

HEX

He was sitting where he didn't want to be. In that corner office again. Not much of a corner office since it looked out over a parking and had a view of more unremarkable buildings like the one that housed his office.

Phil was back in charge of a small foundation that had enjoyed some success in supporting young artists in a way that had helped to launch their careers. The foundation was the creation of his ex's well-to-do father, a man who knew how to make money but not how to spend it.

After 20 turbulent years in academe and several years listening to his in-laws argue endlessly about art, which they loved to talk about but seldom thought about, Phil had agreed to take charge of the foundation. He righted the ship in a few years, fell in love with one of the artists the foundation had underwritten and found himself out in the cold.

He had enough money of his own to take off, and he took off to Paris where he had lived since his very public spanking. He dropped his academic research, having published enough on historical economic trends to deserve a rest, and he set about to write some fiction. He spent more thinking than writing usually at his favorite café whose hostess, it turned out, was also painter. She cared for him in the sense that she always managed to find him a table, made sure his espresso was perfectly brewed and virtually ordered his meals for him. He never knew her name, although she knew his. Too shy to ask? Never thought it was necessary until she was gone. Farib, a *serveur* he knew well, said with the wave of a hand,

---"Allée. L'architecture de paysages. Elle a transféré à Marsailles. J'ai oublié de vous dire, Au revoir à Philippe."

---"Farib, votre mémoire palît rapidement."

---"Si vous avez travaillé ici, votre mémoire palîrait aussi," replied as he headed back to the counter.

It was true that Les Philosophes was one the busiest in the neighborhood. That was not really the problem. Farid wanted to be a film-maker. A decade later a necessary but temporary job had lost the temporary.

Phil had explained to Farib one slow evening about his work with the arts foundation. A mistake. Farib immediately wanted to know about funding possibilities for his films. He wanted to set up a time for Phil to view the films.

Phil's French often failed him. Case in point. He explained slowly and deliberately that he had left the foundation and besides he never watched movies and knew nothing about them.

Farib did not understand how any American could be uninterested in or uninformed about film – film drove America.

Phil could not resist, telling Farib he could not understand how the French doted on Jerry Lewis. Farib squinted, shrugged and walked away. They remained friends, though.

Shortly after the mystery host had disappeared the call came from New York.

---“Phil, Jason here. How are you, and please sit down.”

---“Sitting, old boy, at my favorite café with a pot of good red. What’s up?” Jason was a member of the foundation board and had been Phil’s closest ally.

---“You must come and head up the foundation again,” said Jason without any warning or preparation. “Otherwise it will die.”

---“It will have to die, then, Jason,” said Phil.

---“No, Phil, that can’t happen. We’ve got a small window, a few days, for you and me – I’m doing this with the approval of all parties – to hash out a new contract. If nothing else, Phil, I can appeal to your heart. The Board approved six grants two months ago – probably the best crop we’ve ever had. I’ve sent you an email with photos attached. Look at them and tell me how rotten we’ll all feel if the money is withdrawn, and it will be withdrawn if we shut the doors.”

---“You’ve hardly made my day, Jason. I’ve got my computer with me. Give me a moment. The café is now wireless.”

After a few minutes, Philip said,

---“That Utah sculptor is an eye-catcher, both the art and the artist,” said Phil into the cell.

---“No hanky-panky, Phil, she’s married and tough as nails. So you’re coming back on the first possible flight?” intoned Jason.

---“I’ve got an apartment lease, a book to....”

---“The Board will cover the lease and even allow you a week every so often in Paris. The book - anything we can do to get you some free time we’ll do.”

---“Why such short notice?” asked Phil.

---“The parties agreed last night over champagne and other stuff I don’t eat after which, the feuding family members including your ex split for various rich-folks’ destinations. You get the drift, no contact.”

---“Knowing that family they’ve hired spies. Jason, you know my affection for you – more honest and upright than I’ll ever be, but I need some time. Call me tonight at midnight, Paris time. You’re always up by 6 AM. I’ll have an answer. I don’t care about money. Can the Board or will the family give the authority I need? Cleaning up messes used to appeal to me. Not so much anymore. You know better than anyone I haven’t completely recovered from past sins. How do I protect myself?”

---“Read the contract, which I’m sending you as another attachment – there, it’s gone – and see if we haven’t tried to address some of your concerns. I know you better than your ex or your ex-lovers. I tried to anticipate as much as I could. Your past sins can’t be erased. It’s possible to build some protection into the contract. It’s still a risk for you and the foundation. I’ll call at 6 AM tomorrow.” Jason hung up.

Phil knew the power of Jason. Jason had tons of money with which he was unfailingly generous and he was smart like Phil with one crucial difference – he knew when to be gracious. Phil also knew he had never completely put the foundation out of his life. In an odd way living around the corner from the Pompidou and just a few blocks from the Picasso Museum in one direction and the Louvre in the other direction had made it harder for him to unlock himself totally from the work of the foundation. He knew what his answer would be. He ordered another pot.

Going back to New York was full of risk for him. He knew that. But for now he had to hustle back to the apartment to get ready for a concert at Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Stephen Hough was playing Brahms's Second Piano concerto. During all the years he had been coming to Paris Phil had probably heard Brahms's piano concertos more than any other piano concertos. The French loved Brahms, and French pianists loved playing Brahms. Hough was an American but was widely admired in Europe. Phil was looking forward to the evening, the champagne at intermission and even Brahms for the umpteenth time.

He met his friends Rick and Belle at the Théâtre, but they were entertaining friends from Hawaii so they made no plans to get together afterwards. They would meet for champagne.

Phil's seat was at the end of the second row center. When they brought the piano on stage, he realized he'd be looking on a slight angle at the keyboard no more than 15 feet from him. When Hough entered to enormous applause and sat down, Phil further realized that he'd be watching the right hand directly perform feats of magic. Not only the right hand but also both feet on the peddles. And for the next 40 minutes it was truly mesmerizing. He kept asking himself how can those fingers play all those notes? Were all those notes in the score? He noticed on the trills of which there must be hundreds the palm of Hough's right hand rested on the wooden frame below the keys, as if for support while the fingers moved up and down almost too fast follow. He also noticed that often the right knee was braced on the underside of the keyboard while the front of the foot peddled. Intensity altered with passivity that made the venerable composer what he was – master of one tradition and hesitate explorer of a new style. At the end the audience was on feet, and soon the stage was covered with bouquets flung from the sections of the balconies that connected with the stage. While Hough turned to acknowledge the conductor and the orchestra a wayward bouquet struck him on the side of the head – the audience gasped, Hough looked startled and then he picked the misguided flowers and held them high over head to a resounding roar. It was a memorable concert for Phil and unfortunately, he knew his last concert in Paris for a while.

He told Rick and Belle during intermission he was headed back to New York and he wanted them to have his opera tickets for next week and the week after. They toasted with their champagne, and two days later Phil was sitting at his old desk across from "Celebrate?" whose painter he feared more than anyone in the world.

The knock on the door broke the silence.

---"Come in, Jason," who had called to say he was on his way.

They embraced and sat on the sofa under the painting.

---"A bit risky, don't you think," said Jason bemusedly.

---“I’m locked in,” said Phil, “I can’t move it and I don’t trust it.”

---“So, since I know how you work, you have read that pile of papers and you have a plan,” said Jason slowly.

---“I’ve read them. It’s been a bit messy around here for the last year.”

---“Your euphemism is out of character, it’s been chaotic.”

---“Part of a plan has formed but more thinking remains. You know, Jason, I didn’t sign the generous contract you sent me because I’m not sure how long I want to stay or you will want me to stay. The direction of the foundation has changed, there is a strong rationale for doing so and you and I both know I’m not the one to lead the foundation into the areas that the family wants to embrace. I can assist with the transition but that’s it.”

---“I understand,” said Jason, “I’m not sure what my connection will be a year from now.”

They talked for a while about various options, and then Jason stood up and stuffed his papers into his brief case.

---“We need to finish the details for the exhibit of this year’s grantees. It’s only a few months away,” said Jason.

---“I’ve taken care of some things, well, Keely has, she knows me so well that I can let her go off on her own. I need to spend more time with the photos of the works before we nail down all the details. I want to travel to the studio of each artist for a half a day. The East Coast studios can be done with little effort. I can do the Utah and North Dakota studios on one trip.”

---“And, you will be...?” injected Jason.

---“Keely’s going with me unless you want to come along as well,” answered Phil reassuringly.

---“No, I do not need to accompany you. Take that as a vote of confidence or total faith in the Keely arm-lock,” said Jason and he turned to leave.

Phil walked him out, they stopped to talk to Keely and Phil went back to his office to finish some work. He felt as if he was on pins and needles all the time. He kept looking over that proverbial shoulder.

The phone rang, and he observed it was the private family line. He picked up the receiver slowly.

---“Hello,”

---“Philip, it’s Pauline. How are you?” asked his ex.

---“Well, thank you, and you?”

---“I just got back from Costa Rica so I’m feeling a bit disoriented but not enough to complain.”

---“How did you find Costa Rica,” asked Phil, trying to delay what he knew was behind this call.

---“I enjoyed the beach and the Margaritas, but the food was not memorable. Philip, I want you to know I opposed your rehiring, but then I backed off because the situation was becoming unmanageable. For the moment I’m on the sidelines, but I’m watching. I definitely want to push the foundation into new areas in which your expertise is minimal.”

---“I share those sentiments, actually. I’m not the person for the future you envision,” replied Phil smoothly. Being smooth was easy when you’re telling the truth.

---“I assumed you would take that position. You’re a leech but not stupid. I’ll drop by one of these days. Goodbye,” and she hung up.

He thought he could hardly wait as he put on his coat to leave.

Phil decided to concentrate on two areas and to leave the board to wrestle with the future. He and Keely on a daily basis worked through the evolving plan for the exhibits of this year’s grantees. A new staff member was hired before he arrived to work solely on organizing the selection process. The staff was small, and the addition of Dan was a good idea. As part of the deal Dan would also advise the family on their own holdings. The foundation owned few pieces, but the family’s holdings were substantial and were spread out in the various homes the members owned. Dan had worked for several years at Art Basel Miami Beach but had wanted to return to New York City. Less than half his time was to be devoted to the documentation and authentication of the family’s collections and to advising them on futures purchases or sales. His primary job was to serve as the foundations eyes and ears in rounding up a worthy list of candidates for foundation grants and managing all the paperwork.

From the outset Phil was impressed with Dan’s experience and background as well as his administrative skills. He was also surprised that they could talk amiably about the art world. Dan had training, Phil did not. But Dan never flaunted his several degrees. Dan had remarked once to the effect that Phil saw things almost immediately that eluded the trained eye. Phil responded he was often wrong but perhaps all those hours he had walked through museums and galleries had taught him something.

In style Dan reminded Phil of a young assistant he had hired when he was deaning. Phil was probably the least popular dean the college ever had, but he was elevated to the position because he was a hard-ass at a time when the faculty was overloaded with jack-asses. His assistant was smart, charming, graceful and, it turned out, a viper. He was sleeping with one of female department chairs who detested Phil, although he was never sure why she felt that way. Phil was known to stray but not while he was dean. He played it straight. But his assistant threw enough shit to his lover that she could eventually drive Phil from office. The president, who had appointed Phil and had known him for years, called him to the presidential suite late one afternoon. They had made wine together years before, and when Phil saw the champagne glasses on the table he knew what coming. The president made it brief. Actually dismissed him before pouring the champagne.

---“She’s got some goods on you, nothing sexual, I hasten to add, Phil, but enough to put you out business. I’m sorry. Do you want to fire the assistant or should I? Here is a letter authorizing it. Presidents have black boxes at their disposal, and I have chosen one for his consort, now an ex-chair. I know you had to manipulate and maneuver to get anything done. You did the president’s

dirty work. It not the way you wanted to leave, but you've been trying to leave for a year. You go with my thanks. Champagne?"

---"Of course. It's the best way to go," said Phil as the president turned off the phone, poured the champagne and reminisced with Phil for an hour.

He ended up at the family foundation not because he didn't have a job – he was tenured – but because he wanted to do something away from academe and with a different reward structure.

While he liked and respected the new assistant, his antennae were out.

Phil and Keely were leaving for Utah on Monday, and he set up a meeting with Dan for Friday noon. He had ordered in a small lunch and had asked the staff set up a large computer screen so they could work without interruption on Dan's preliminary list. He had given Dan a large budget increase, and from early indications he was using it intelligently and shrewdly.

When Dan walked in, Phil pointed to a chair at the small table that was already set.

---"I'm amazed how quiet your management style is?" an unusual remark thought Phil.

---"Had you expected a phone-throwing, desk-thumping boss?" asked Phil with a smile.

---"You have a bit of a reputation, although it doesn't include either of those behaviors."

---"The cognoscenti aren't the smartest people in the world. They obviously don't have all the information. You're too young to remember Princess phones – I won't go there," said Phil, fully relishing this conversation.

---"The painting on the wall, yours or the foundation's?" inquired Dan.

---"Mine actually, a gift from the foundation after the painter won a prize due in part to our and my support. I have no doubt you know the story."

---"Who in the art world could not know," said Dan with some hesitation.

---"Indeed, who could not have known. Even I, one of the principals, learned things I had not known from the tabloids," chuckled Phil.

---"Perhaps, you should know that I also know the painter. You had brought her to the attention of the jury at Art Basel Miami and she was assigned to me. We became and remain friends."

---"I cease to be surprised about degrees of separation any longer," replied Phil.

---"On a strictly artistic basis you made a superb choice. It is one of her best small pieces. Like so much of her work it's shrouded in mystery," intoned Dan with eyes glued on the painting.

---"Strange though it may sound, Dan, after I slept with her the mystery was resolved. That's a story for another time. Regarding your work I'm very pleased thus far. You're as efficient as I can be but with more charm than I could ever summon. The list you're pulling together may top this past year," said Phil.

For the rest of the afternoon they worked steadily and with considerable humor through the submissions and created several piles of documents based on their first impressions. The piles would be constantly readjusted, although there were two or three artists who would surely be finalists.

On Sunday Phil and Keely flew to Salt Lake City and Keely drove a rented car – Phil did not own a driver’s license – by his own reckoning a risk – to a small town a hundred miles southeast of the capital. The sculptor had arranged for them to stay at a B&B, a lovely sprawling farmhouse. After checking in they sat on the porch with homemade lemonade – after all it was Mormon territory – and Phil used his cell to call the sculptor. He introduced himself again, chatted briefly about tomorrow’s schedule and clicked off the phone.

---“I think I’m going to like her,” said Phil in anticipation of a scolding from Keely.

Much to his surprise he heard,

---“Oh, you will,” said she with warmth. Keely had a partner. Much to the chagrin of her parents, a female partner.

The next day the artist studio, they had their first drink in Utah. A martini, perfectly made, very good gin, a sniff of vermouth with a lemon curl. After touring the studio and spending about an hour with the piece she was submitting for the exhibit, they sat on her veranda. Her dogs and her husband had joined the group. Phil learned that this was her mother’s family’s homestead. Not where she had planned to live but the valley surrounded on all sides by snowcapped Rockies pulled her back.

Phil knew that if he allowed himself he’d be smitten and in trouble again. Everyone made an effort whether for the same reason as his to keep the discussion on the art and the studio.

---“Your work is totally abstract but not jarring. It pulls you in and holds you there. It doesn’t sooth but it doesn’t alienate. How do you manage to hold this balance?” inquired Phil.

---“I don’t know the answer to that,” said the sculptor. “I’m not sure I see in the same terms you do. But you’re the outside looking upon the creation, and I’m the insider creating without much thought for what you may see. I started with jewelry out of frustration edging on near despair. It almost immediately gave me a sense of control. Fortunately I had some talent, but I had been drawing and designing for years. It took a set of circumstances to make me start when I did. At first I loved working with small pieces, but after while I wasn’t satisfied. I think the massiveness of the sculptures represents another breaking out....with the jewelry I began to stumble, too much repetition, the small would always be small. As large as this homestead is, it can confine. It is possible to hide and stay small. With sculpture I started to walk again. The further I walked the less constrained I felt. That’s the expansionary side of this homestead. My imagination flowered, although not to everyone’s liking. Who knows whether there will be another stage, and if there is what it will be. I don’t think I could work any place else. The sculptures outside look less massive, less abstract and perhaps to use your sword less in balance than the piece you looked at inside the studio. They become a part of the natural landscape and yet they are never totally lost in it. Small remains a part of my life and experience, but large represents a transcendence that perhaps every artist and every person needs to remain vital. I don’t know what comes after large. Maybe it will be small again.”

It was a stunningly honest appraisal, thought Phil.

---“Have you ever written about your work or this place or your life?” asked Phil.

For the first time her husband spoke,

---“A shelf full of journals.”

---“That the answer. If I can’t write, I can’t sculpt or design.”

---“Would you consider writing a piece for the foundation? We’ll take care of everything – the editing, the printing, etc.”

There was no immediate answer.

---“I’m reluctant to because I think the privacy of my writing is what keeps me at it. But I’ll think about it.”

The sculpture and her husband served a light supper along with a good Napa red. It was dusk when Phil and Keely prepared to leave.

---“We’ve nailed down all the packaging and shipping details,” said Keely, “and we’ll be sending you a check within six weeks to cover all your expenses.”

Keely and Phil were quiet for the first few miles back to the B&B.

---“I’ve never met an artist with such a calm interior,” said Keely.

---“I was thinking the same thing and wondering why,” responded Phil, not quite sure what he had in mind.

The trip to North Dakota went well. An urban dude transplanted to the wind-swept upper plains. His story was very different – abuse as a child, drugs in high school, and brief jail time. North Dakota had calmed him in a different way. His exhibit piece, a monoprint, however, was explosive with anger except for the borders about an inch wide, utterly conflict-free. They seemed almost to contain and rule the interior of the print that raged like fire. The contrast was stunning.

In North Dakota there was booze plus to Phil’s and Keely’s surprise a first-rate restaurant in this small prairie town.

---“Don’t forget,” said the artist, “the guys around here raise commodities and they’re making money hand over fist. When this boom passes, so too will this restaurant, which two years ago was a tavern not worthy of Barney Fife.” They all laughed.

Back in New York the work on the two fronts proceeded smoothly. An important change after much Board discussion was that this year’s grantees would show their pieces in some of the city finest galleries. From a financial and public relations standpoint this made sense. Much to everyone’s disappointment the sculptor decided not to write an essay. Not her thing, she said. Phil had met with all the artists in the exhibit, chosen the galleries in consultation with Keely and Jason and given Dan the green light to move ahead without consulting Phil directly until the

applications were ready for the juries This had allowed Phil to spend in two batches of 10 days each in Paris.

Then the roof caved in. Phil showed up at the office at 9 am as usual only to find the doors barred by city policemen. He explained who he was, and after a few minutes the captain appeared.

---“We’re sorry about being unable to reach you. We tried,” said the officer in a near monotone. Phil checked his Blackberry only to discover it was dead.

---“I’m sorry too. It’s dead,” said Phil showing it to the captain.

---“Isn’t it true,” said the officer, “we more and less in touch. Please follow me.”

In his office in the presence of Jason, who had been here since 6 AM, Phil heard the story. For once in his life he was absolutely clean. The captain assured him of that and said that he would appreciate it if Phil and Jason could remain until the officers had finished their work. They had not removed anything from Phil’s office, but they would have to do so, such as correspondence and computer files. He reminded them not to erase anything while the investigation moved ahead. Phil explained that he had one Blackberry and a personal computer in his bag in addition to the desktop computer. He tried to keep foundation business on his desktop, making transfers from his Blackberry and his laptop daily. There may be personal items on his desktop and business items on his phone or laptop, but not much. Phil had already plugged the recharge cord from his Blackberry into the outlet by the window.

---“It will take a few hours to work out the details concerning computers and Blackberries. The technical staff is on its way. We’ll try to keep the disturbances to your private life at a minimum,” said the captain as he left.

Phil and Jason sat on the sofa.

---“Dan and my former sister-in-law, the model, fucking in her home and in my office just to name two places,” said Phil showing some anger.

---“And then shifting money around, selling art without authorization on the grey market and creating a bogus list of potential grantees – they were two very busy people. But as smart as Dan was he didn’t stop to think that selling art more than anything else they did would attract attention,” added Jason.

---“Here is a family with a ton of money, and yet one member socially connected, married and financially secure joined with her lover to bilk the family and the foundation of more. Why?” asked Phil.

---“Not sure anyone knows yet,” answered Jason, “but according to your ex who called me this morning it had nothing to do with debts, lacks of money or any financial demands. Was it just a game they thought they could play and win? I don’t know. By the way your ex in consultation with her kin has prepared a severance package for you.”

---“No thanks, I don’t need it,” Phil shot back.

---“I’ll convey your response. I hate to bring this up. Be prepared, Phil, the tabloids will revisit the affair that drove you out the first time and no doubt insinuate some role for you in this affair. I know you’re clean, but that makes no difference to the newspapers.”

---“It’s beyond my control. Have you had time to think about the galleries and the exhibits, Jason? Can they go on under the circumstances?”

---“I’d thought about. People from my office are visiting the galleries as we speak. I explained the problem to the captain, and with his approval and with his suggestion on what to say to the owners of the galleries I so instructed my staff by phone from here. I won’t be surprised if the galleries and perhaps even the artists back out. Who wants to be associated with the foundation. Fortunately all the artists have been paid in full. No need to worry about the pool of candidates for next year. Most were ghosts or friends of the perpetrators,” and looking up at the painting above them, “and unfortunately Dan had used his friendship with her to advance the scheme.”

---“My antennae did not work again. Some weeks ago I learned of Dan’s connection to the painter. He asked me if I had figured out the painting. I said I had, but I had to sleep with her to do it.”

He paused to collect his thoughts.

---“My interpretation goes like this. Those soft pastels are like making love to her. They are soft and rounded and lay without a ripple on the canvas. Even her orgasms were quiet affairs. Never had I been so tightly embraced when her orgasms ended. The disturbing or deceiving images in her painting are her life out of the bedroom. She can be nasty and confrontational. Understandably I tried to keep her in the bedroom as much as I could....Not really. More than once she skewered me in front of her friends or at restaurants or when we tried to cook together. She blamed me for what happened even though she initiated the affair. I’m not guiltless, though. I hope that her role in all this turns out to be unimportant. Whatever her involvement I was probably her target. In an odd way, Jason, I can’t erase her or her painting. I still miss her.”

---“Are you going to take the painting?” asked Jason, “you own it technically.”

---“No. Return it to her. She still owns it, always has.”

---“Don’t be too hard on yourself – not in your nature, I know – but this time is different. You were a straight-shooter. If you had been able to complete this year’s competition and then had resigned, I would have been happy. You would have left the foundation in good shape.”

---“If I’m good I’m bad, and if I’m bad I’m bad. To be honest, Jason, I have no regrets. I’m sorry for the way it turned out for both of us, but I needed one more test. I have one small regret. My enemies will say, once the full story is known, he’s off his game. Let him go. They’re right, I hate to admit. I had to find out.”

The exhibits did not take place, Phil and Jason took it upon themselves to write a personal letter to each artist with a report conducted by the police and an accounting firm about what had happened. And Phil also called each artist. The legitimate candidates in next year’s were also notified by letter about the foundation’s closing. The ghosts or cronies were ignored.

Phil dreaded the phone call to the Utah sculptor, although he wanted to hear her voice again. No animosity could be noted in her voice. She said the gallery had called her to say they could arrange a private sale. She refused. It was her best piece, and she wanted it around for a while. She was in no hurry to sell. She could take this path because of the foundation, and she was grateful. She invited him to stop and see the sculpture in its new surroundings. Phil thanked her and said he was headed back to Paris. Momentarily he considered changing his airline ticket. They hung up.

Weeks later Phil was sitting at Les Philosophes. Farid was gone but Sébastien was still there. He was actually the first *serveur* Phil had met.

---“Philippe, Vous êtes retourné. Ça va? asked Sébastien.

---“Oui, bien, merci. Je suis retourné. Je suis un exil encore.”

---“Un exil. Encore? Je ne comprend pas. M. Sarkozy n'approuvera pas.”

---“A compliqué aussi pour expliquer, Sébastien. Juste rappelez-moi de temps en temps je préfère être un exil.”