

The Watcher, A Chicago Tale

by Bernie Kirstein

Prologue

Three weeks into the future:

Winston Logan gazed out the glass wall of his 60th floor suite, trying to make out the south lakeshore in the moonlight ten miles away. He looked for the flash of a massive explosion and wondered how hard the concussion would shake his building. He flinched as a hand touched his shoulder.

Chapter 1

In the present:

Lit by neon signs above, blue and yellow rain hits the sidewalk and flows along the curb before swirling down an iron grate. Apartments above the closed stores cast a warm sheltering light. Down the hill out to the horizon, towers of apartments flicker like fireplaces. On the corner, steam rises from under the illuminated red and yellow umbrella of a hot dog vendor.

The view gave Winston comfort, as he shifted the weight of his lanky frame from foot to foot. For him, the fogged apartment windows across the street were like glimpses into a bank vault. His employer, *Innovative Surveillance Inc.* maximized corporate profits, but he maximized his time, making it stand still when he secretly entered these buildings. The company rewards were monetary, his were deeply emotional. His world came alive behind the doors of these warm apartments. He had a degree of control that overshadowed the powerlessness he normally felt. He took a deep draw on his vape pen, inhaling menthol nicotine steam, his dark eyes and scruffy hair giving him the look of a smoldering scarecrow.

A dark blue restored Camaro rumbled down the street pushing water over the curbs like a wake, stopping three storefronts down from where Winston waited under a store portico. The car parked in a metered space.

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Winston spent a great deal of time alone, being raised by a single mother and no male role model. He remembered the horror of the day they left his father. Winston at the age of five had been awakened by a scream in the dark and then gurgling. He jumped out of bed to see his father strangling his mother with a towel. Winston grabbed a heavy wooden brush with both hands, ran and swung it at his father's shin, connecting with a loud crack. His father screamed and let go of the towel, then limped after Winston. His mother grabbed Winston and covered him in a corner as his father beat her back with his fists. He flailed at her, until exhausted and wheezing. As his mother hugged Winston and whimpered softly with each blow, his father was overcome with shame and fled the apartment. His mother threw clothes into a shopping bag and they ran out into the night. She paced back and forth at the bus stop, looking out for his father, then pulled Winston onboard when the bus squealed to a stop in front of them and the door flew open.

The bus was magical. A bright steel tube that rumbled through the dangerous night. It kept them safe from the threatening stumbling men outside in the dark, dressed in torn greasy cloth, drinking from paper bags. A fight broke out at one stop, but the driver quickly closed the door, and roared off, leaving men and women running after the bus shaking their fists.

His mother held him as they drove on, but her eyes were red and watery and her lower lip quivered. He didn't feel safe. Were they going to become the people he saw outside the bus without a home. What would they eat? He dug his face into his mother's coat and fell asleep.

When he awoke, he was in a soft warm bed, with the smiling face of his aunt hovering over him. The smell of bacon wafted in from the kitchen. But he still had the same bad feeling from the night before and it never went away.

With his aunt's help, they moved into their own apartment. Winston's mother took him everywhere she went. While he was at school, she worked at an electric motor factory, coming home with bleeding fingers. On Saturdays, she cleaned apartments for reclusive wealthy couples. She had gotten her clientele through a friend of hers, Greta, a German cleaning woman in her sixties who was lightening her workload. Greta had accumulated a long list of devoted and secretive clients by skill and discretion. All of her clients were gay men.

Winston and his mother lived in a third-floor attic apartment, with walls painted so many times, the weight of the paint made the walls peel. His mother had scraped the walls, patched them, and painted them again, with Winston's help. She made worn linoleum shine every Friday

night, as she cleaned the whole house, exhausted and numb from the week of winding wire. Winston questioned why his mother had to work so hard, when others didn't.

Winston's bedroom, was a large closet and his playroom was a storage area under the rafters of the attic, accessed through a removable wall panel. There he tacked old gift wrapping over the splintered roof joists and softened the raw wood plank floor with cardboard, creating a rough circus tent feel. His prized possession was a ten-year-old set of 'Golden Book' encyclopedias that he had found in a box on top of a trashcan. He had initially taken as many as he could carry, hiding the rest in bushes until he could come back for them. These books not only opened up a world of abbreviated knowledge, but more importantly, vastly increased the number of questions he had about the world. He spent hours at a time scouring them under a bare bulb hung over a rafter. One photo in them struck home poignantly, that of a library inside Buckingham palace. He wondered how the leather-bound books smelled in that library, how soft those carpets were, and what it would be like to nestle in their huge leather chairs. He could even make out some of the titles in the sea of colored book jackets and made notes on these. If he were in that room, he could absorb all of this through his senses and that memory would be his possession forever. He didn't need to own the Palace or own anything, he just wanted to possess its experience.

On her first Saturday of cleaning, his mother did take him to what he thought was a Palace. She awoke him early to take three separate buses to the edge of downtown Chicago. They walked down a block of tree-lined brownstones where skyscrapers hovered above the residences. The street gardens were fragrant with flowers and exotic shrubs. At the address his mother had, they had climbed marble steps to a tiled portico, where she pressed an ivory button next to a windowed brass door. A resonant male "Hello!", came from a speaker overhead and they were buzzed in. An ornate mahogany inner door opened, and the same voice said, "Come In" as their eyes adjusted. They entered and Winston's feet sank into a thick wool carpet. He deeply inhaled the smell of spice and leather as the door closed behind them.

"Welcome to our home. Greta told us you would bring your son. He is lovely. We have a little gift for him. A Chinese kite."

The large bald man in a black suit reached inside a velvet green gift bag and started pulling out a long red Chinese kite. Winston heard the high-pitched bark of a small dog galloping from behind the man.

"Ponce, stop!"

The small white poodle with wild eyes didn't stop. He sprang and his jaws locked into Winston's bare ankle. He could feel his leg being pierced in the dog's hot mouth, then felt an extra sharp spasm of pain as a tooth scraped his bone. The man grabbed the dog's jaws and pried them slowly open. He dragged the dog away into a bathroom, slammed the door then ran back.

Winston's mother in a panic, carried him into the kitchen, sat him down and cleaned off oozing blood with a wet towel. There were 4 punctures in his leg that continued to sting and bleed. The man returned with bandages and antiseptic, profusely apologizing. His mother observed Winston intently, confused that he wasn't crying, then accepted the apology. Winston stared around the room noting in wonder at the copper pots and colorful dishware visible in the massive rows of glass cabinets as they worked on him. There was a large butcher-block table in the middle of the kitchen. A huge copper vent hood over the stove disappeared into the high ceiling. Brass trays of potatoes, onions, and garlic hung along one wall.

"I'm so sorry, Ponce was probably jealous."

The man who smelled of woods and cinnamon carried Winston into a library. He'd never smelled cologne before. Colorful paintings with blurred figures and landscapes, hung everywhere, and corners of the room were filled with life-sized sculptures, that probably frightened people entering in the dark. The room was not unlike the one Winston had seen in his Golden Book of Buckingham palace. He was lowered into a soft leather chair in front of a color TV, the first he had ever seen. The man went back and got his kite to look at. He turned on the TV, let it warm up, and clicked the selector knob until cartoons came on. Winston's leg throbbed with every heartbeat, still he took pleasure in the perch that he'd earned through his pain. But even then, he thought, why did he have to suffer to enjoy these surroundings?

His mother had two wishes for him in life. The first was for Winston to get a college degree, something her family's generation hadn't yet achieved. Towards this goal, she put every spare penny she could earn. The second wish, was for him to stay out of jail. Winston easily got the grades he needed to enter college. The second goal took more effort, but he had still managed it, despite a Drunk and Disorderly felony assault charge, the result of a bar altercation- charges mutually dismissed.

Winston enrolled in the University of Illinois at Chicago, commuting from his mother's apartment. One of his mathematics professors saw sparks of high intelligence in his work that

fizzled before reaching potential breakthroughs. He called Winston brilliant but unmotivated. Winston had replied, that being highly intelligent as a human being was a relatively insignificant trait, given the ultimate terminal condition of humanity and humanity's insignificant role in the universe. The professor nodded patronizingly, implying that Winston was making his point.

The professor had also laughed at Winston's idea that the entire universe was comprised of a single elemental particle set in motion through time; the particle creating a line in one dimension, moving further to create a plane in two dimensions, a cube in three dimensions, the cube moving to create a fourth dimension, and so forth until the physical material of an entire universe was created. Winston pondered what initial force made the initial particle move. He didn't think the answer was to be found in religion. He also doubted that his present reality was the ultimate reality.

Winston thought of himself as the opposite of an artist, who attempts to share the depth of human experience with all those deadened by society. He was a hunter, a predator who explored the depth of the human experience for himself. He felt secure in coming to terms with who he was. He sought to experience the full range of human emotional experience safely and vicariously, by merely watching it.

Winston supported himself through a series of university created "Work-Study" jobs. The most satisfying of which was taking a late-night shift where he watched security cameras for the university police.

He watched the entries to dormitories and their hallways. His job was to contact the police for a range of anomalies, like when someone left a door propped open for party guests, vandalism, or the occasional fight or assault. As he watched the fuzzy camera images, hour after hour, the chaos of the student's lives began to crystalize into set patterns of activity. He found out who were the hard partiers. Who was straight or gay. Who were the heavy potheads. Most intriguingly, were the habits of the women, he was too shy to approach.

On the second floor, a tall girl with blond Scandinavian features drew his attention immediately. She lived in a one-bedroom graduate student unit. On weeknights, she would come home with her gym bag, go into her room, then come out in a robe and flip-flops, going down the hall to shower, coming back with her wet hair wrapped in a towel. Watching this routine became a highlight of Winston's evening. On Friday and Saturday nights she had her boyfriend over, a very tall slim, black-haired student, with an un-athletic shuffle. She gave him the access code to

the building, and to her apartment. Winston tracked both codes by the boyfriend's hand motions. On a break one night, he verified the building code, going one step beyond his job's authorization. The door clicked open and felt like a slot machine payoff. He spent the rest of the evening erasing his image from his appearance at the woman's door.

Winston took another long step beyond his authority the next week, when he knew the girl would be at the gym. He picked a Tuesday night, the night of a crucial school basketball game when the halls were likely to be empty. He entered the code sequence at her apartment door and it clicked open like the entrance to a new world. He could smell the soft floral musk of her perfume and vanilla soap from a recent shower. At a desk was a computer with codes to her school and personal emails on *post its* stuck below the screen. A pay stub on the desk held her social security number. Her name was Lynn. Photos of her parents and brother were pinned to a bulletin board. Her boyfriend's name was Paul and she was meeting him at the Crow Bar Grille on Friday at 7:00PM. She liked frozen Stouffer's lasagna and drank White Zinfandel. Her bra size was 34 C. He took photos of the room with a digital camera, paused to listen at the door for hallway noises, then left, his head throbbing with adrenaline. He erased all evidence of his entry from the night's video recording.

Upon graduating, on the strength of his surveillance camera experience, Winston got a job working as an apprentice surveillance software technician, where he learned to design camera surveillance systems.

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The driver door of the blue Camaro opened and a man in his early forties got out. He had a pencil thin mustache and slicked back black hair, tall, slight paunch from too much pasta and cannolis. He was followed by Candy Carmello, a red-headed woman, late thirties, athletic in a black slit skirt, dark eye shadow. She led the way to her apartment with the man following eagerly. She turned on the lights in the living room, as Winston watched her from the street. She walked to another room out of Winston's sight.

He saw her again, this time on his phone, getting a feed from the camera in the computer in her bedroom.

He had previously tracked Candy remotely, through her building's entry hall camera that his company had installed, before coming to this part of town on a business client visit. Candy worked at a shop below her apartment, the *Arabica*, a coffee shop she operated for her boyfriend. It was the shop's elaborate surveillance system that Winston's company had designed, that initially got Winston's attention. He wondered why the design also included Candy's apartment. Candy got Winston's attention.

He entered Candy's apartment earlier that evening. He looked through her mail, her wardrobe, her shelves of books. Now Winston would enjoy the ultimate invasion of her privacy, he would see how she interacted in her natural habitat with another human being.

"What the fuck!" Somebody's been in here," Candy shouted, noticing the repositioning of items on her desk. Her jewelry box had been opened and stacks of hundred-dollar bills all over her desk, appeared slightly lower.

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Candy had never been low key. The look of a cynical model, intelligent yet hyperactive, she early on got the attention of men. In high school, she was courted by both star athletes and gang members. She had a presence and a smile that said she knew something you didn't know, but that she could share with you if she wanted too. Attention from her improved a high school boy's self-image immediately, and she was generous with that attention.

At nineteen she was dating, a "connected" upcoming Mafioso, who picked her up one block from her parents' house in a new Cadillac convertible, the same man that now brought her home in his Camaro, Angelo Mosconi. Angelo was an accounting graduate, who delved deeply into the logistics of sports betting. His creative financial work gave him a lucrative career in the mob, without much of the socially unacceptable and violent downsides. *Arabica*, a string of 49 Mid-west franchises was a legitimate business enterprise he developed with mob money and now ran for himself and as franchises for other mob members. The smell and taste of good coffee triggered deep familial memories in Angelo, and he had turned this passion into a business. His shops featured imported coffees from throughout South America, particularly Columbia.

Although he grew up in Little Italy, Angelo had never intended to get into "the life", although he idolized his older brother, Franco, who was deeply connected. Franco ran fast and flashy, like a Ferrari and savored the mob life, to his hard-working shopkeeper parent's

disappointment. Franco looked out for Angelo and respected his parent's wishes kept him out of trouble. Angelo worked hard in school and had a natural curiosity that transcended the classroom, wanting to make his own way through the world with the quest of an adventurer. When Angelo got his accounting degree to satisfy his proud parents and was faced with being confined to a lifeless corporate prison, he sought Franco's help for to escape. Franco reluctantly introduced him to his boss, Lenny "the Accountant" who immediately saw Angelo's academically trained potential. Lenny first groomed him in the business end of bookmaking, then loan sharking and financial accounting of drug and prostitution operations. Angelo learned quickly, becoming the most valuable member of Lenny's crew and gaining the attention of the other families. Lenny was proud of Angelo at first and wanted them to become much closer, but Angelo kept his distance, never showing the closeness he had with his brother. In conversations with only the three of them present, Angelo and Franco a non-verbal knowing intimacy. They could communicate by just looking at each other. Lenny knew he could never have the same relationship with Angelo. Lenny saw Franco as a threat in getting closer to Angelo.

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Lenny did a substantial amount of business with the Russian mob. On one occasion he arranged a major drug buy with the Russians from Buffalo Grove, a Chicago suburb. Lenny put Franco in charge of the transaction, but came along himself.

Operating in the middle-class suburbs, they were sophisticated enough to not leave bodies in the streets, but occasionally caused permanent relocations.

"He moved to Florida." was their version of "He sleeps with the fishes."

Franco was surprised that Lenny would come along, as he generally had Franco solely involved in direct contact work, but wrote it up to the importance of the venture. Angelo wanted to come along, as he'd never met the Russians, but Lenny didn't allow it. They were to meet in a parking lot of the Algonquin Woods forest preserve in Des Plaines, a suburb that backed up to O'Hare airport, just outside of Chicago. At 1AM. Franco arrived first, then the 3 Russians, one a huge Rasputin type, the other two could have passed for cheap suited Traffic Court attorneys. They waited for Lenny who had the money.

Lenny waited alone behind the group in the woods for the next low flying plane. As he heard the roar of a jet grow overhead, Lenny stepped out from behind a tree blasting the startled Russians with an Uzi that nearly flew out of his hands in the concussions. Franco pulled out his 9 millimeter automatic and joined Lenny in firing at their jerking bodies. As the Russians lay bleeding and groaning, Franco stood in shock, wild-eyed. Lenny pointed at a Russian who was still pawing the asphalt near a green duffle bag of money they had brought. Lenny gave Franco the Uzi.

“Empty the clip.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this was the plan boss. I could have taken care of it myself.”

Franco put his gun in his belt, took the Uzi from Lenny and emptied the last 5 rounds into the twitching Russians head, that now resembled a coconut overflowing with raspberry pie. Lenny walked away from Franco to the Russian’s green bag. He unzipped it counting Oxycontin prescription bottles, until another while another plane flew overhead. Then he pulled a Glock from his jacket pocket and emptied 4 rounds into Franco’s chest. Franco died with an astonished expression frozen on his face, that even the undertaker couldn’t erase. Lenny found a Russian whose hands were not bloody, and put the Glock in his hand and fired the gun towards Franco. He went back to the duffle bag, lifted the strap over his shoulder and walked into the woods. Bottles rattling in the bag while he walked . Lenny reached his Escalade in another forest preserve lot, and drove off leaving the police to sort out his carnage.

A jogger discovered the bodies and called the police. A young cop, Karl Mumfrey, received the call in the area and joined the detail securing the scene perimeter. He watched the white curly haired evidence tech examine the bullet trajectories with rods extending the flight path of the bullets.

“What do you think happened here,” Karl asked.

“Some kind of turf war between the Russians and the families.”

“This guy works for Lenny *the Accountant*, some kind of enforcer, who blew the Russians away with an Uzi.”

“It doesn’t make sense though,” Karl interjected.

“It looks like the Russians were hit from the side, out of the woods, and Lenny’s guy was straight ahead of them.”

“The guy could have distracted them, and they turned. Are you trying to tell me how to do my job. I’ve been doing this for 30 years. Go eat a doughnut.”

At the funeral, Lenny attempted to console Angelo, who was almost catatonically unemotional.

“Your brother was a stand-up guy. I’m going to really miss him. I was carrying a steel briefcase with the money, otherwise I don’t know why I’m still here.”

Angelo didn’t know either.

Lenny thereafter made Angelo a regular visitor to his home for dinner and increased his cut and responsibilities, but Angelo always abruptly excused himself whenever the time for business had passed. Lenny smashed a bottle of rare cognac into the fireplace when Angelo left abruptly after dinner to go out on a date, erupting a fire- ball that singed furniture and the rug.

Candy came to take the place of Franco in Angelo’s life. She became more than Angelo’s girlfriend. She became his confidant, impressing him with her own organizational skills and math aptitude. She was drawn deeply into his work. Her family overlooked Angelo’s apparent connections, being happy that she, with his urging, pursued college accounting classes and had entered an apparently successful financial career in the coffee business. Angelo had set Candy up as the owner of her own coffee shop with an apartment above. The shop below also functioned as a regional office for the mob where police took their paper bag payments with their coffee and donuts.

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