**Godson**

Roger Zelazny

THE FIRST TIME I SAW MORRIS LEATHAM, AT THE baptismal font where he became my godfather, I was too small for the memory to stick. Thereafter he visited me every year on my birthday, and this year was no exception.

“Morrie,” I said, knuckling my right eye and then my left. I opened them and stared through the predawn light of my bedroom to the chair beside the window with the dead geranium on the sill, where he sat, tall and thin, almost anorectic looking.

He rose, smiling, and crossed to the side of the bed. He extended a hand, drew me to my feet, and passed me my robe. “Put it on,” he said, as he led me out of the room. My Aunt Rose and Uncle Matt were still asleep. Moments later, it seemed, Morrie and I were walking inside the local mall. It was dimly lit, and there was no one about.

“What are we doing here?” I asked.

“I’d like you to walk through, look around, and tell me what you’d like for a birthday present.”

“I know right where it is,” I said. “Come on.”

I led him past the bench where the night watch-man lay unmoving, a wet spot at the crotch of his uniform trousers. I stopped before a store window and pointed.

“Which one?” Morrie asked.

“The black one,” I said.

He chuckled.

“One black bicycle for David,” he said. “I’ll get you one like that, only better. It’ll be delivered later today.”

“Thank you,” I said, turning and hugging him. Then, “Don’t you think we ought to wake that guard up? His boss might come by.”

“He’s been dead for some time, David. Myocardial infarct. Died in his sleep.”

“Oh.”

“That’s how most people say they’d like to go, so he had it good,” Morrie told me. “Just turned seventy-three last month. His boss thought he was younger. Name’s William Strayleigh—'Bill' to his friends.”

“Gee, you know a lot of people.”

“You meet everybody in my line of work.”

I wasn’t sure what Morrie’s line of work was, exactly, but I nodded as if I were.

I woke up again later and cleaned up and dressed and went downstairs for breakfast. There was a birthday card beside my plate, and I opened it and read it and said, “Thanks, Aunt Rose.”

“Just wanted you to know we hadn’t forgotten,” she said.

“My godfather Morrie remembered, too. He was by earlier, and he took me to the mall to pick out a present and—”

She glanced at the clock.

“The mall doesn’t open for another half hour.”

“I know,” I said. “But he got me in anyway. Too bad about the night watchman, though. Died in his sleep on a bench. I’m getting a black ten-speed that’ll be sent over this afternoon.”

“Don’t start on that business again, David. You know it bothers Uncle Matt.”

“Just wanted you to know the bike was coming.”

“Nobody’s been here this morning. Nobody’s been out and back in. You miss your folks. It’s natural you have these dreams around your birthday.”

“And I get presents.”

“Hard for us to know, since you weren’t with us last year.”

“Well, it’s true. Morrie always gives me something. Dad could have told you.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But it’s strange that Morris has never gotten in touch with us.”

“He travels a lot.”

She turned away, began making French toast.

“Just don’t mention him around Matt.”

“Why not?”

“Because I asked you not to, okay?”

I nodded when she glanced my way.

The doorbell rang that afternoon, and when I opened the door it was there: a bike with a paint job so dark and shiny that it looked like a series of black mirrors. I couldn’t find a manufacturer’s name on it, just a silver-edged plate on the handlebar post in the shape of a small black heart. The note tied to the bar said, “Happy Birthday, David. His name is Dorel. Treat him well and he will serve you well. —M.”

It was a long time before I knew exactly what that meant. But the first thing I did, of course—after re-moving the tag and handing it to Uncle Matt—was to take it down the steps, mount, and ride off.

“Dorel,” I said softly. “He told me you’re called Dorel.” Was it my imagination, or did a brief vibration pass through that midnight frame just then?

Everything Morrie gave me had a special character to it—like the Magic Kit I had gotten last year, with the Indian Rope Trick I never used (I’m not a good climber) and the Five-Minute Time Warp which I never found any use for. I keep it in my pocket.

“My name’s David,” I continued. “You’re beautiful and you’re fast and you’re easy to steer. I like you a lot.”

It was as if I were going downhill all the way to the corner and back.

When I parked Dorel on the porch again, Uncle Matt was waiting right inside the door. “I just heard on the news,” he said, “that the night watchman at the mall was found dead this morning, of a heart attack.”

“I know,” I said. “I told Aunt Rose about it earlier.”

“How did you know about it?”

“I was over there, before the mall opened, with Morrie. He got us in, and I picked out the kind of bike I wanted.”

“How did he get you in?”

“Uh, I don’t really remember the details.”

Uncle Matt scratched his chin through his beard and narrowed his gray eyes behind his thick glasses. They looked a lot like my eyes, and—I suddenly remembered—my dad’s.

“What’s he look like, anyway—your godfather?” he asked.

1 shrugged. It was hard to remember just what he looked like. “Kind of thin. He has dark hair, I think. And a real nice voice. Makes you want to do whatever he says.”

“That’s all?”

“I guess so.”

“Damn! That’s no description, David. That could be almost anybody.”

“*I’m* sorry.”

He reached out and squeezed my shoulder as I began to draw back.

“I didn’t mean to yell at you,” he said. “It’s just that the whole business is kind of—unusual. Not to speak ill of my own brother, but it’s no secret that your father was a heavy drinker. Especially there at the end. It’s why your mother left him. Probably what killed him, too.”

I nodded. I’d heard—or overheard—all this before.

“He told a bizarre story of the way he met your godfather. Sounded like something a paranoid Trotskyite drunk might come up with, and I didn’t believe a word of it. Still don’t.”

I stared at him. I knew what a paranoid was, also. And two out of three wasn’t bad.

“I don’t remember the story,” I said, “if I ever knew.”

Uncle Matt sighed, and told me the tale.

My father met Morrie at a crossroads, pursuant to a dream. He’d dreamed that a voice came to him out of a thundercloud limned with lightning, and it said, “I am God. You have alienated everyone close to you and I pity you. I shall stand for your son in my own church and make him happy in life.” My father said, “You give to the rich and leave the poor working stiffs to hunger. I do not want you for my son’s godfather.” And there was a clap of thunder and the cloud went away, and the earth split and a flame rose up out of the crack and a voice spoke from it, saying, “I am Satan. Have me. I will make him rich. I will see that he gets on well in the world.” My father said, “You are the Prince of Bullshitters. I do not want you either, for I do not trust you.” And the fire flared, and Satan was gone, also. Later then, as he was halfway to wakefulness, a shadowy figure passed near and told him, “When you awaken walk outside. Stop at the first crossroads you come to. I will meet you there.”

“Who are you?” my father asked. “I am he who makes all equal,” came the reply, “in a most democratic fashion.” And my father got up, dressed, went out into the darkness, and waited at the crossroads. There he met Morris, and he invited him to be my godfather, for he said that one who had him for a friend would lack nothing.

“Do you know what that means?” Uncle Matt asked me.

“Yeah. It’s a good thing that he went to the crossroads, or I wouldn’t have my bike.”

He stared at me for several moments. “Rose and I weren’t present at your christening. We’d had a disagreement with Sam earlier. So neither of us got to meet Morris.”

“I know.”

“The next time you see him, tell him it had nothing to do with him, or with you. Tell him we wish he’d stop by sometime.”

“You will get to see him,” I told him. “He says everyone does. I’ll ask him to name a date next time—”

“Never mind,” he said suddenly.

Later, that evening, after my birthday party, I went out on my new bike again. Lacking an address for a thank-you note, I resolved to go visit Morrie and say it aloud. In the past, when I’d wanted to see him between birthdays I would wander about trying to figure out how to do it and before long I always encountered him—most recently as part of the crowd at an auto accident, and once at the beach, where I was watching the guard give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to a guy. This time, though, I’d go in style.

I pedaled hard till I got to the outskirts of town, coasted downhill to a wooded area, turned onto an old logging road now mainly used by hunters, fishermen, hikers, and kids from the high school following dances and movies. It was darker down here than it was up on the hill, and I bore to the left, coming onto a long, winding stretch under summer foliage.

“Dorel,” I said, “I’m really happy with you, and I want to go and thank Morrie for such a great birthday present. I don’t know where to find him but I’ve got a feeling you do. I’d like you to help me get to him—now.”

A throbbing seemed to begin within the dark vehicle, and as we rounded the next corner a kind of stroboscopic effect began. At first it seemed that it might simply have been from the angle of the light and the trees’ spacing. But after a while each period of darkness seemed more intense, lasted a little longer; and each time the light returned it came more dimly, came for a shorter bit of time.

Soon, I coasted down a dark tunnel—for I noted that I need no longer pedal but only steer in the direction of a distant light which now came into view. Dorel vibrated, and we picked up speed. After a time, the light grew brighter and I entered a gallery of stalactites and still pools. The place was a blaze of light, for there were candles everywhere I looked— on every ledge, in every niche, atop every flat surface. They varied in size, they burned with a still intensity. There were no drafts here, save for the rush of air from my own passage, and we were slowing, slowing… I put my foot down, halted, and stared. I had never seen so many candles before in my life.

“Thanks, Dorel,” I whispered.

I set the kickstand and walked about. There were tunnels leading off in all directions from the grotto, all of them blazing for as far as I could see with multitudes of candles. Every now and then a burnt-down candle stub would gutter and go out. Shadows darted about these like black butterflies as they died.

Wandering, I was suddenly concerned about finding my way back out. I halted and looked about for Dorel. Once I was back upon my bike, I was sure I could retrace my route.

A shadow glided around boulder, plinth, stalactite. It was my bike, with my godfather seated upon it and pedaling slowly, grinning. He wore what appeared to be a dark cloak. He waved and made his way in my direction.

“How good of you to come and visit,” he called out.

“Wanted to say thanks for the present,” I told him. “Dorel’s really neat.”

“Glad you like him.” He drew up before me, braked, and dismounted, setting the stand.

“I never knew a bike to have a name before.”

He ran a bony finger along the handlebars.

“He is something that owes me a great debt. He is paying it off in this fashion,” he said. “Would you care for a cup of tea or hot chocolate?”

“I’d like a hot chocolate,” I said.

He led me around a corner and into a niche where a slab of stone bore a red-and-white calico tablecloth. Two cups and saucers were laid upon it, along with napkins and spoons. Sounds of classical music were in the air, and I could not determine their source. We seated ourselves and he reached for a carafe which stood within a wire frame above one of the ubiquitous candles. Raising it, he filled our cups.

“What is that music?” I asked.

“Schubert’s Quartet in D Minor, a favorite piece of mine,” he said. “Marshmallow?”

“Yes, please.”

He added marshmallows. It was hard to see his face, the way the shadows danced about him.

“Is this where you work, Morrie, or where you live?”

He handed me my cup, leaned back, and commenced cracking his knuckles, one by one, a talent I mightily envied him.

“I do a lot of my work in the field,” he said. “But you might consider this my office, and I do keep an apartment here. Yes, it is both.”

“I see,” I said. “It’s certainly well lit.”

He chuckled. He gestured broadly, and the nearby flames flickered wildly.

“She’ll think it a fainting spell,” he remarked.

“Who?” I asked.

“The lady who belongs to that candle. Name’s Luisa Trujillo. She’s forty-eight years old and lives in New York City. She’s got another twenty-eight years to go. *Bueno*.”

I lowered my cup, turned slowly, and regarded the immense cavern and all of the side chambers and tunnels.

“Yes,” he said after a time. “All there, all of them. There’s one for each of them.”

“I read that there are several billion people in the world.”

He nodded.

“Lot of wax,” he observed.

“Good chocolate,” I said.

“Thanks. The Big Ten’s really come upon bad days.”

“Huh?”

“Everything interesting’s happening in the West,” he said.

“Oh,” I said. “Football. You’re talking college football, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but I like pro football, too. What about you?”

“I don’t know enough about it,” I said, “but I’d like to,” and he commenced telling me.

Much later, we simply sat, watching the candles flicker. At length, he refilled our cups.

“You given any thought to what you want to be when you grow up?” he asked.

“Not really,” I said.

“Consider being a physician. You’d have a knack for it. I’d see to that,” he said. “Do you play chess?”

“No.”

“Good game, too. You ought to learn. I’ve a mind to teach you.”

“All right.”

I don’t know how long we sat there, using the squares on the tablecloth for our board. The pieces were of bone—the clean white of fresh, the almost-brown of aged, bone—which were quite elegant. As we played, I realized that I liked the game.

“A physician,” I remarked after a time.

“Yes, think about it.”

“I will,” I agreed.

And so I did. It was good to have some sort of goal. I made it a point to study extra hard for math, chemistry, and biology classes. College wasn’t particularly difficult, and while I worried as to where the money for med school would come from, a distant relative died at just the right time and left me enough to take care of it.

Even after I’d gone away to college I still rode Dorel—as sleek and shiny as ever—to Morrie’s office every year on my birthday, where we drank hot chocolate, played chess, and talked football.

“You graduate in June,” he remarked. “Then you do an internship and a residency.”

“That’s right.”

“You’ve thought about the area in which you would like to specialize?”

“I was thinking of dermatology. I figure nobody will ever call me in the middle of the night with a dermatological emergency.”

“Hm,” Morrie said, stirring his chocolate with a delicate bone which served us as a spoon. “When I suggested the medical profession I had something a little more basic in mind. Internal medicine, perhaps.”

A bat darted by, caught hold of Morrie’s cloak, crawling inside, and hanging upside down from a seam. I took a sip of chocolate, moved my bishop.

“A lot of hard work there,” I finally said. “Dermatologists make pretty good money.”

“Bah!” Morrie said. He moved a knight. “Check,” he added. “As an internist you will become the greatest consulting physician in the world.”

“Really?” I asked, and I studied the chess pieces.

“Yes. You will manage some miraculous-seeming cures.”

“Are you sure you’ve considered all the ramifications? If I get that good, I could be cutting into your business.”

Morrie laughed. “There is a balance between life and death, and in this we play our parts. For mine, really, is the power over life, as yours will be the power over death. Think of it as a family business.”

“All right. I’ll give it a shot,” I said. “By the way, I resign. You’ve got me in four moves.”

“Three.”

“Whatever you say. And thanks for the present, those diagnostic tools. I’ve never seen anything like them.”

“I’m sure they’ll come in handy. Happy Birthday,” he said.

And so I went off to a big hospital in a big city in the Northwest, to do my time. I saw Morrie more than ever there. Usually, he’d stop by when I was on the night shift.

“Hi, Dave. That one in Number Seven. She’ll be checking out at 3:12 A.M.,” he said, seating himself beside me. “Too bad about the fellow in Number Sixteen.”

“Ah, he was fading fast. We knew it was just a matter of time.”

“You could have saved that one, Dave.”

“We tried everything we knew.”

He nodded. “Guess you’re going to have to learn a few more things, then.”

“If you’re teaching, I’ll take notes,” I said.

“Not yet, but soon,” he responded. He reached out and touched my cup of coffee, which had long ago gone cold. It began to steam again. He rose and faced the window. “About time,” he said, and a moment later there came the blaring of a horn from the highway below, followed by the sound of a collision. “I’m needed,” he said. “Good night.” And he was gone.

He did not mention it again for a long while, and I almost thought he had forgotten. Then, one day the following spring—a sunny and deliriously balmy occasion—I went walking in the park. Suddenly, it seemed that I cast two shadows. Then one of them spoke to me:

“Lovely day, eh, Dave?”

I looked about. “Morrie, you’re very quiet when you come up on a person.”

“Indeed,” he said.

“You’re dressed awfully solemnly for such a fine, bright morning.”

“Working clothes,” he said.

“That’s why you’re carrying a long, sharp tool?”

“Right.”

We walked in silence for a time, passing through a field and into a grove of trees. Abruptly, he dropped to his knees at the foot of a small rise, extended his hands amid grasses, and spread them. Two small flowering plants lay between his extended forefingers and thumbs. No, what had seemed a pair of plants could now be seen as but one. What had misled me was that it bore both blue and yellow flowers. I regarded the leaves. I recalled a botany class I had once taken…

“Yes, study it,” he said.

“I can’t identify it,” I told him.

“I would be most surprised if you could. It is quite rare, and the only sure way to know it and to find it when you need it is by means of introduction and by words of summoning, which I shall teach you.”

“I see.”

“… And in your case it will be necessary to place samples under cultivation in your apartment. For you must learn its usages more deeply than any other who knows of it. Roots, leaves, stalks, flowers—each part has a separate virtue, and they can be made to work in a wide variety of combinations.”

“I do not understand. I’ve spent all this time getting a first-rate medical education. Now you want me to become an herbalist?”

He laughed.

“No, of course not. You need your techniques as well as your credentials. I am not asking you to abandon the methods you have learned for helping people, but merely to add another for… special cases.”

“Involving that little flower?”

“Exactly.”

“What is it called?”

“Bleafage. You won’t find it in any herbal or botany text. Come here and let me introduce you and teach you the words. Then you will remove it and take it to your home, to cultivate and become totally familiar with.”

I ate, drank, and even slept with the bleafage. Morrie stopped by periodically and instructed me in its use. I learned to make tinctures, poultices, salves, plasters, pills, wines, oils, liniments, syrups, douches, enemas, electuaries, and fomentations of every part and combination of parts of the thing. I even learned how to smoke it. Finally, I began taking a little of it to work with me every now and then and tried it on a number of serious cases, always with remarkable results.

My next birthday, Morrie took me to a restaurant in town, and afterward an elevator in the parking garage seemed to keep descending, finally releasing us in his office.

“Neat trick, that,” I said.

I followed him along a bright, winding tunnel, his invisible servants moving about us, lighting fresh candles and removing the remains of those which had expired. At one point, he stopped and removed a stump of a candle from a case, lit it from the guttering flame of one upon a ledge, and replaced the old one with the new one, just as the former went out.

“What did you just do, Morrie?” I asked. “I’ve never seen you replace one before.”

“I don’t do it often,” he answered. “But that woman you fed the bleafage to this afternoon—the one in 465—she’s just rallied.” He measured the candle stump between thumb and forefinger. “Six years, eight months, three days, seven hours, fourteen minutes, twenty-three seconds,” he observed. “That’s how much life you have bought her.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to study his face and failing, within the darting shadows.

“I’m not angry, if that’s what you’re looking for,” he said. “You must try the bleafage out if you’re to understand its power.”

“Tell me,” I said, “is it a power over life or a power over death that we are discussing?”

“That’s droll,” he said. “Is it one of those Zen things? I rather like it.”

“No, it was a serious question.”

“Well, mine is a power over life,” he said, “and vice versa. We’re sort of '*yin-yang'* that way.”

“But you’re not restricted to your specialty, not when you have this bleafage business going for you, too.”

“David, I can’t use the herb. I can only teach you about it. I require a human master of bleafage to use it for me.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Not entirely, I’m certain. Go ahead and experiment. It may seem that the people you treat with it all come to you by chance, but this will not always be the case.”

I nodded and studied the flowers.

“You have a question?” he asked.

“Yes. That candle stub you used for purposes of extending Mrs. Emerson, of Room 465, for six years, plus—How did it come to be snuffed out at just that point, rather than having burned itself all the way down? It’s almost as if you’d—snuffed someone— prematurely.”

“It is, isn’t it?” he said, grinning broadly. “As I mentioned, death *is* a power over life. Let’s have some coffee and our brandy now, shall we?”

I was more than a little puzzled by the way Morrie ran his business. But it was his show and he’d always been kind to me. He’d given me a whole new wardrobe for a birthday present, and when I completed my residency he gave me a new car. Dorel was still in fine fettle, but I needed a car once I began my practice. I moved Dorel to the rear of the garage and rode him only on the weekends. But I found myself going out there more and more, evenings, sitting on the high stool beside the workbench, popping the tab on a cold one and talking to my bike the way I had when I was a kid.

“Funny,” I said, “that *he* should give me a wonder drug for saving lives. On the other hand,” I reflected, “it’s obvious that he did sort of push me into medicine. Could it be that he wants control over the life-*giving* half of the yin-yang? Not just letting someone live, but assuring quality time by removing causes of suffering?”

Dorel’s frame creaked as he leaned slightly in my direction. His headlight blinked on, blinked off.

“Is that an affirmative?” I asked.

The blinking was repeated.

“Okay, I’ll take that as 'yes’ ” I said, “and two for 'no.'”

One blink followed.

“It would make a kind of sense,” I said, “for two reasons: First, back when I was still at the hospital, I gave a sample of bleafage to Dr. Kaufman, a biochemist, and asked him whether he could determine its major constituents. He died in the lab the next day, and a fire destroyed whatever he was working on. Later, I ran into Morrie in the morgue, and he told me that synthesizing bleafage was a no-no. He did not want it to become as common as aspirin or antibiotics. That would make it seem he only wanted certain persons to benefit.

“Second,” I continued, “I believe this guess was confirmed by the instructions he gave me when I set up in private practice.”

Morrie told me that I would get calls from all over for consultations. He never said where they’d get my name or number or why they’d want me, but he was right. They did start coming in. He told me to take my bleafage with me whenever I went, and my special diagnostic tools, but that the entire diagnosis and treatment—or lack of it—would be governed solely by a matter of personal perception. I can see Morrie when other people can’t. He said that in those special cases where I’m called in to consult he would enter the room. If he were to stand at the head of the bed, I was to diagnose and treat, and the patient would live. But if he stood at the foot, I was to perform a few routine tests and pronounce it a hopeless case.

“It almost seems as if there were an agenda, as if he had a special deal with some of my patients or a plan into which they fit.”

The light blinked once.

“Ah, you think so, too! Do you know what it is?”

It blinked twice, then a third time.

“Yes and no? You have some guesses, but you’re not sure?”

It blinked once.

“Of course, no matter what the reasons, I’m helping a lot of people who wouldn’t be helped otherwise.”

A single blink.

“Morrie once said that you’re working off a debt by being a bicycle.”

A single blink.

“I didn’t understand what he meant then, and I still don’t. Is there a way you could tell me?”

Again, a single blink.

“Well, what is it?”

Abruptly, Dorel rolled across the garage, leaned against the wall, and grew still and lightless. I gathered that meant that I had to figure it out for myself. I tried, too, but was interrupted by a phone call. Emergency. Not at the hospital, but one of those special emergency cases.

“This is Dr. Puleo, Dan Puleo. We met at that ER seminar this spring.”

“I remember,” I said.

“Speaking of emergencies…”

“You got one?”

“There’s a limousine on the way to pick you up.”

“To take me where?”

“The governor’s mansion.”

“This involves Caisson himself?”

“Yes.”

“How come he’s not in the hospital?”

“He will be, but you’re near and I think you can beat the ambulance.”

“I think I can beat the limo, too,” I said, “if I take the bike trail through the park.”

I hung up, snatched my med kit, ran back to the garage.

“We’ve got to get to the governor’s mansion fast,” I said to Dorel as I wheeled him out and mounted.

What followed was a blur. I remember dismounting and making my way shakily to the door. Somehow I was inside then, shaking hands with Puleo and being escorted into a bedroom—as the doctor said something about a bad bout of flu recently, kidney stones last year, and no history of heart problems. No vital signs at the moment either.

I stared at the figure on the bed—Lou Caisson, a reform governor who was doing a great job on a number of fronts his predecessor had let slide, as well as maintaining the previous administration’s gains. All that, and having an attractive, talented daughter like Elizabeth, as well. I had not seen her since we’d broken up back in school and headed for different parts of the country. As I moved forward to begin my examination, I felt a guilty pang. I had let Morrie break us up, with his insistence that I attend a West Coast med school after I’d been accepted at the one with the Eastern university she was to attend.

Speaking of Morrie…

A shadow slid forward and Morrie stood at the foot of the bed. He was shaking his head.

I checked for a carotid pulse. There was none. I raised an eyelid…

Suddenly, I was mad. As I heard the sirens in the distance, I was swept by a wave of anger over every decision in my life that Morrie had influenced. In an instant, looking back, I saw just how manipulated I had been with all his little bribes and attentions. I opened my med kit and placed it on the bed.

“Are you going to treat him?” Puleo asked.

I leaned forward, slid my arms beneath Caisson, picked him up. I backed away then, walked around the foot of the bed behind Morrie, and laid him back down again, this time with Morrie standing at his head. I reached across and picked up my kit.

“I can’t take any responsibility—” Puleo began.

I filled the long syringe.

“If I treat him right now, he’ll live,” I said. “If I don’t, he’ll die. It’s as simple as that.”

I unbuttoned Caisson’s pajama top and opened it.

“David, don’t do it!” Morrie said.

I did it—3 cc’s of tincture of bleafage, intracardially. I heard the ambulance pull up out front.

When I straightened, Morrie was glaring at me. He turned away then and walked out of the room without even bothering to use the door. I heard Caisson gasp. When I checked his carotid again the pulse was present. A moment later he opened his eyes. I put my kit away and buttoned his shirt.

“You’ll be all right,” I said to him.

“What course of treatment is indicated now?” Puleo asked.

“Put him in the ICU and watch him for twenty-four hours. If he’s okay after that, you can do whatever you want with him.”

“What about continuing medication?”

“Negative,” I said. “Excuse me. I have to go now.”

When I turned away she was standing there.

“Hi, Betty,” I said.

“David,” she said, “is he going to be all right?”

“Yes.” I paused, then, “How’ve you been?”

“Oh, pretty well.”

I started toward the door, then stopped.

“Could we talk for a minute, in private?” I asked.

She led me to a little sitting room, where we sat.

“I wanted you to know I’ve been missing you for a long time,” I said, “and I’m sorry about the way I broke up with you. I suppose you’ve got a boyfriend now?”

“I take it that means you’re unencumbered yourself?”

“That’s right.”

“And if I am, too?”

“I’d like to go out with you again. Get to know you again. Is there any possibility? Might you be interested?”

“I could tell you that I’m going to have to think about it. But that wouldn’t be true. I have thought about it, and the answer is yes, I will go out with you.”

When I reached out and squeezed her hand, she returned the pressure. We sat and talked for the next two hours and made a date to go out the next night.

Riding back through the park, in the dark, I switched on Dorel’s headlight and was reminded of our earlier “conversation.”

“Talk! Damn you!” I said. “I want your opinion!”

“All right.”

“What?”

“I said, 'All right.' What do you want to know?”

“How come you wouldn’t talk to me earlier?”

“I could only talk if you ordered me to. This is the first time you have.”

“What are you—really?”

“I was a physician he’d trained in early nineteenth-century Virginia. Name’s Don Laurel. I did something he didn’t like. Manufactured and sold a patent medicine—Laurel’s Bleafage Tonic.”

“Must have helped some people he didn’t want helped.”

“Aye, and maybe a few horses, too.”

“I just saved someone he didn’t want saved.”

“I don’t know what to tell you—except that I was arrogant and insolent when he confronted me concerning the medicine, and I wound up as transportation. You might want to try a different track.”

“Thanks,” I said, plucking a quarter from under the headlight and flipping it. “Tails. I will.”

Of course, Morrie came by later.

“Evening,” I said. “Care for a cup of tea?”

“David, how could you?” he asked. “I’ve been good to you, haven’t I? How could you go against my express wishes that way?”

“I’m sorry, Morrie,” I said. “I did it because I felt sorry for the guy—starting off with such a great year in office, particularly those health care programs, putting all those fat-cat business interests in their place, and being taken out of the game so suddenly. And— Well, I used to date his daughter. I still like her, as a matter of fact, and I felt sorry for her, too. That’s why I did it.”

He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed it.

“David, you’re a good-hearted boy,” he said. “It’s hard to fault a man for compassion, but in my line of work it can be a liability. You’re going to have to be ruled by your head, not your heart, when you’re working my cases, you understand?”

“Yes, Morrie.”

“Okay, let’s have that cup of tea and talk football.”

Three days later I was doing some work around the house when the phone rang. I recognized the governor’s voice immediately.

“How are you feeling, sir?” I asked.

“Fine, and I know I owe you a lot, but that’s not why I’m calling,” he said.

I knew it. Before he said another word, I could feel it coming: Morrie’s revenge. My test.

“Emergency?” I said.

“That’s right. It’s Betty, and from what Puleo told me about my seizure this sounds like the same thing. He didn’t say anything about its being contagious.”

“I’ll be right over.”

“Should I call an ambulance?”

“No.”

I hung up, got my kit, went for Dorel. As we headed through the park, I told him what had happened.

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

“You know what I’m going to do.”

“I was afraid of that.”

And so, as I checked her over, Morrie entered the room and stood at the foot of the bed. I drew 3 cc’s into the syringe, then I turned her around.

“David, I forbid it,” he said.

“Sorry, Morrie,” I told him, and I administered the injection.

When she opened her eyes, I leaned down and kissed her, at about the same time that I felt Morrie’s hand upon my shoulder. This time his grip was icy.

“Me, too,” he said.

… And then we were walking in total silence through a dim place of constantly shifting shadows.

I seem to recall moving amid pieces of my world, in monochrome, as well as the way into his, down under the ground, of caves, tunnels, still pools. I knew we were arrived when we entered a tunnel lined with candles and followed it to that bright and massive central grotto where we had played so long at chess and drunk so much chocolate.

Passing through that vast gallery I seemed to acquire solidity once more. My footfalls created echoes. I felt again that cold grip which steered me. Some of the shadows fell aside, like drawn curtains.

Morrie took me through the grotto, up a corridor, then down a small, chilly tunnel off to its left which I had never visited before. I was too proud to ask him where we were headed and so be the first to speak.

At length, we halted, and he released my arm and gestured.

Jamming my cold hands into my pockets, I followed the gesture but could not at first tell what he was indicating, as we stood in a fairly average area of his office, ledges and niches full of candles. Then I saw that one of them was much lower than all of the others and was flickering now, preparatory to guttering. Assuming it to be Betty’s, I waited to see it replaced by the action of one of the invisible entities.

“It was worth it,” I said. “I love her, you know.”

He turned and stared at me. Then he chuckled.

“Oh, no,” he said. “You think that that’s her candle? No. You don’t understand. She’ll live. You’ve seen to that. Her candle is already in good shape. This is *your* candle. You started out kind of handicapped in that regard. Sorry.”

I withdrew a hand from my pocket, reached out, touched it gently.

“You mean that’s all I have? Maybe a few minutes? And you didn’t mess with it because you’re mad at me? That’s *really* the way it is?”

“That’s right,” he said.

I licked my lips.

“Any—uh—chance of an—extension?” I asked.

“When you’ve crossed my will a second time, after I’d warned you?”

“I didn’t do it lightly,” I said. “I told you I’d known Betty years ago, and I cared about her then. I didn’t realize how much until just recently, when it was almost too late. There was no real choice then. I had to save her. Perhaps such emotions are something you cannot quite understand—”

He laughed again.

“Of course I can understand caring about something,” he said. “Why do you think I’d decided to take Governor Caisson right when I did? The son of a bitch’s business policies had just cost the town a pro football franchise—for my favorite team. And I’d been angling to get them here for over a generation.”

“So you *were* grabbing him off early?”

“You bet I was. Then you had to butt in for the first time in your life.”

“I begin to understand… Say, Morrie, you know it’s not too late to transfer my flame to a fresh candle.”

“True,” he acknowledged, “and you *are* my godson. That still counts for something…”

He stared a moment longer at the candle.

“Probably should,” he said. “Shouldn’t stay mad forever. Family counts for something,” and he stooped and reached into an opened case back in a recess in the wall.

Drawing forth a candle, he stood and reached forward with his other hand toward my sputtering taper. He touched it, began to raise it. Then I saw it slip from his fingers and plunge groundwards.

“Shit!” I heard Morrie say as it fell. “Sorry, David—”

Lying on the floor, watching a tiny spark, feeling that something had worked properly, not recalling what… And my cheekbone was sore where I’d hit it when I fell—

I lay amid countless lights. There were things I had to do, and do quickly. What were they?

I raised my head and looked about. Morrie was gone…

Ah, yes. Morrie, my godfather. Gone…

I placed my palms upon the floor and pushed myself up. Nobody there but me, a guttering candle, and a black bicycle. What was it I was supposed to remember? My mind felt heavy and slow.

“Get a candle out of the box, David! Hurry!” Dorel told me. “You’ve got to take the flame from the other before it dies again.”

*Dies again…*

Then I remembered and shuddered. That’s what I had done—died. And I would do it again and for keeps if I didn’t act quickly. Fearing the worst, I had been able to buy this brief recurrence of the light, finally finding a use for the Five-Minute Time Warp I kept in my pocket. But how long it would last, lying there, sputtering, upon the floor, I could not tell.

I moved with accelerated deliberation—that is to say, as fast as I felt I could without disturbing the air to the point of ending the enterprise. It was just a piece of wick in an irregular puddle of wax now.

I groped in the carton, took out a candle, moved it to a position above the failing flame, held it there. For a second, the first one nearly died and my vision darkened and a numbness passed over me. But it caught, and these symptoms vanished. I turned it upright then and rose to my feet, groping once again in my pocket. I carried dried stems, flowers, roots, and leaves of bleafage wrapped in a handkerchief.

I placed the handkerchief on Dorel’s seat and unfolded it.

“Good idea,” he suggested as I began eating the specimens. “But as soon as you’re finished I want to lead you to another tunnel where we can hide your candle amid many. We ought to hurry, though, in case he’s still in the area.”

I stuffed the last of the bleafage into my mouth and set off walking beside him, carrying my candle.

“Could you locate Betty’s candle and hide it, too?” I asked.

“Given the time, the appropriate form, and the access,” he said.

I followed him down another tunnel.

“I used to work here,” he went on. “I was an invisible entity before he made me a bike. If I were an invisible entity here again I could keep moving your candle and Betty’s so that he’d never know. I could correct any number of his petty abuses the way I used to. Might keep lighting you new ones, too, if you got into bleafage research.”

“I could be persuaded,” I said. “What would it take to make you an invisible entity again?”

“I’m not permitted to say.”

“Even if I order you?”

“Even then. This is a different category of restriction. I can’t think of a way to tell you how to get around this one.”

We moved a little farther down the tunnel and he halted.

“To your left,” he said, “in that low niche where several others are burning.”

I dribbled a little wax to anchor it, set it upon that spot, held it in place till it was fixed.

“Mount,” Dorel said then.

I climbed onto the seat, and we coasted through a series of chambers. Soon the stroboscopic effect began again.

“Back to where you were?” Dorel asked.

“Yes.”

After a time, the upper world flashed into being for longer and longer intervals, as the underworld diminished.

Then we were slowing before the governor’s mansion. Then we were halted there. I was dismounting. There was still some daylight, though the sun hovered just above the western horizon. As I was setting the kickstand, I heard the front door open.

“Dave!” she called.

I looked up, watched her approach down the stair. I realized again how lovely she was, how much I wanted to protect her. In a moment, she was in my arms.

“Dave, what happened? You just sort of faded away.”

“My godfather, Morrie, took me. I’d done something he didn’t like.”

“Your godfather? You never mentioned him before. How could he do that?”

“He is a person of great power over life,” I said, “who is responsible for whatever power I possess over death. Fortunately, he thinks I’m dead now. So I believe I’ll have some reconstructive surgery, change the spelling of my name, grow a beard, move to another state, and run a small, low-key practice to cover the expense of my bleafage research. I love you. Will you marry me and come along?”

Dorel said, “I hate to tell you that you sound a little crazy, Dave, but you do.”

She stared at my bike.

“Are you a ventriloquist, too?” she asked me.

“No, that was Dorel talking. He just saved my life. He’s a rebel spirit doing time as a bicycle, and he’s been with me since I was a kid. Saved my life a couple of times then, too.” I reached out and patted his seat.

Descending the steps, she leaned forward and kissed the top of the handlebars.

“Thanks, Dorel,” she said, “whatever you are.”

Whatever he was, it was no longer a bicycle. He fell apart in the days-end light into a swirling collection of golden motes. I watched, fascinated, as the phenomenon resolved itself into a tower about six feet in height, narrowing as it grew.

I heard Betty draw in a long breath.

“What did I just set off?” she asked.

“Beats me,” I said. “But since there was no frog I don’t think you get a prince.”

“Guess I’m stuck with you then,” she said, and we watched the bright whirlwind assemble itself into a human shape—that of a tall, bewhiskered man in buckskins.

He bowed to Betty.

“Don Laurel,” he said. “At your service, ma'am.”

Then he turned and shook my hand.

“Sorry to deprive you of transportation, Dave,” he said. “But I just got my enchantment broken.”

“Calls for a celebration,” I said.

He shook his head.

“Now that I’m unbiked I have to find a niche quick,” he said, “or I’ll fade to airy nothingness. So I’ll be heading back below, and I’ll take up residence in the caves. He’ll never spot an extra invisible entity. And I’ll keep moving both of your candles out of his way. Good luck with the bleafage work. I’ll be in touch.”

With that, he turned once more into a tower of light. The motes darted like fireflies and were gone.

“That’s a relief,” I said, moving once more to embrace her. “But I wish things had gone differently with Morrie. I like him. I’m going to miss him.”

“He doesn’t exactly sound like a nice guy,” she observed.

“His line of work hardens him a bit,” I explained. “He’s actually quite sensitive.”

“How can you tell?”

“He likes football and chess.”

“They both represent violence—physical, and abstract.”

“… And hot chocolate. And Schubert’s Quartet in D Minor. And he does care about the balance between life and death, most of the time.”

She shook her head.

“I know he’s family,” she said. “But he scares me.”

“Well, we’re going incognito now. He shan’t be a problem.”

I was able to leave it at that for a long time. Betty and I were married, and I did change my name and move to a small town in the South—though I opted against cosmetic surgery. The beard and tinted glasses and a different hairstyle altered my appearance considerably, or so I thought. I built up a satisfactory practice, had a greenhouse full of bleafage, and set up a small home laboratory. For over a year I managed not to be present at life-and-death crises, and when visiting my patients in hospital I was able to avoid other patients at terminal moments which might have resulted in an undesired family reunion. You might say I was pathologically circumspect in this regard; even so, I did glimpse Morrie going around corners on a few occasions.

I kept wondering, though, given my line of work, when—not if—we would meet, and whether I would be able to carry the encounter with sufficient aplomb so as not to reveal that I possessed the ability to see him. When it did occur, of course, it was nowhere near the hospital, and I was not even thinking of these matters.

It was a Saturday evening in October and I heard the squeal of brakes followed by the sound of a heavy impact up the street from our home. I grabbed my bag and a flashlight and was out the door in moments. Betty followed me as I hurried to the corner where two cars had collided. Broken glass was everywhere and the smell of gasoline was strong.

Each vehicle had but a driver. One was obviously dead, and the other—a younger man—was badly injured, but still breathing.

“Go call 911!” I shouted to Betty as I moved to succor the second man. He had been thrown from the car and lay upon the pavement, a massive, well-muscled individual with a bubbly pneumothorax, heavy arterial bleeding, numerous lesser lacerations, a possibly broken back, and fractured skull.

As I slapped a cover on the pneumothorax and moved to deal with the bleeding a familiar figure was suddenly beside me. I forgot to pretend to be unseeing. In the press of the moment, I simply nodded, and said, “Can’t argue with you about this one. Take him if you must.”

“No,” he said. “Save him for me, Dave. Shoot him up with bleafage. You’ve got all the time you need.”

“What’s so special about him, Morrie? I haven’t forgotten how you treated me when I wanted to make an exception.”

“All right. I’ll forgive and forget if you’ll do the same—and save this guy. My power, as I’ve often said, is not over death.”

“Then how’s about you promise to let me save whom I can, and do whatever I would with the bleafage?”

“Looks like you’re doing that, anyway. But all right, I’ll make it formal.”

“I wish you could have been at my wedding, Morrie.”

“I was there.”

“You were? I didn’t see you.”

“I was in the back. I wore bright colors so you wouldn’t notice.”

“That guy in the Hawaiian shirt?”

“Yes, that was me.”

“I’ll be damned.”

“And I sent you the microwave oven.”

“There was no card with it—”

“Well, we weren’t talking.”

“I did wonder about the Heat of Hell brand name. Good oven, though, I’ll give you that. Thanks.”

My patient moaned.

“About this guy, Morrie— Why are you so dead set against taking him?”

“You don’t recognize him?”

“Too much blood on his face.”

“That’s the new quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons.”

“No kidding. But what about the balance between life and death and all that?”

“They’re really going to need him this season.”

“I forgot you were a Falcons fan.”

“The bleafage, boy, the bleafage.”

And so… The Falcons are doing well this season, not the least because of their new quarterback. Not too many people die during Falcons’ games, because Morrie comes by for beer and pizza and we watch them on the tube together. He collects with a vengeance afterward, though, if the Falcons don’t do well. Read the obits.

Morrie hints strongly that he’d like to know what I did with the candles. But he can keep on wondering.

Don Laurel and I stay in touch. He comes by every Halloween for a glass of blood and we bring each other up to date on everything from bleafage to candies. And sometimes he changes into a bicycle for old times’ sake, and we ride between the worlds.

This morning I walked back to the crossroads where the accident had occurred. Morrie was standing beside a lamppost petting a dead cat.

“Morning, Dave.”

“Morning. You’re up bright and early.”

“Thought you might be coming by. When’s she due?”

“In the spring.”

“You really want me for godfather?”

“Can’t think of anyone I’d rather have. Was that the same dream you sent my dad?”

“No. It’s a remake. I updated it. Been watching some MTV.”

“Kind of thought so. Care for a cup of coffee?”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

We walked home as the morning shadows fled. Whoever catches them may make himself a cloak of darkness.