

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 into the moonlight, trying to make out the lakeshore ten miles away. He looked for the flash of a massive explosion and wondered how hard the concussion would shake his building.

Chapter 1

In the present:

Lit by neon signs from closed stores, blue and yellow rain hits the sidewalk and flows along the curb before swirling down an iron grate. Apartments above cast a warm sheltering light, flickering with silhouettes. Up the street on the corner, steam rises from under an illuminated red and yellow umbrella of a hot dog vendor. Further up the hill out to the horizon, the lights of apartment towers glimmer like fireplaces.

The view gives Winston comfort. He shifts the weight of his lanky frame from foot to foot trying to keep warm under a dark store portico. For him, the fogged apartment windows across the street are like movie screens. The world shown in these screens is more alive than his own. He is watching one apartment whose windows are dark. He takes 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.

Winston hears the rumble of a restored Camaro coming down the hill, pushing water over the curbs like a wake. It stops across the street from where Winston is hiding and parks in a metered space. Winston's employer, *Innovative Surveillance Inc.* has installed a corporate quality internet-based camera system at the residential apartment he is watching. Why?

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Winston has spent a great deal of time alone, being raised by a single mother. 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 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 cried softly with each blow, his father began sobbing himself and fled the apartment. His mother then threw clothes into a shopping bag, looked out the door out into the night. She grabbed his hand, and they ran to a bus stop. She kept looking up and down the street for his father, finally seeing a bus. When it stopped, she pulled Winston onboard as the door flew open.

The bus was magical, a bright steel tube that rumbled through the shivering night. Looking out the window, Winston saw men in torn clothes stumbling as they drank from paper bags. At one stop a fight broke out as the waiting crowd jostled to get on, but the driver quickly closed the door and roared off. The abandoned crowd ran after the bus shaking their fists and throwing bottles.

His mother held him, and Winston felt safe as they drove on, watching the city scenes unfold outside. But when he looked up, he saw that his mother's eyes were red, and her lower lip quivered. Were they going to become the people he saw outside the bus? What would they eat? He dug his face deeper into his mother's coat and fell asleep in the droning of the bus.

When he awoke, he thought he was still dreaming. 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. The bad feeling from the night before was miles 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, where the walls had been painted so many times the weight of the paint made the walls peel. His mother scraped the walls, patched them, and painted them again with Winston's help. She made the worn linoleum shine

every Friday night as she cleaned the whole house, exhausted and fingers raw 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. To create his playroom, in the light of a bare hanging bulb, he nailed cardboard covered in old gift wrapping over the splintered roof and wall joists and softened the raw wood plank floor with thrown away carpet, 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 exploring them. One photo in them he felt 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, for his next trip to the library. If he were in that room, he could absorb the experience of being there 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 houses, 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. She stopped at three story brick building that had life-size statues in the windows. They climbed marble steps to a tiled portico with mahogany benches, 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 inner door, of ornate oak 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."

The man was large, bald, and in a black suit. He reached inside a velvet green bag and pulled out a long red Chinese kite. Behind the man, Winston heard the excited bark of a small dog running towards them, his nails clicking on the hardwood floor.

"Ponce, stop!" the man yelled.

The small white poodle with wild eyes didn't stop. He sprang and he nipped Winston's bare ankle. He could feel his leg being pierced in the dog's hot mouth. The man grabbed the dog and carried him into a bathroom. He slammed the door on the barking dog then and back.

Winston's mother in a panic carried him into a kitchen and cleaned off oozing blood with a paper towel. There were four punctures in his leg that continued to sting and bleed. The man returned with bandages and antiseptic, profusely apologizing. His mother hugged Winston but was confused that he wasn't crying. Given Winston's reaction she accepted the man's apology.

Winston stared around the room as his mother worked on him, noting the huge copper pots and colorful dishware in endless rows of glass cabinets. There was a large butcher-block table in the middle of the kitchen. A brass vent hood over the stove disappeared into the high ceiling. Trays of fruits, potatoes, onions, and garlic lined one wall.

"I'm so sorry, Ponce was probably jealous," said the man to Winston.

The man smelled of pine and cinnamon, as he lifted Winston and carried him into a large library. Colorful paintings with suggesting figures and landscapes hung everywhere. The corners of the room were filled with life-sized sculptures that probably frightened people entering in the dark. The room was not unlike the palace library Winston had seen in his Golden Book. The man lowered him into a soft leather chair in front of a color TV, the first he had ever seen. He turned on the TV, let it warm up, and clicked the selector knob until cartoons came on. Winston's leg throbbed, 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. The first was for Winston to get a college degree, something her family 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 as Winston grew into adulthood. He still managed it, despite a Drunk and Disorderly assault charge, the result of a bar fight with a surly bouncer - charges mutually dismissed.

Winston was accepted at the University of Illinois at Chicago which he attended while commuting from his mother's apartment. He was in heaven in this kaleidoscope of human knowledge. Winston took courses in subjects that kindled his curiosity: engineering design of materials, neurobiochemistry, astronomy, sociology, computer coding. His interests focused for the short period it took him to become knowledgeable in any area, he then moved on. The consensus of his professors was that he was brilliant but unmotivated. Winston's defense was 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. In framing this argument to his thermodynamics teacher, the professor had nodded patronizingly, implying that Winston was making his point.

A physics professor laughed at Winston's speculation that the entire universe could be comprised of a single elemental particle set in motion through time; the particle creating a line in one dimension, moving farther 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 the 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 their own human experience with all those deadened by society. He came to the conclusion that he needed to acquire rather than share experiences. He determined a noble focus for his life would be to acquire the experiences of thousands of lifetimes within his own lifetime. But how could he do this?

In addition to his mother's savings for his tuition, 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 the dormitories, including their hallways and study rooms. 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. He came to enjoy the vignettes of their lives in “Rear Window” fashion.

On the second floor, a tall girl with a wide friendly face and blond Scandinavian features drew his attention immediately. She was Sally, a teaching assistant in his Applied Mathematics class. She lived in a one-bedroom graduate student unit. She never had any visitors. Once, Sally had brought a goldfish in a globe aquarium to class. She bought it nearby during lunch to take home. Emboldened by the confidence of having seen something of her private life, Winston asked her what the fish’s name was.

“Hadn’t thought about it,” she replied, shrugging.

“How about Descartes? I sink therefore I am,” Winston offered.

She laughed and looked at him like seeing him for the first time.

Seeing her come and go on his screens was the highlight of Winston’s working evening. He continued bantering with her, now drawing a smile when he entered her classroom. He wondered if the opportunity arose would she invite him to a party to get to know him better? Winston spent his next evenings at his surveillance job organizing such a party to get an answer to that question, knowing that he wouldn’t be able to attend.

The dormitory floors alternated between male and female students and had a large study room at the end of each hall. The party could be held there the next Saturday night while he was on duty. Winston entered the university files and sent each student on Sally’s floor and the male floor below an invite to a BYOB party sponsored by a fictional *Dormitory Committee*. Would Sally invite him to this party? He couldn’t attend because he had to erase the record of the party, but he would have a sign that she was interested in him. Winston spent the rest of his evenings at the screens noting on a spreadsheet which female dorm resident might best be paired with which male resident downstairs. He then sent them both emails, each pair asking the other to join them at the party.

By the night of the party, Sally had not mentioned it to Winston nor sent him an email. He watched his screens in their blue light as the party unfolded, over pizza. It grew exponentially, fueled by the pairs he had invited. One pair was sitting in a corner, a Nigerian engineering major, who laughed as a pony-tailed blond in nursing shouted in his ear over the din. At a conference table made into a bar, a Korean business student was clinking Corona bottles with a sunburned brunette, an Iowa agriculture major in a tube-top and denim overalls. In the

middle of the floor, a rotund pre-med male student in a yamaka was dancing with an equally large Iranian female law student.

Winston recognized a student from his math class at the bar, a tall, bearded Viking type. He was scouring the room. Minutes later, Sally entered and headed to embrace the Viking. Wilson shook his head in disappointment but laughed at the overall success of his social engineering project. He wanted to do more of this.

That weekend, his mother died while cleaning a downtown townhouse. She had an asthma bout triggered by her cleaning chemicals that led to a heart attack. She was found by the male residents as they came home from brunch. Winston arrived just as they were carrying his mother out in a body bag along with trash bags that included her cleaning supplies. Winston spent what was left of her savings on her funeral. He couldn't sleep for two nights, which he spent wandering along the crashing waves of the lakefront. When he was finally able to sleep and morning arrived, he dreaded opening his eyes. But when he did, he felt a melancholy sense of freedom. He was no longer responsible to anyone.

Upon graduating, on the strength of his surveillance camera experience, Winston got a job as an apprentice surveillance software designer. Now he had an even greater window on the world.

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The driver door of the blue Camaro opened in the rain. A man in his early forties gets out. He had a pencil thin mustache and slicked back black hair, medium muscular build with a slight paunch from too much pasta and Cannolis. Candy Carmello gets out too. She is a stylish red-headed woman, about thirty. She was wearing dark eye shadow matching her black slit skirt and holds an umbrella over the man. She leads him to her building and enters. A minute later, second floor lights turn on. Winston watches as Candy walks past a window and out of sight. On Winston's phone both figures appear on a surveillance camera feed from Candy's office. Winston's stomach starts rumbling as the oniony hot dog steam wafts down from the corner kart.

Winston came across Candy's surveillance system during the routine course of his work. Her sophisticated system was one that might normally only have been installed in a bank or even a police station. *Why would a residential customer need such a system?* From his corporate

cubicle he monitored her apartment, her entrance, and the *Arabica* coffee shop below and found some interesting things. He followed up by accessing her computer files, getting her daily schedule and door code. He didn't need anyone to tell him this was a bad idea, not that he could have curbed his ferocious curiosity.

Winston had entered Candy's apartment earlier that evening and had gone straight for her office, to personally see what he had caught on camera. Covering a good-sized table were huge stacks of hundred-dollar bills. He now waited in the dark trying to learn what was going on in Candy's apartment.

"What the fuck!" Winston heard over the surveillance feed. "Somebody's been in here," Candy shouted. Candy's eagle eyes had noticed that the stacks of hundred-dollar bills appeared slightly shorter. Winston's face turned red.

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Candy had never been low key. With the look of a cynical model, intelligent yet hyperactive, she got the attention of men early on. 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, and that she could share it 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 even in college had delved deeply into the logistics of sports betting. His creative financial work for the mob gave him a lucrative career, without much of the socially unacceptable and violent downsides. He expanded the mob's legitimate business interests by developing *Arabica* coffee houses, a string of 49 Mid-west franchises. 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. Angelo ran Arabicas for himself as well as managed franchises for other mob members.

Although he grew up in Chicago's *Little Italy*, Angelo had never intended to get into "the life" of his mobster brother, Franco. Angelo worked hard in school and had a natural curiosity that transcended the classroom. Franco ran fast and flashy like a Ferrari and savored the mob life.

This deeply disappointed his hard-working shopkeeper parents. Franco looked out for Angelo and respected his parent's wishes to keep him out of trouble. When Angelo got his accounting degree to satisfy his proud parents, he was faced, he thought, with a lifetime sentence in a corporate prison. To avoid such a life, he sought Franco's help. Franco reluctantly introduced him to his boss, Luca "the Accountant" who immediately saw Angelo's academically trained potential. Luca first groomed him in the business end of bookmaking, then loan sharking and the financial accounting of drug and prostitution operations. Angelo learned quickly, becoming the most valuable member of Luca's crew and gaining the attention of the other families. Luca was proud of Angelo at first and wanted them to become much closer. Angelo kept his distance however, never showing him the nonverbal communication he had with his brother. Luca came to see Franco as a threat, standing between him and Angelo.

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

Operating in the middle-class suburbs, Luca was sophisticated enough to not leave bodies in the streets, but he occasionally caused *disappearances*.

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

Franco was surprised that Luca would come along on a routine buy but wrote it up to the importance of the venture. Angelo wanted to come along as well, as he'd never met the Russians, but Luca didn't allow it. The buy was to take place in a parking lot of the Algonquin Woods forest preserve that backed up to O'Hare airport, just outside of Chicago. At one in the morning Franco arrived first, then the three Russians. One Russian was enormous, at a heavysset six foot-six, the other two could have passed for cheap- suited, traffic court attorneys. They all waited for Luca who had the money, smoking cigarettes under the sole light pole in the lot.

Luca waited alone behind them in the woods, for the next low flying jet. As he heard the roar of a 747 grow overhead, Luca stepped out from behind a tree, blasting the startled Russians with an Uzi that nearly flew out of his hands in the recoils. Franco, wide-eyed, pulled out his nine-millimeter automatic and joined Luca in firing at their jerking bodies. As the Russians lay

bleeding and groaning, Franco looked to Luca for an explanation. Luca pointed to the big Russian who was still alive, pawing the asphalt. Luca 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.” Franco jammed his automatic in his belt, took the Uzi from Luca and emptied the last ten rounds into the Russian’s head, until it erased his identity.

Luca walked away from Franco to the Russian’s green duffel bag. He unzipped it counting Oxycontin prescription bottles until another plane flew overhead. Then he pulled a Glock from his jacket pocket and emptied four rounds into Franco’s chest. Franco died with an astonished look on his face that even the undertaker couldn’t erase. Luca found a Russian whose hands were not bloody, put the Glock in his hand and fired the gun again towards Franco. He went back to the duffel bag, lifted the strap over his shoulder and walked into the woods, bottles rattling. Luca reached his Escalade in the forest preserve lot and drove off leaving the police to sort out his carnage.

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