

**PART I**

**TREMBLING**

## In Search of Levity

Victor Maas clenches and flexes in the hallway mirror. “You are a short, naked, 49-year-old Marin County Realtor with zero prospects. GRrrrrrrrrrr!” He laughs at himself.

No one lives with Victor anymore – Jeb and Max, his oppositional twins, are in luxury colleges far away and Mildred, his once-beloved, now-ex wife, has checked into a pricey local psych ward that he can’t afford either – so he talks freely to his own reflection and to Fairchild, his slobbery, old, brown-and-white St Bernard.

“I can barely support us anymore, Fairchild, let alone the three who moved out!” Victor turns sideways and sucks in his chubby little gut.

At the front doorstep he stoops for the morning paper and shows Fairchild the scary headline: **REAL ESTATE CRISIS HITS HOME.**

“We might lose our little house!” he tells the big dog, who barks. “Remember how easy our life in Marin used to be? Remember the peacock-feather hot tub years of *The Serial*? Remember the ‘90s?”

Fairchild’s sad brown eyes seem to say, “Yes, there was an era. It was good. Life was funnier.”

Once upon a time – not so long ago – whenever Robin Williams or Dana Carvey were rumored to be dropping in on Comedy Tuesdays, Marin

insiders were tipped off and rose up en masse to abandon their hot tubs, put on their clothes, and descend on downtown Mill Valley.

Ten dollars got you in the door for comedy – the new drug – decades since trendy real estate meant Ken Kesey’s Bus, Sausalito anchor-outs, and the Poet’s Loft. Comedy, to niggle at your yearning for Village Music, the old Sweetwater Saloon, and your exuberant youth.

Victor combs his graying red curls and trims a few nose hairs. The curls are tight-wound and peachy fuzz trails down the nape and covers his body.

“Ah, my perfect body. Ten years ago I was a cancer patient with six months to live. Remember that, Fairchild?”

Marin County’s best-dressed real estate broker dons a cobalt blue silk shirt and charcoal slacks and starts looking for his keys. Fairchild tags along, ears perked at the invocation: “The keys can’t be nowhere, they must be somewhere.”

Victor pauses in the search to glance through the rest of the news: Internet viruses, suicide bombings, Obama in, Hillary out, riots that threaten global equilibrium. (*Librium, anyone?*)

“Aha!” The keys are hidden in the Sports section.

“I am glad to be alive!” Victor sings his daily affirmation.

The dog tilts his head at him.

“Yes, Fairchild, I’ve stopped saying ‘alive and well.’ Haven’t you noticed, my lifelong fear of being broke and alone is coming to pass?”

“Fear and trembling, yes, but not the sickness unto death,” the dog licks Victor’s wrists to remind him, “The master may be broke but you are alive, and you are not alone.”

Victor wraps his thick arms around the dog’s massive neck and whispers, “I love you,” then leaves his otherwise empty nest, in search of levity.

Victor lucks into a parking spot in front of New Century Café, leaves the Prius unlocked, and passes through the swinging door. Inside the café, reliably, Santiago Zaillo is behind the counter grinding coffee beans.

“Double soy latte, Santiago, in a glass, please, for here.”

“How are you today?” Santiago asks.

Victor shrugs. He relaxes into the café order. He likes Santiago. At least some things in the world, a man can count on. Besides the dog, this place feels like Victor’s most stabilizing force in these bright crisis days, a small sure thing in the hyper-cyber cutthroat world of vicious unknowns.

Victor Maas has been brokering homes in Marin County all his life, a family man who plays by the rules and supports all the good causes of the genuinely rich: charities, taxes, tuitions, investments. But his finances are cycling precariously along with the zeitgeist and the first three months of 2008 have been tumultuous, given the U.S. presidential election, the war in Iraq, and crashing economy, to name three wild cards.

According to this morning’s news: *The jolly old-world order of real estate in Marin, like all industries dominated by Baby Boomers since the sixties, is giving way.* This is the editor’s opinion. *The future feels unpredictable, even in Marin County, which has been a universe unto itself, insulated from vagaries.*

So far this year Victor has not sold a single property and his formerly healthy retirement plan is ravaged.

The usual crew has dropped in to New Century on this foggy March Monday. These people sit around acting like there’s no tomorrow and they have all the money and time in the world. Victor used to be a knight of faith; he wants to feel that way again.

After two years spent more or less in the fetal position when his twenty-year marriage imploded, Victor has found tenuous solace in Marin's peace-loving cafés, where he is free to grouse, conspire, and laugh. Café chat is cheap therapy for the mobile middle-aged of Marin on their way to work and between appointments, a pause in the heart-throbbing pain of costly divorces, ball-busting mortgages, falling stock markets, and the Dick Cheney mantra of fear.

Ed Ricci with the white Einstein hair and California tan is in the coffee line. It's California winter and he's wearing knee-length flowered board shorts, a white peasant shirt, and flip-flops.

Ed offers a Hawaiian *mahalo* thumb and pinky salute and greets Victor with his trademark "Hey ho."

Ed Ricci is internationally known as the visionary small press book publisher from Bolinas who has driven Wayward Publications ahead of every wave of every trend of the last forty years, from dome building to lawyer jokes to internal martial arts.

Ed dazzles Victor with the newest great idea. "Next tome I might publish is on immortality. This Tomas Grinning guy claims Baby Boomers could be the first generation not to die. What think you?"

"Hard to buy!"

"It's about stem cells, brain gym, and humor."

"That's funny."

"For real."

"Would we keep on aging?"

"According to Grinning, we'll always be men in our prime."

"I'm open to grandiosity."

“I’d love to be right on this one!” Ed smiles. He puts a lid on his paper cup of green tea. “Now please excuse me, I’m going surfing at RCA Beach, a space in time where I am ageless.”

At age 55 Ed is not that much older than he is but Victor has to ask, “How did you get to be so weirdly wise?”

“My mother!” Ed tells him. “When I founded Wayward Publications she told me to keep my eye on the horizon. She said very few authors know how to write! I’d be the one to focus and tone their overwrought manuscripts. That’s the dirty secret of the book business.”

Ed smooshes his wispy locks into his “Life Is Good” cap, says, “Good day, good luck,” pinches Victor’s rump in passing, and heads to the beach.

Victor retrieves his drink from Santiago, whose white teeth light up his smile in the unwrinkled brown face and hands are clean with square-trimmed nails. The brawny barista is looking saintly ever since last Friday’s *Marin IJ* editorial supporting Latino laborers and criticizing the dawn INS raid that woke the whole Canal District and netted two of his wife’s cousins.

Victor asks him about it and Santiago tells him, “The Zaillos are in no danger; we’ve lived five generations in Marin.”

Santiago may be the only native Marinite in the room.

Victor is licking foam from the edge of his latte when all 240 pounds of Charles Farnsworth III shows up, sweating at the neck of his grey Armani suit. Endorphins coursing through veins and synapses, Charles is energized when he gets in line near Victor and announces, “I am prepared to crush all opposition and back John McCain for President!”

“So, it’s official? You’re the last Republican in Marin?” Victor elbows him.

Charles says, “Ah, it’s the little handwringer who’s always worried about the day’s headlines.”

The coffee-scented air grows thick with politics as Charles falls into hunter-prey mode and Victor dials-up his metabolism. His skin flushes red. He might be tolerant enough to appreciate the alt-perspective that Charles provides but he does not like him as a person.

“So Republicans actually believe that with McCain, we bomb and blacktop Iraq, own the oil fields, lift the moratorium on offshore drilling, drop gas back to 59 cents a gallon. Fight, conquer, plunder: Mission Accomplished?”

“Indeed.”

“Why not talk about all those killed in Iraq, on both sides of the battlefield?”

Charles is sick of Marin liberals.

“War is *how* you keep the peace,” he informs Victor, recalling the hell of leaving Vietnam defeated. “We want America to win in Iraq. We fight; we win. What do you know about war, wussy?”

Liberals can keep their inner savage at bay only so long. No one who’s been around Lefties much believes the myth that they’re all peaceniks: when pushed, they can make a dandy stink.

Still, the café regulars are all surprised when Victor reaches up and grabs Charles by his red tie, seemingly intending no more than a provocative gesture.

Faster than you can order cappuccino, Charles lands a left hook then a right-leaning fist straight to the face and Victor goes down.

The crash of juice glasses and latte mugs is heard. A little blood falls on a lady’s croissant.

Santiago steps out from behind the counter and says, “You’ll need to vacate the premises immediately.”

Victor mumbles, “Big bully,” picks himself up, adjusts the crease of his pants, and departs.

Charles demands “my *cuppa cav-fee*” but Brian the owner backs up his barista. “Outta here, Mister. New Century Café is a Blood-Free Zone.”

Charles shouts, “Marinites know nothing about war!”

No one is listening; everyone has an opinion about all the violence in San Anselmo – and the world – but no one wants the thought of it to disturb the pristine morning.