

Richard Vance

WHAT COULD HE DO?

Bob Miller was a pothead. The four or five joints per evening kind. The kind who spent more money on pot than food. In fact, these days he sometimes paid two hundred dollars an ounce, whereas in the late sixties he had averaged twenty. These days he was paying thousands each year because the drug lords had switched their emphasis to coke. The law of supply and demand was bleeding him.

Bob craved not just the high from smoking marijuana but also the ritual that came with it. The vintage rock and roll. The candles. The feel of his favourite chair. There was nothing like a roomful of Credence Clearwater and dancing light. And he craved the escape from everyday problems, even if the pot itself was unhealthy.

His doctor had told him that THC attacks the brain, causing memory loss and confusion. Or maybe he had read it somewhere. He also worried about lung damage, but what could he do? He had tried quitting a dozen times, but reality had proved either painful or dull. And if getting "high on life" meant hanging out with the zealots who preached it, no way in hell. He would sooner step in front of a bus, like some brainless crack addict.

It was snowing, and the flurries looked blue in pale moonlight. Bob stood on the river's eastern shore, staring at the nuclear power plant on Three Mile Island. He had worked there for months before failing a random drug test. The twin towers still reminded him of cancerous breasts, but the job had paid well while it lasted.

Tonight the river looked solid, a dark boulevard lined with trees. As he smoked, Bob imagined himself racing across the surface then flapping his long arms and rising in one ecstatic motion, like a heron. Sometimes he ached for a bird's eye view. Once he had flown a short roundtrip from Harrisburg for no other reason than to get up and away. At the Philadelphia airport he had even stayed on the plane between flights. The stewardess had eyed him suspiciously, he remembered. Either that or the pot had made him paranoid. He could never be sure.

Bob finished the joint, briefly fascinated by his own smoke rings. He started back toward the car, coughing as he paused to gaze at the sky. The stars resembled faint dots, and he tried to imagine himself as the line of flight connecting them. But he couldn't. Suddenly he was too hungry for such fantasies. Worse, there was no food back at his apartment. He had meant to go shopping before the weekend, but somehow it had slipped his mind.

Things were always slipping his mind lately. Tonight, for instance, he was expected at a party, and he had forgotten the location. Something about a bowling alley. Or a firehall. He was supposed to meet a woman there, providing she wasn't still angry at him. A week ago he had confused her birthday with his daughter's, who was living — last he'd heard — in Florida. Was it possible that his baby girl had grown old enough to join the Air Force. Probably he wouldn't recognise her. Over the years his ex-wife had discouraged visitation, even going so far to restrict his phone calls. And because of his pot use, she'd had him by the balls. That and the fact she'd remarried into money and waived his child support. Finally — maybe five years ago — he'd stopped trying. Now it was one of those Christmas and birthday relationships. Hallmark cards. Impersonal gifts. Brief letters about general news. But what could he do? He wasn't a Pacific salmon. A man could only swim upstream for so long before the current wore him out.

The banks were closed and the grocery store refused to cash his paycheck without proper identification. Bob normally relied on automatic teller machines, but the card, too, was in his wallet. Rather than drive home and back, he decided to use the coins in his ashtray for a snack at McDonald's. Bob hated supermarkets anyway. The bright lights hurt his eyes, and there were too many choices. Desserts posed the biggest problem. How could anyone choose from the hundreds of temptations? The first of his four foster mothers had been a wonderful baker. That's where he and Joe — his brother — had gotten their sweet tooth.

Joe was the only person Bob trusted. Growing up they had been shuffled from town to town, always the outsiders forced to prove themselves. Often they had used their fists, standing shoulder to shoulder against local bullies. Joe had continued to prove himself, working his way through college. Now he had a solid career and a close-knit family.

Bob was happy for his brother but sometimes wondered how two people with the same blood and aptitudes could lead such different lives. In high school, both had been strong in maths and mechanical drawing, and now Joe was designing skyscrapers while he installed mufflers. He kept

telling himself that it was partly fate, that someday when he was in the right place at the right time, good things would start happening to him. Until then, what could he do?

Bob entered the McDonald's and began coughing again. This time it seemed out of control, so he hurried to the restroom. As he stood there hacking in the mirror, he saw a man's face too puffy and pale to be his own. He vowed to improve his diet and to get more exercise.

Bob emptied his change on the counter and let the girl at the cash register pick out enough to pay for his food. He looked around for a good place to sit. He didn't like having his back to anyone, but the strategic seats were all taken. He decided to eat in the car.

Across the street, the mall was closing. As he wolfed his french fries, Bob watched the procession of people hunting their cars in the crowded lot. Suddenly he spotted someone and let out a cry of excitement. The fat man in the cowboy hat was a local dealer known for quality pot.

Bob backed quickly out of the parking space and raced toward the exit, forgetting the milkshake on the dashboard. He grabbed for it but the cup struck the gearshift, splattering dark goo across his leg. He never saw the bus.

The End