

The Watcher, A Chicago Tale

by Bernie Kirstein

Three weeks into the future:

Winston Logan stared through the curtain wall of his 60th floor suite and tried to make out the lakeshore in the moonlight, ten miles away. He searched for the flash of an explosion and wondered how hard the concussion would shake his building moments later.

Chapter 1

Winston's life changed forever the night his mother left his father. He was five when he was awakened by a scream followed by gurgling. Winston jumped out of bed to see his father strangling his mother with a towel. He grabbed a heavy wooden brush with both hands and swung it at his father's shin, connecting with a crack. His father screamed and let go of the towel, then limped after him. 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 threw clothes into a shopping bag and took an envelope from under the living room rug. She grabbed Winston's hand and opened the door. No one could be seen under the streetlights. They ran to a bus stop two blocks away, slowing now and then to look for his father and the bus. They saw the light of a bus coming their way and raced it to the stop. The bus door flew open, and she pulled Winston onboard.

The bus was magical, a bright steel tube that rumbled through the freezing 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. But when he looked up and saw that his mother's eyes were red and her lower lip quivered, he felt less safe. 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 with the droning of the bus.

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. However, the bad feeling from the night before came to his mind through the surface of his surroundings, like a breaching whale.

His mother, with his aunt's help, found a job at an electric motor factory. She eventually saved enough to move them into 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 with fingers raw from the week of winding wire. Winston questioned why his mother had to work so hard when others didn't.

She took off work to enroll Winston in school. They walked a mile through a neighborhood of brick bungalows to get there. Afterwards, he walked there on his own. On Saturdays, Winston's mother took him along as she cleaned apartments for 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 clients by skill and discretion.

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 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 trash can. 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 connecting buses to the edge of downtown Chicago. They walked down a block of tree-lined brownstones where skyscrapers hovered above the residences. The gardens along the street were fragrant with flowers and exotic shrubs. She stopped at a 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 carved oak opened, and the same voice said, "Come in!" Their eyes adjusted as they entered, Winston's feet sinking into a thick wool carpet. He 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 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. The dog sprang and clamped onto Winston's bare ankle. He could feel his leg being pierced in the dog's hot mouth. The man apologizing profusely, unclenched the dog's jaws and carried the barking poodle under his arm into a bathroom.

Winston's mother ran with Winston 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 brought bandages and antiseptic. His mother hugged Winston but was confused that he wasn't crying. Given Winston's reaction she accepted the man's profuse apologies.

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 massive 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 male 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 do work he enjoyed. Winston easily got the grades he needed to enter college. The second goal took more effort as Winston's interests changed rapidly as he grew into adulthood.

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 and took courses in subjects that kindled his curiosity: engineering design of materials, neurobiochemistry, astronomy, sociology, computer coding. His interest focused for the short period it took him to satiate his curiosity in any area, and then he 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 people at dormitory entrances, 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 for him into set patterns of behaviors. He found out who were the hard partiers. Who had relationships with whom. Who were loners like him. 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 in his cameras, 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.

Having 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 the 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, because the university didn't allow dorm parties serving alcohol.

The dormitory floors 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 in Sally's dorm an invite to a BYOB party sponsored by a fictional *Dormitory Committee*. Winston couldn't attend because he had to erase the record of the party. Winston spent the rest of his evenings at the screens noting on a spreadsheet which female dorm resident might best be paired with another male resident. He even paired gay couples. He then sent emails from each pair, each asking the other to join them at the party. He sent a general invitation to Sally.

By the night of the party, Sally had not mentioned it to Winston nor sent him an email. He watched his screens as the party grew exponentially, fueled by the pairs he had invited. A Nigerian engineering major who Winston had paired with a pony-tailed blond in nursing, were sipping chianti out of the tube of an IV bag she had rolled in. At a conference table made into a bar, a Korean business student was feeding green Jell-O shots with chopsticks to 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 Yakama was dancing with an equally large Iranian female law student.

Winston recognized a student from his math class at the bar, a tall, red bearded Viking type. He was scouring the room. Minutes later, Sally entered and headed to embrace the Viking. Wilson with a sad grin shook his head. But he was pleased at the success of his social engineering experiment. He wanted to do more of this.

That weekend, his mother died while cleaning a townhouse downtown. 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 his mother's savings on her funeral. He couldn't sleep for two nights, which he spent wandering the beach along the lakefront, calmed by the crashing waves. 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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Lit by neon signs above closed stores, blue and green rain hits the sidewalk and flows along the curb before swirling down an iron grate. Apartments above the stores cast a warm yellow 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. Even further up the hill out to the horizon, the lights of apartment towers glimmer like fireplaces. Winston's employer, *Innovative Surveillance Inc.* had installed a corporate quality internet-based camera system at the residential apartment Wilson is now watching.

He shifts the weight of his lanky frame from foot to foot trying to keep warm under a dark store portico across the street. For Winston, the fogged apartment windows are like movie screens. 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 gives him the look of a smoldering scarecrow.

The rumble of a restored Camaro comes down the hill, pushing water over the curbs like a wake. It parks in a metered space. The driver door of the blue Camaro opens in the rain. A man in his early forties gets out. He has a pencil thin mustache and slicked back black hair, medium muscular build with a slight paunch from too much pasta and Cannolis. A stylish red-headed woman, about thirty gets out too. She was wearing dark eye shadow matching her black slit skirt and holds an umbrella over the man. She leads him to the building and enters. A minute later, the dark windows Winston had been watching light up. He watches as the red-headed woman walks past and out of sight. On Winston's phone both figures appear on a surveillance camera feed from the apartment office. Winston's stomach starts rumbling as the oniony hot dog steam wafts down from the corner kart.

Winston came across the apartment's surveillance system during the routine course of his work. The sophisticated system was one that might normally only have been installed in a bank. *Why would a residential customer need such a system?* From his corporate cubicle he monitored the apartment and the *Arabica* coffee shop below and found some interesting things. He followed up by accessing the computer files of the woman he was now watching, getting her

daily schedule and door code. He didn't need anyone to tell him this was a bad idea, not that it would have curbed his ferocious curiosity.

Winston had entered the apartment earlier that evening and had gone straight for her office to verify what he had caught on camera. Covering an entire four by eight-foot table were six-inch-high bound stacks of hundred-dollar bills. He now waited in the dark trying to learn what was going on in the red-heads apartment.

"What the fuck!" Winston heard over the surveillance feed. "Somebody's been in here," the woman shouted. Her eagle eyes had noticed that the stacks of hundred-dollar bills were minutely shorter. Winston's face flushed hot.

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The red-headed woman was Candy Carmello. 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 would 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 a rogue accounting graduate who in college had delved deeply into the logistics of sports betting, wanting to gain insight and a skill admired in the world of his brother the mobster, whom he joined. 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 forty-nine Midwest 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 some Arabicas for himself as well as managed franchises for other mob members.

Although he grew up in Chicago's *Little Italy*, Angelo had not originally intended to enter 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 and savored mob life. His godlike transcendence over the wage slave lives of ordinary people was as intoxicating as a drug. Franco deeply disappointed his hard-working shopkeeper parents. But Franco looked out for Angelo and respected his parent's wishes to keep him out of trouble. While Angelo got his accounting degree to satisfy his proud parents, he couldn't face the prospect of a life sentence working for a corporation. Franco, after Angelo's vehement insistence 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 kind of bond 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, who were brutally successful, even breaking off into warring splinter gangs. On one fatal occasion Luca arranged a major drug buy with a new gang of Russians in Buffalo Grove, a Chicago suburb. He 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 created 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, a heavysset six foot-six,

the other two could have passed for cheap-suited, traffic court attorneys. They waited smoking cigarettes under the light pole in the lot for Luca, who had the money.

Luca waited in the woods, listening for the next low flying jet. As he heard the roar of a 747 grow overhead, Luca stepped out and blasted the startled Russians with an Uzi that nearly flew out of his hands in the recoils. They won't be missed, Luca thought. The main Russian mob will approve.

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 would have taken care of it.” Franco replaced his automatic in his belt, took the Uzi from Luca and emptied the last ten rounds into the Russians 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 the carnage.

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