

# STORIES

IN THE KEY OF C. MINOR.



Russell  
Bittner

# Something Special

*A Novella*

# Chapter FIVE

Three hours later, a fine dinner tumbling in my belly while a cognac and coffee wait within easy reach, I sit in perfect contentment on a loveseat in front of a blazing fire in a cavernous room of a fine hotel. This loveseat – like its twin just opposite me – is set at a ninety-degree angle to the fire, and I turn my head to look across the room and out the floor-to-ceiling windows at curtain call upon curtain call of large, billowy snowflakes – and then re-focus on the pitch black emptiness just out of range of the hotel’s lights. The flames of the fire in front of me, I note with some relish, reflect ghoulishly off the windowpanes – orange specters dancing for my perusal and with no other care in the world but that I should be entertained.

“Excuse me, sir –.” The sound of a human voice abruptly interrupts my reverie. I look to its source and see, standing off to the side of my loveseat, the young man I believe might have been Angie’s...Angie’s what? I’m still not really sure.

“Yes?”

“I was looking for your daughter. She didn’t dine with you this evening.” He has, I must admit, a certain air of refinement. What a pity, I think.

“My daughter?”

“Yes, your daughter.”

“I don’t have a daughter.”

“Angelina.”

"Who?"

"Angelina. Your daughter. The girl you were dining with yesterday evening."

"No, no. There must be some mistake. And you, by the way, would be—?"

"No, I saw you!" A whine has crept into his voice, and I don't like it. It reminds me of Angie's whine. Lucky for both of us, he recovers quickly. "Sorry. The name's 'Crandall'," he says as he extends a young gentleman's hand.

I ignore the hand. "What you saw, Crandall, is me with a dinner companion. If you must know—and I don't exactly know why you must—with my employee, Roweena."

He appears not to hear—or *want* to hear—the correction. "Is she not feeling well? Is she not coming down to dinner this evening?"

"Unfortunately, she's had to return to San Francisco—well, to Oakland really."

"To *San Francisco*?" He's whining again.

"Yes."

"But I thought she was from New York. That she's a model in New York."

"Hah! Either you've got the wrong girl, or that employee of mine has *some* imagination!"

"And her name's Rowee—?"

"Roweena. She works for me. In Oakland. She manages one of my stores."

"She *manages a store*? What kind of store—?" he asks, mouth agape.

"Well, if you must know, I own a chain of pet stores. Roweena is a manager-in-training at one of them."

"A *pet store*?" Gullibility in another lends such a feast. In spite of the three-course dinner I've just enjoyed, I feel suddenly ravenous for more.

"Yes, a pet store. She's a real hit with the animals. They just *eat* her up," I say with a chuckle.

"She won't be coming back tonight or tomorrow?" he asks, wearing disappointment like a Purple Heart.

"I'm afraid not. She's filling in on an emergency basis. Animals have to be fed, you know. Why, —I glance at my watch—I suspect she's feeding them even as we speak."

"I see."

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"Yes, well, duty calls—and so do animals when they're hungry. Lucky for me, I have an employee as conscientious as Roweena to attend to them. No muss, no fuss—just back to work."

"I see—," he says one last time, though more to himself than to me as he turns slowly around and walks off.

"Toodaloo, Crandall," I say under my breath before returning my attention to the fire and to my musing. The flames are licking the top of the fireplace and sending showers of sparks up the chimney. The heat is so intense, I involuntarily retreat back into the loveseat; feel the warmth invading and settling into its fabric; finally get up and wander over to one of the rear windows in search of cool relief.

I look out into snowfall and the impenetrable darkness just beyond and remember something I'd once read in some obscure monograph on death and dying. Of the means by which you could attain that unfavorable but inevitable end—I'm paraphrasing—"alone" and "in agony" were the least desirable. Agony could take many forms, of course, but specific mention of your still living, breathing, *gasping* flesh in the teeth and claws of a large animal just fresh out of hibernation was not one of them. Perhaps the author was squeamish. Perhaps he had no experience with wild animals. Perhaps he'd never read about *accidents* in a wildlife refuge like this one.

Bears could be particularly nasty when famished. In no mood for nuts or berries after six months in a cave, they'd simply lift their nostrils to the air and follow the scent to its source, then rip into the prize without so much as a how-do-you-do if it offered no resistance. (A girl succumbing to hypothermia, I surmise, would offer barely an iota.) The softer bits would go first, of course—the places you, yourself, might recognize as ticklish or particularly sensitive to heat and cold: armpits; the groin; cheeks of either variety. The bear might or might not first administer a *coup de grâce*. If so, and if the force of its paw didn't immediately break your neck, the claw would most assuredly tear off half your face in its swipe.

A mountain lion, on the other hand, would go straight for the throat and might first strangle you before tearing out your trachea and esophagus, severing your head, and settling down to devour the remainder of your still-warm carcass. Big cats were merciful in that way. Too bad there were considerably fewer lions—never mind tigers—than bears in Yosemite.

And while you wait, cold well beyond numb in the pitch black, having expended three matches in a futile effort to ignite a hard log, now watching the last of your hopes snuff out with the last of the three matches? Hardly refreshing. There's no one to call out to as your predator finds you

quite easily by his nose alone—though you can always try calling out to mommy. Mortally wounded soldiers and men with a noose sitting snug around their necks frequently—though not with any notable success—do.

I return to the loveseat; finish the last of my coffee and cognac; place cup and snifter carefully back down on the table. I then walk casually up to the front desk. Meredith, seemingly always present, ever-watchful, ever-courteous, greets me. I return her greeting, inform her that we will be departing early in the morning, report that our stay has been nothing less than magical, ask that she have the final bill delivered to my room during the night. She answers each bit of news or request with a cordial nod.

“By the way, Meredith,” I ask just before leaving the front desk. “The Crandall party? Do you recognize the name? We had the pleasure of making their acquaintance yesterday evening. I neglected to ask for a card.”

“Oh, yes, of course—the Crandalls,” Meredith says as she flips through her index of guest names. “Of Grosse Pointe. They’re regulars this time of year. Delightful family. Let me see—,” her voice trails off as she locates what she’s looking for, writes down the name and address on a piece of hotel stationery, then puts it into an envelope, which she hands over to me with her ever-courteous smile.

“Thank you so much, Meredith. I’ll certainly treat this with the utmost discretion. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Seymour. And *bon voyage* back to New York. Do please come and see us again soon.”

“Most assuredly, Meredith.”

A new “American Tragedy,” I muse as I drift off to sleep. Funny, I haven’t given a thought to Dreiser since my Groton days.

I sleep exceedingly well.

Just after dawn the next morning, I slip out of the hotel with all of our belongings and take them to the car. At least a foot of snow has fallen overnight, but the parking lot and roads into and out of the Ahwahnee compound have already been plowed. I drive out with ease and enter the long service road leading me to Highway 120—and ultimately, to San Francisco.

On one stretch of road called Big Oak, and just before exiting Yosemite, traffic—as light as it is at this hour of the morning—is being detoured, and I learn the reason for it minutes later: a combination of avalanche and rockslide has buried the road. I wonder how long it will

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take the authorities to determine whether there might be a car or two buried beneath – and, if so, whether bears and mountain lions will get there first. Rescue people in a place like this are the best at what they do, I figure. But then, nature – after a long sleep and in the roar of hunger – is bigger, badder, even better.

On a two-lane road leading to the airport in San Francisco, I look for a Dempsey Dumpster, but then spot a thrift shop, pull over, and take out Angie's things. It would, I think, be a waste just to dump them. The lady who takes my donation doesn't ask; I don't tell.

A few doors down, I find a shop selling cell phones and buy a disposable unit.

I continue the last few miles to the airport; check in the rental car, then myself and my baggage; make my way to the gate. As I'm passing through the people-feeder tube to the plane two hours later, I suddenly realize: as special as our something might've been, I didn't lose my heart in San Francisco. Hmm, I think.