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Darvon, Kansas

When my uncle died we read his will in the hall because his lawyer, C. Todd, was in a hurry to get to a convention of the Slightly Disturbed in Provo. The Slightly Disturbed is an organization designed to support those who have come close to severe mental illness but not enough to join an encounter group for their specific malady. That's where the S.D. steps in, filling that particular void.

"And to my nephew Roger," C. Todd read, "I leave all my stock in Nostrum, Inc." C. Todd looked up. "That's 51 percent, you know. You control the company."

I was disappointed. Uncle Ray owned a Porsche. "What about the car?"

"The car?" C. Todd asked.

"The car, the Porsche," I said.

C. Todd laughed. "You don't get it, do you? You've just inherited 51 percent of Nostrum, Inc. You're worth a fortune. Go buy a Porsche. Buy three, if you like." He slipped on some Spanish wraparound sunglasses, and opened the door. I followed him out.

"So this Nostrum company ... where is it? What do they do?"

C. Todd's beeper erupted furiously. "Todd, call Marshall. We've got a date," it said. He looked at me. "Pharmaceuticals."

"What, drugs?" I said.

He got into his car. I could see my reflection in his sunglasses. "I think. Ray never said much about it."

"Where is it located? I'd like to check it out."

He rifled through some papers on the passenger seat. "Here we go," he said, producing a business card. I read it. "Nostrum, Inc. Makers of Fine Pharmaceuticals. Ray Trainer. Darvon, Kansas."

"Darvon, Kansas?" I said.

C. Todd gunned the Mercedes. "Right, that's right. Kansas."

"Think I should go there?"

"Sure," he said, dropping it into first. "Check it out."

I couldn't find a flight directly to Darvon, so I flew into Topeka and rented a car. The scenery was nice, but it was far out in the country and I got badly lost on my way there. I stopped at a BP

station by the two-lane highway I was on to ask for directions.

"Darvon?" the old guy said. He was wearing a beaten baseball cap and had a huge wad of tobacco nestled in his cheek, a wad so impressive it seemed he had a tumor the size of a baseball festering beneath his molars. "Darvon, Kansas?"

"Right," I said. "Is it further down this road?"

He spat. "Why you want to go to Darvon?"

"I -- I've got relatives there. My niece, Shirley. She lives there."

"Ain't no one got relatives in Darvon." He leaned closer, his gnarled skull invading my car. "It's weird," he whispered conspiratorially.

"Weird?"

"Yeah, weird," he said. To my astonishment, he lit a cigarette. He was obviously some kind of tobacco fiend.

"Well, is it down the road?"

"Yep."

"And I'll see it?"

He spat, then blew out smoke. Inside his brain, the tobacco-processing center must have been gyrating madly. "Can't miss it," he said.

There it was, about twenty miles farther. The sign said "Darvon, Kansas. Home of the WORLD'S LARGEST TRANQUILIZER. Come see us!" I drove into town.

It was at Estelle's La Grille France that I first noticed what the nicotine-mad station attendant meant. Something was strange about Darvon. Not something glaring, like a bomb crater, but something subtle. Something just sort of skewed. For example, everything on the menu was preceded by "Le" or "La." It said things like "Le Cheeseburger," "La Pork & Beans," "Le Corned Beef Hash." The waitress had an immense beehive and was happily chomping gum.

I was sitting at the counter, and had a cup of coffee and Le Apple Pie Slice. There was a man two stools over from me, and he began staring me fiercely down, a deep scowl etched on his face. It was making me very uncomfortable.

"You here to see it?" he said at last.

I quickly looked at him. "What?"

"It. You know." He held his hands about a foot and a half

apart, then nodded.

"I don't understand," I said. What? A fish?

"It. The trunk."

"The tank?" A World War II monument, maybe? In miniature?

"The trunk. The tranquilizer."

Aha. "No, not really."

"What, you don't like it?" Estelle said from the end of the counter. "You don't like the tranquilizer?"

"No, no," I said, "it's not that. I'm in town on business."

"Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should," the man offered, and lit a cigarette. Estelle walked down the counter to where I was sitting.

"You know," she said, "you could take some time out to see it. It's just down the street, at Nostrum headquarters."

"Really?" I said. "That's where I'm going. I'm Roger Trainer, Ray's nephew."

The man looked at me. "You kin to Ray?" he said.

"That's right. I'm the new owner."

"That's good," he said. "You like TV?"

"Pardon?"

"TV. You like to watch it?"

"Sure," I said.

"That's good," Estelle said merrily.

I drove down to Nostrum HQ. It was an otherwise nondescript brick building that was painted such a fluorescent shade of blue that it was probably visible from space. With the sun shining on it, I had to avert my eyes as I made my way up the walk. The company motto, I guess, was painted on the door.

"There's never anything wrong with Nostrum," it said.

There was a secretary in the foyer, watching a small portable television and blowing on her nails. I cleared my throat several times but got no response.

"Miss?" I said at last. "Hello, miss?"

She looked up. "What?"

"I'm Roger Trainer. I'm the new owner here."

"Oh. Do you want to see it?"

I was onto this now. "Yes, please," I said.

"Okay, okay, Sally. Just sit tight," I said. I picked up the phone and called the number myself. "We're sorry," the pleasant female recorded voice said, "but there is no long distance. Have a relaxing day."

I left the office and followed Sally's directions to City Hall. I thought the mayor might be able to clear up some of this confusion that Darvon was obviously plagued with. I walked right into his modest office; in a lot of small towns, mayors don't even have secretaries. The Hon. Doyle Pablum was leaning back in his easy chair, intently watching TV. I surprised him and he bolted upright when I came in.

"Can I help you?" he said. He was wearing a plastic nametag that said. "Hello, I'm DOYLE PABLUM," and beneath that, "MAYOR."

"Yes," I said. "I'm Roger Trainer, the new owner of --"

"Nostrum, Inc.," he said, extending a beefy hand.

We shook hands. "Yes," I said.

He sat down. "So you're Ray's boy?"

I took a seat across the desk. "Well, nephew actually."

"Whatever," he said, and started watching TV again. "Good movie, huh?" he said.

"I don't know. Actually, your honor, I'm here for some information. You see, I'm new to Darvon, and I'm just settling in, and, well, to be frank, I'm having a few problems. For example, I think the long distance service at my building is faulty, and --"

"You watch TV like Ray?" he said.

"Well, yes, your honor, but right now I'd --"

"Good." Silence.

"Mayor Pablum," I said, "I'd really appreciate your help."

He looked at me. "Well, sure, son, of course." He rose and switched off the set. "C'mon, I'll show you around the town."

We drove into the main square, a pleasant little collection of early 20th century storefronts and sidewalks. In the middle of the square was a requisite soldier-on-top-of-a-column monument.

"Civil War?" I said, pointing to the monument.

Pablum regarded me in puzzlement. "No, son," he said, "that's our monument to the brave boys who lost their lives defending Darvon from the Communists."

We went back through the grand hallway decorated with huge bronze busts of the various Nostrum products: enormous, gleaming brown-gold capsules, pills, even a six-foot bronze bottle of codeine-laden cough elixir. At the end of the hall was a glass box on a pedestal, bathed in a soft yellow light. There it was, inside a box.

It was resting on a velvet cushion. It was big, all right. About a foot long, a huge capsule, blue in color, with "Nostrum" stamped cleanly on its face. The card on the pedestal said "This is Big Betty, the world's largest tranquilizer. It was manufactured here at Nostrum and is composed of equal parts of diazepam and codeine. A tranquilizer this size could bring gentle rest to the entire population of Somalia. Ray Trainer, prop. A.D. 1978."

"Kind of takes your breath away, doesn't it?" she said.

"Yeah," I said.

"Of course, Somalia was a lot smaller then. It wouldn't do that now."

"Of course," I said.

As I went through the books that Sally, the secretary, brought to me, the whole thing got weirder. I buzzed Sally to come into my new office. Over the desk hung a lifesize portrait of Ray, two of his company's products nestled reassuringly in his outstretched hand.

"Sally, are these just the books for sales in Darvon itself?"

"No sir, that's all of them." She returned her gaze to the small television in her hands. "Isn't Captain Kirk dreamy?"

"Sally, if these are all the books, then the only place Nostrum products are sold is right here in Darvon," I said.

"Really?" she said. I looked at Ray for a while. What, I thought, did you have going here?

I handed Sally one of C. Todd's cards. "Get this man of the phone for me."

She looked at the card. "But this isn't a local number."

"I'm confident the Bell System will accommodate us, Sally. Dial a '1' first, then the number."

"Yes sir," she said, defeated. She buzzed me back a few seconds later. "Sorry, sir," she said. "No long distance."

I sat up. "What?"

"No long distance. We don't have it here."

"The Communists?" I said. "When?"

"Did you skip out on history class, son? The Great War in '55. When the Reds invaded. The Darvon Elite Corps held their ground, and saved our town from devastation at the hands of the godless horde, the red menace."

"Ohhh ... right," I said. Then I got Mayor Pablum to drive me back. There was definitely something wrong here, something very wrong, and I thought Ray might have something to do with it. I drove out of town, back to the gas station where I had been before. The tobacco-addled eccentric was gone, replaced by a pimply-faced teenager. I went straight to the phone and called C. Todd at his hotel in Provo.

"What is it?" he said. "I'm late for a Suddenly Schizophrenic rap session."

"Todd, there's something wrong. I'm in Darvon, well, just outside of Darvon, and something's not right here."

He laughed. "No good clubs? Valet parking sucks? C'mon Roger, you're in Kansas, for chrissake."

"No, no, Todd," I said, "it's really weird here. These people are really strange, like pod people or something. They worship a giant downer and get all their information from TV. Besides that, they think that the Russians invaded the U.S. in 1955."

"I think you've been worshipping about 20 hits of orange sunshine, Roger," he said.

"No, Todd, I'm completely straight here. This town is strange. What's more, according to Ray's books, the only place Nostrum products are sold is right here in Darvon. Nowhere else."

"Those people must take a lot of medication."

"Dammit, C., I'm serious. Do you know anything about this place?"

"Not really, Rog. Look, gotta run. I heard voices the other day, and I want to get it straightened out at S.S. I'm sorry, really. Ray just never said much about Nostrum Inc. or Darvon, Kansas."

"Well, do you know anyone here I could contact? Someone Ray knows well?"

"He did mention a name once, some old friend of his who got stuck in Darvon and just stayed there. Name of ..."

"C'mon, C'mon, Todd, I need help here."

"Rille. Royal T. Rille, that was his name."

"Thanks, Todd," I said.

"Anytime. And lay off the hallucinogens, okay?"

"Sure, Todd," I said, "Sure."

I found Rille in a small ramshackle house on the outskirts of town, just off Maple Street. When I knocked on the door, a small, rheumy eye surrounded by forest of eyebrow and whisker appeared at a peephole.

"Whaddya want?" it said.

"Mr. Rille? I'm Roger Trainer, Ray's nephew. His attorney, C. Todd, said you might be of some help to me."

"You want some mary-joo-wana?"

"No sir, I'd just like to talk to you."

The door creaked open and I stepped inside. Rille was a small, bent man, leaning ponderously over a constantly shaking cane. He wore a patch over one eye. "Come in," he said. "Wanna drink?"

"No thanks." We walked into the den. There was no TV, to my surprise, just an elaborate statuary column topped with a gold angel and the legend "KNOWLEDGE" chiseled into its face. Rille hobbled to a nearby table and poured a glass with Yogi Bear on the side to the brim with Old Grand-Dad. He sat down gingerly across from me and half the glass in one fluid gulp.

"Mr. Rille, did you know my uncle?" I asked.

"Sure. Everyone in town knew Ray. Say, you gotta cigarette?"

"No, I'm sorry, I don't smoke."

"Ray smoked, y'know. Like a fucking chimney! Hee-hee-hee!" he cackled.

"Didn't you know him better than most around Darvon, though?" I asked, trying to get the conversation back on track.

Rille grew reflective. "That I did. I knew him a spot better than anyone else on God's Earth, I would say. Fine man. He was warped, twisted, his brain made ill by decades of wrestling with your weightiest philosophical conundrums, but a fine man. Used to fish with him."

"Sir, what do you know about Nostrum, Inc.?" I asked. His rheumy eye perked up.

"Nostrum? I know too much." He finished his immense drink of bourbon. "That's why I'm an exile. I came here strong and

young, ready to run Ray's business, but now I'm defeated and broken. All caused by Ray's twisted notions of the way things should work.

"Exile?" I said. "What do you mean?"

"Look around. See any neighbors? I'm shunned. Shunned! Because I knew! I know! I know now!"

"What?" I yelled. "Know what?"

He hobbled back over to the table and pured another monster cocktail. "I just know," he half-whispered. There was a knock at the door, and Rille looked around in terror.

"They followed you," he hissed. "You shouldn't have come." He glanced quickly around the room. "Hide in there," he said, pointing to the column, and left the room.

The column opened from the side and I crawled in, discovering in the process that the structure was already home to a teletype machine that was on. With the little light available, I made out that the machine was an AP Newswire, and it definitely had power. At any minute the little bugger could come to life and start chattering out the headlines, revealing my position. I prayed for a slow news day.

"What?" I heard Rille yell. "There's no one here! Never!" I heard some muffled voices, then they were gone. I came out of the column just as the teletype sprung to life and began spitting out the latest in news, weather, or sports. I found Rille by the door.

"You must go," he said. "Now."

"Why? Who was that?"

He pushed me out the door with all the strength his feeble little body could muster, and slammed it shut behind me. I could hear his wheezing and the newswire clacking away in the background.

"Who was that, Mr. Rille? What's wrong?"

"Go away, leedle one," he cackled. "I got no mary-joo-wana for you today, Pancho." Then he was gone.

I stopped by Nostrum on my way out of town and secured Ray's personal papers. I stuffed them into a briefcase decorated with a large yellow pill painted in oil on the side. Sally was still at her desk when I came out, even though it was growing dark.

"You see the news tonight, Sally?" I asked.

"Yes sir. It was just on."

I put the briefcase down, and picked up a sheaf of pink message slips. They were all for Sally, written by Sally. "Oh? And what was the top story tonight?"

"Oh, just more about the Brown incident."

"The Brown incident?"

"Yes sir, you must have heard about it. Ed Brown fed his hog broccoli and now it can dance. I'm sure you must have seen it in the news before you came here. It's been the top story of the week."

"Of course, Sally. Say, when do you usually go home?"

"When Mr. Trainer says it's time, sir."

"Oh, very good. Sally?"

"Yes sir?"

"Time to go home."

"Yes sir."

As I made my way back to Topeka, I stopped at La Grille France one last time. Estelle and the Man were still there.

"Well, hi Mr. Trainer," Estelle said. "How about some Le Coffee?"

"Sure, thanks," I said.

"Damndest thing," said the Man, "isn't it?"

"Sure is," I said.

"Never saw a hog dance like that before. No siree."

I drank Le Coffee and started to read some of my uncle's papers. Most were routine, invoices, memos, shipping orders, but there was a sheaf of handwritten pages that proved interesting.

"Life is so depressing," the scrawl said. "The more we can isolate ourselves from the dreariness and despair of the grim world, the happier we become."

I looked at Estelle. She smiled broadly.

"What I want to do at Nostrum," it said, "is provide the escape these people badly need. Hunger in Africa? Not a problem for us, and likewise, should never be one. The only way to ensure that is to seal ourselves off from despair."

"More Le Coffee?" Estelle said. I put the papers away.

"No, thanks, I've gotta run."

"So I guess you're in charge now, huh," the Man said.

"I suppose," I said.

"Well, I've got a suggestion. I want to see some changes in this town. There's something that's been wrong near as long as I can remember, and now that we've got ourselves some fresh blood maybe we can make some changes."

"Really?" I said, my interest was piqued. "What kind of changes?"

He opened his hand to reveal a small blue capsule. "The Nostrum 913. Could you -- do you think you could maybe make it red? We're all a mite tired of blue."

"I'll see what I can do," I said. "I'll do my best."

"More Le Coffee?" Estelle said.

Ben Vance