

Transformation*

By Stephen J. Davies

"The rich live differently; I guess they die differently, too."

From the movie "The Black Dahlia".

After the gang attacked my wife, I knew I had to do something.

"Stay at home," I told her. "It's too dangerous on the roads."

"But I want to go back to work," she insisted. "We need the money."

"Are you sure you're ready?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've just had a transplant."

"So what? I feel fine."

"But –"

"But what?" she asked, her cheeks a little flushed. "You think I'm too old for work? Is that it?"

There was a slight pause. I noticed she was breathing heavily.

"No, Martha," I said. "Of course you're not too old."

She held out her hand: "Well, give me the car keys then."

"Just make sure you drive in the fast lane," I said, smiling.

After breakfast, I watched her reverse the car, a Korbus 2, out of the garage. The solar plates on the car roof shone in the cold morning light: it was an economy model from the Mother Earth range – but, driven flat out, it was still fast enough.

Martha waved goodbye to me, accelerated down the exit ramp, and powered up the street.

After she'd gone, I went back inside the house to check my email and finish my morning coffee. I was working the afternoon shift, so I had a little free time.

But, about thirty minutes later, I heard the car on the ramp again.

Next, the front door de-sealed.

"They've attacked me again," Martha said, stepping into the kitchen.

"Where?" I asked her.

"On the speedway. Near the intersection."

"Are you okay?"

"I think so."

"What about the car?"

"There's a big dent in the back."

"You think it was the same gang?"

Martha nodded, her eyes a little tearful now. "But this time they yelled at me. They called me a 'fucking senile'."

The ugly curse words hung in the air.

"Were you in the fast lane?"

Martha shook her head. "I was too scared."

"Then stop driving."

* A special thanks to: Subarno Chattarji, Bern Mulvey, Micheal Thompson, Debra Occhi, and Peter Verbeek.

"But how will I get to work? You know it's too dangerous on the streets." Her voice wavered a little.

I stood up, crossed the room, and gave her a hug. She felt frail and bony under my fingers. "I'll talk to Lenny," I said. "He might be able to help."

"John, they think I'm finished," she said, sobbing now. "I don't want to be forced off the road by thugs. If only..."

"If only...what?" I asked gently.

"If only the transplant had worked."

'Don't be silly,' I reassured her, trying not to think about the web of purple scars that stretched across her chest ...

Later, I put on a necktie – Cybertech College, a gift from Martha's father – and drove to the local garage. Some people said the gangs took pay-offs, that they could be bought. I figured that if anyone knew about this stuff, Lenny would.

"Hi John," Lenny said, standing up and holding out his hand.

I looked around the workshop. There were several rows of shiny tools on the wall, and a power drill was lying next to the top-of-the-range Korbus 8 that Lenny had been working on.

"What can I do for you? Is Martha okay?"

"What do you mean?"

Lenny level-gazed me for a few seconds. "Hell, John, I was only asking. I know she's been in hospital and all."

"Martha was attacked," I told him. "On the road."

He stiffened slightly. "I can fix the car. You know that."

"Lenny, come on. What's going on? It's the second time she's been hit. How much will it cost to call the gang off?"

Lenny shrugged. "How bad is the car?"

"Just a dent in the back. Nothing serious. But how do I find the gang?"

Lenny shook his head: "They don't usually negotiate. Not these days, anyway."

"Why not?"

Lenny glanced towards the garage door, then pointed at the small office at the back of the workshop. "You want some coffee?" he asked me.

"Sure."

In the office, Lenny told me what he knew. He said the garages were making money by claiming the wrecked cars were write-off's, then fixing them up and selling them on. And the hospitals were making money too, if the victim still had any useable organs. Some people said the hospitals were even financing the gangs, but Lenny didn't know about that. Still, he would see what he could find out. Until then, he had a suggestion for me. A sales guy from an agency had left his card at the garage. He pressed the card into my hand. He said the guy could sort something out for Martha.

As soon as I'd finished talking with Lenny, I drove to the agency. It was on a wide, tree-lined street not far from the clinic where Martha had her first operation.

I parked in front of the main building, and walked towards the entrance.

Above the door was a sign that said: 'Sweet Sunsets'.

I crossed the plush carpet to a desk where a young man was sitting in front of a computer screen.

"Jed Stone," he said, holding out his hand. "How may I help you, sir? Do you have a loved one in need of assistance?"

"Maybe," I said, feeling uneasy. Jed had the tanned confidence that youth and money bring. "I think you know a friend of mine. His name is Lenny."

Jed smiled. "The garage mechanic? Sure, he's doing some work on my car... Why don't you sit down?" he asked, pointing at a chair.

As I sat down, Jed pushed a glossy magazine towards me.

On the cover was a picture of an elderly couple of retirees drinking glasses of champagne. Nearby, some fat lobsters were roasting on a charcoal grill. In the background, a tropical sun was setting over the ocean.

"Now, I'm guessing that you're looking for a Sunset Package? For a loved one? Well, you've come to the right place. Just look at the enormous range of options in that brochure. By the way, I take it the loved one is still mobile?"

"Is this a resort?" I asked him. "It looks kinda fancy."

"...In a way, yes. You could call it that. Now, why don't I run through some of the choices, Mr...?"

"Smith," I said, "John Smith."

"Excellent, John. Let's start with the top of the range. Always go for the best, I say. Look at page 37. These are what we call our 'Themed Departures'. For instance, we can arrange for a sporting event to go wrong – a capsized canoe, maybe, or a parachute that doesn't open. A while ago, we even had someone fired out of a canon into a brick wall."

"We're talking about my wife," I said. "She's 89."

"Your wife?"

"Yes. I don't think she'll go for anything athletic."

"Why not? Have you consulted her?"

"I don't need to. That's not her style."

"People might look old, Mr. Smith, but that doesn't mean they want to finish old. Anyway, we have plenty of other options. Is your wife a movie fan by any chance?"

"Yes. And her name is Martha, by the way."

"A very nice name. Now, we have a number of movie simulations that have proved to be very popular with our customers. And we can also arrange some modifications if you like, so the loved one can make a personal and stylish exit from the main stage. Let me give you an example. A few years ago, an elderly spinster, a history professor, asked if she could play the part of Deborah Kerr in the final scene in 'From Here to Eternity'. You know, the one where she is having that passionate kiss with Burt Lancaster on the beach? Anyway, the professor wanted it arranged so that she fell asleep in Burt's arms. And it all went very well, only the stand-in actor said she'd bitten his chest in her final spasm."

"Final spasm?"

"Sorry," Jed said, coughing.

I looked at the brochure. In the top corner was a table of prices. "100,000 dollars? To suffocate on a beach?"

Jed frowned. "I said we'd start at the top. Of course we have other options. Our standard is called 'Dinner Delights'. We can arrange for any kind of locale," he added. "As you can imagine, the tropical setting is the most popular. We get the couple to sit for a final photo together – included in the package, of course – then, when they are feeling nice and cosy, the Finalizer sends the loved one to eternity."

"How?"

Jed lowered his voice. "Well, that depends. We have a number of closure methods. A plasma bullet in the back of the head is quick and painless. But neurotoxins are also good. We have a variety of designer brands, synthesized from natural venoms: snake, centipede, stonefish...you name it."

"And what's the cost of these...methods?"

"Well, we have a number of factors to consider. We out-source the Finalizers, and they don't come cheap. If we use neurotoxin, we need to test for contra-indicators. I mean if the loved one has a weak liver, it could get fried before the brain shuts down."

"How about hearts?"

"Hearts?"

"Yes. Martha's just had her fourth transplant. And it looks like her body is rejecting it."

Jed looked puzzled. He leaned back and put his hands behind his head. "I don't understand," he said, finally. "Hearts are the easiest to fix. Why don't you fit her with an Ever-Lasting battery model? They've been on the market for ten years already. Martha would be guaranteed another fifty years of good health. As a matter-of-fact, I've just bought one for my father's birthday. Of course, you would still be able to buy our Sunset Package for Martha. That way, you'll benefit from buying at today's prices. Just like a futures option. It's a total win-win situation."

"We don't have that kind of money."

"But you're a Cybertech graduate. You're wearing the tie. I noticed it as soon as you sat down. It pays to notice these things, you see. I had a friend who went to Cybertech and he told me their graduates make at least 300k at entry-level. Beats the hell out of this job."

It was my turn to smile. "The tie was a gift. From Martha's father. I never went to Cybertech."

"Is he still alive?"

"No."

Jed glanced at his watch. "I see," he said, frowning. "Then I guess you won't be needing that." He held out his hand.

I gave him the brochure.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Smith," he said. "Now, if there's nothing else..."

"Martha's been attacked," I told him. "Twice. I want her to go with...dignity."

Jed exhaled heavily. "Do you have any money at all?" he asked, reaching for a notepad.

"A little."

"Any collateral?"

"There's the house. My car. Not much else."

"What about you?"

"Me?"

"Have you had any major operations?"

"No."

"Any transplanted organs?"

"No."

"Blood diseases? Bone disorders? Lung trouble?"

"No."

"How old are you?"

"75."

“A lot younger than Martha. Based on what you’ve told me, you could live for another fifty years. How will you survive if you sell the house?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

As I drove away from the agency, I thought about Martha. I wanted to help her...I wanted...

The car phone rang. I flicked the speaker button to the ‘on’ position, and listened to the answer phone taking the message.

It was Lenny from the garage. “John, you there? I’ve talked to someone who thinks he can do a deal. He wants fifty thousand up front, the rest later. He thinks he can get the gang to hold off for the time being, but he says there’s someone at the hospital who is in the loop. A guy up there is giving out information to the gang, telling them stuff about patients. So, like I said before, the gangs are getting money from the repair shops and the hospitals. He says the gang know Martha has a rare blood type, am I right?”

I switched the phone off.

I slowed at some red traffic lights. There was a young traffic cop standing next to the lights who looked a bit like Martha had when I first met her...

I remember the day well. I was sitting in the Personal Enhancement Center, waiting for a consultation with my new life coach. A few weeks earlier, I’d signed up for a course of transformational therapy, and I was looking forward to my first session.

“Mr. Smith?”

“Yes.”

“This way please.”

A receptionist – all hair and teeth – led me towards a cubicle where a life coach was checking data on a screen. The coach stood up as I approached her desk.

“Hi. My name is Martha. I’m going to help you overcome your self-defeating behavior.”

Back then, Martha talked like that. She tried to convince me I could handle ‘high-stakes situations’, that I could win my ‘inner resolution game’.

But during our next session, a week later, she told me I was her very first client. “You see, John, I need your transformation to work,” she said, smiling. “For both of us.”

Somehow, I must have convinced her that I could transform myself, because a few months after that we were talking about marriage.

The real problem, though, was Martha’s father. He was a high-level, Tier-3 worker, who only wanted the best for his daughter.

Of course, I told him I was going to get to the top, that I would make Tier-2 before I was thirty. And Martha must have persuaded him I would do okay because we were married in the fall of the same year.

Then, after he died, her inheritance money got us through some bad times. The worst was when my business went under – I guess, in the end, I was never cut out to be a manager.

Martha’s symptoms started about six months after that. She was always tired. She had a cough. She couldn’t sleep.

We went to see a doctor. He listened to her chest, made some notes on a pad, and gave Martha a prescription for some pills.

“The heart’s not right,” the doctor told her the next time we went to see him. “We’re gonna have to put a new one in. It’ll cost 100 grand. Talk to reception. They’ll sort out the details.”

"Don't worry about me," Martha said, when they took her to the theater for the first operation.

Later, in the recovery room, as I lifted a cup of water to her lips, I tried not to look at the chest drain they'd put in her, or at the bag of blood by the side of the bed.

I'd lost track of how many operations she'd had since that one, of how much it had all cost. Martha had already cashed in her pension plan, but things were still very tight. We both needed to work to pay the bills, but there was no way she could take any more surgery... she was so frail...

The light turned to green, and the cop waved me forward. I drove on until I reached Turn 27, then slowed at the exit.

It took about 20 minutes to reach the house. I parked the car on the ramp, and de-sealed the front door.

The hallway was quiet. I guessed Martha was upstairs resting, so I decided to make some coffee. I went into the kitchen and put the kettle on.

Just then the phone rang.

"Mr. Smith? This is Jed. We were talking about a Sunset Package for your wife? Well, I've come up with a great deal. We can offer you the Tropical Dinner Delights, after all."

He sounded pleased with himself.

"What about the cost?" I asked him. "Are you offering me some kind of discount?"

There was a slight pause, a crackle on the line. "In a way, yes. Here's what we can do. We can fly you to the departure site, we can fix up the hotel, and we can provide the Finalizer. Then, when the job's done, we'll fly you back."

"You still haven't told me about the cost."

"Don't worry about that. The company will sort out the details."

"How?"

"We need your organs, Mr. Smith. All of them. Of course it will be done in the hospital. And you'll be sedated beforehand. You won't feel a thing."

"And afterwards?"

"We'll cremate you with your wife. It will look like you bought the Sunset Package together."

"You mean my organs will cover all the expenses? I've already told you I'm 75. My organs can't be worth that much."

"You're right - we'll need your house, the car, and anything else you have of value."

"So there'll be nothing left? After a lifetime of work?"

"Think of it this way, Mr. Smith. Your organs will help other people, and Martha can stop worrying about that gang."

"... I need to sort out a few details," I told him. "Then I'll call you back."

The kettle was boiling, and I wanted to get off the phone.

After I'd replaced the receiver, I made two coffees and put them on a tray.

Martha was awake when I walked into the bedroom. She looked like she'd been crying again.

"Who were you talking to?" she asked. "I heard you on the phone."

I looked out of the window. Heavy rain was falling from dark, broken clouds.

"I've booked us a vacation," I said. "Somewhere nice and sunny."