that more than a year ago?” It was Wayne Short, who was coming along the path, searching for evidence and a name. The secret service guys perked up their ears and watched him closely.

“Cogeto un Burro!” Words spoken softly from the observant group.

“What was that?” the President said. “That isn’t English.”

“That was just an alligator croaking,” said the VP as Wayne Short passed by, his bloodshot eyes blinking as he tried to examine every nook and cranny.

“Yes! Very, very smart. These alligators. So smart.”

Once he was satisfied, the President called for a member of the press to step forward and take his picture, the VP beside him.

“Let me see it,” he said, then asked for another, himself alone, palms raised like a supplicant, the index finger on his right hand pointing at the photographer and the clutch of secret service dandies behind him. He wasn’t looking up toward God in his prayer like posture, that would come later, when he addressed the Christians, but was grinning straight into the small lense, his other hand making the okay sign he had become famous for. There he stood, in front of the early beginnings of his few achievements.

“What am I going to do?” Alfred said.

The four of them sat in the ratty upholstered chairs almost in a circle, the duffle bag elevated on the coffee table for all to see. It was eight o'clock in the evening, the last rays of sun casting thin spears of light on their legs and arms in the growing shadows. Alfred had turned on the lights. Either the bulbs were low wattage or the power entering the house was weak, for each saw things, even those close to them all, in a faint fog. There were prints on the walls, but the only things to be seen there were framed squares. It had been hot all day, and though a whisper of breeze stirred in the tattered curtains, it was still hot. Alfred had provided lemon in solar tee poured from the jug he'd placed in the sun in the early morning.

“Well, shit fire. Don't ya think we aught'a palaver a while?”

Jack still wore his cook's apron, his big white hat perched square on his head. His smile was only half visible in the dim light.

“Well, there it is, y'all. And we all know what's in there, not the dammed drugs, that marijuana on top'a all that dammed cocaine, but the Alfred di-lemma. Is it better 'ta just give the duffle back, however that might be possible? Or are there alternatives? Durned if I know.”

It was Betsy who had brought them all together here. They all knew each other. Jack spent considerable time at the pool hall, and Betsy spoke to him after steak at the restaurant. Mr. George did the books for both places, and Alfred was of course the passenger. She had smelled marijuana on their ride from the border back up the divide to Alfred's place.

“Here's the way I see it,” Mr. George spoke for their attention. “First of all this (he pointed at the duffle) is found material. Finders keepers so to speak. That's not going to work, for even if you throw it away, they'll be after you, both because of the loss and the humiliation. Secondly, we could take it back to him. I know

who he is. I do the books for him. Turned out there was fakery in them.

“Of course, he’ll know then who we are and that we know who *he* is.

“Now, Alfred is stuck here and needs to get out of this place. Get on with a life that has been dormant for many years. We all know this, and Alfred himself knows this. Right, Alfred?”

Alfred nodded.

“So we make a deal. Alfred gets the two hundred thousand that we’ll ask for, the man gets the drugs. Two hundred is of course street value, the value it would be for Alfred if he went into the drug business on his own. The man will know of course that we know what he is doing. He’ll be shocked to see me there, given my access to his books. But, no, we will not blackmail him. That would be our crime. We’ll say not a word about any of this. I suspect he’ll get the point. Oh, and of course I’ll be tape recording our conversation, the device hidden under my suit coat. Are you ready for this, Alfred?”

“You bet I am.” A weak bravado in his words.

“And you two?”

“I am. Absolutely,” Jack spoke uncharacteristically, then added a shit fire.

“Hell, how can y’all even ask?” Betsy said.

It was Jack who arranged the meeting. He knew Shorts from his frequent visits to the restaurant, where he often ate gigantic steaks and complimented Jack on his skill at the grill. Jack told him it was personal. He had to see him. He couldn’t speak of the matter over the phone.

In the late afternoon of the following day, the four of them drove to the copper mine in Mr. George’s dark blue Cadillac, and though the seats were that kind of sumptuous leather that embraced the bottoms and backs of travelers in

perfect comfort, not one of the passengers allowed themselves to sink in. All, with the exception of Mr. George himself, were tense and had pushed up to their seat edges, intent on what might be coming.

“I’m ready,” Betsy said, tapping the broad section of a customized cue stick against her leg. She had unscrewed the thing and carried only the first foot and a half in her grip. Jack sat beside her in the back seat. He wore his cook’s apron, ready for work after the meeting, and held a heavy cast iron frying pan. Alfred was in the front beside Mr. George. He was shivering, not because of the cooling air-conditioning, and Mr. George reached over and massaged his neck.

“Shit fire, ready as ready can be.”

“I hear you,” Mr. George said. “And Alfred here is ready too. Am I correct, Alfred?”

There was a brief pause, then Alfred spoke.

“Uh-huh,” said uncertainly, though he was no longer shivering.

“Here we are,” Mr. George said as he pulled to a stop in the drive running along the edge of the pit. Then they opened the four doors and got out.

Jack lugged the duffle bag up to the Airstream, then handed it over to Alfred. It was his after all. Then Betsy knocked firmly on the metal door with her stick, and when it was opened, all four pushed their way in, Alfred bringing up the rear, the large duffle back held awkwardly in his arms. Paul Shorts stepped back in surprise.

“What in the God dammed hell is this?!”

He was dressed in a light pink leisure suit, no tie, and he sported an expensive pair of white wing-tips. The four crowded around him, and Alfred dropped the duffle. It hit the metal floor behind the desk with a thud.

“And what the hell are *you* doing here?”

“Soon enough,” Mr. George said. “Let us all get comfortable.”

“Comfortable my ass!” Shorts coughed out in the beginning of a rage, then banged his hand down on the desk, searching for a button, which he soon found. They could hear heavy feet on the steps outside, then the door was flung open and two large, burly men in rough ware burst in.

“Get them the fuck out of here!” Shorts screamed. “Leave the duffle bag!” And the men approached, their hands in fists.

Betsy raised her cue stick, Jack his frying pan, but before the battle was joined, Mr. George spoke.

“Stop!” he said. “Look at this!”

He had removed a silver dollar linked to a thin chain from his suit coat pocket, and he held it up, fingering the wire so that the dollar spun slowly, catching the light that the sun cast through the windows. Betsy and Jack had their backs to him, their weapons raised, and Alfred stood off to the side. Shorts had pushed his butt into the desk edge as if he might sink into it, and the two aggressors were watching the spinning coin.

“Look at it,” Mr. George whispered. “Keep looking. Now do as I say.”

He instructed them to back away, to move to the rear of the Airstream. They did so until they were pressed against the wall leading to the bedroom. Then he instructed them to slide down to the floor and to sit there and to sleep.

The four moved to the couch and chairs, and Shorts, bewildered as he stared at his sleeping muscle, finally turned and sat down at his desk facing them, trying to capture some of his lost dignity.

“What do you want?” he said, and Mr. George laid out the terms, the two hundred thousand, street value, and silence on their part.

“How can I trust you?” Shorts said.

“Not to worry,” Mr. George responded. “We’re taking the money after all. A payoff, if you will.”

“Okay, but no papers, the audits...”

“I found him! I’ve got the name!” It was Wayne Shorts standing in the doorway, smiling.

“Get the fuck out of here!” his father screamed, and Wayne retreated.

They gathered in the cramped living room at Alfred’s house. There were hugs, and Betsy planted a firm kiss on his lips. Jack wished him well. “Good luck, pard. You’re gonna have fine times a’comin’.” Mr. George called him aside and spoke quietly to him, his hand on his shoulder, and Alfred nodded, looking up into his eyes. Then they shook hands, and it was over.

Two years later.

The grandchildren rolled on the lawn under the lake-side willow. Two little boys, they were dressed in shorts and baggy t-shirts. Anna Janeway, their mother, watched them. Her eyes glanced up from time to time to glimpse the old city far off across the lake. There were high, wispy clouds, yet a soft summer sun shone down upon it all: the house, a small old Victorian; the quaint little shed, its shingles glowing in the light, where the lawn tools were kept; the six willows dotting the lawn as it moved down to the wooden dock at the lake’s edge, a rowboat there; the energy in the three year old twins.

“Come here to your mommy, the two of you.” Her voice was gentle.

After the unexpected death of her wealthy husband, Linda Carpenter gave up the city and decided to spend her life here at the lake. She read a lot, enjoyed baking, and on this mid-afternoon, she’d played a couple of Phillip Glass etudes on

the piano. The fluid, repetitious strains were quiet, yet crystal clear out on the lawn. Now she was fixing the drinks, solar tea with a good deal of mint floating in the jug.

How has this happened for me, this good fortune? I am no longer alone. This is what she thought as she fussed with the glasses and the tray, the sounds of the twins squeaky laughter creeping into her ruminations. And my daughter, she thought.

The lake was glowing now, as the sun's slant entered at an angle, the tall buildings in the city beyond were golden spires, and the lawn shone bright green, the blond heads of the children bobbed up and down in their play. Their mother was watching them, grinning. Then she heard the screen door's squeak and saw her own mother coming down the steps carrying a tray.

She walked across the lawn in certain slow strides, her flowered dress, roses and sprays of lilac, slipping along her shapely white legs, and headed toward the recliner where the cane rested in the grass. She arrived there and handed the glass of cool, mint tea to Alfred. He smiled warmly, as he raised his hand to receive it. Then he sipped for a while, and afterward placed the glass on the low metal table at the chair's edge. He looked over at the grandchildren, their mother, then his own Linda Carpenter handing a glass of tea to her daughter. His body sunk deeper into the chair's cushion and he closed his eyes against the sun. Then he leaned his head back and yawned.

