

SEVEN WAYS TO OBLIVION

(1) Maddox extended the middle finger of his right hand into the whiskey glass, fished out the offending fly, and smeared its corpse onto the coarse fabric of his shorts. Staring at the tumbler with equally glassy eyes, he muttered “I’ll have to cut back.”

But not now. These were stressful times at the Station, and the ominous thudding of the indians’ drums was louder in his ears than the beating of his own alcoholic pulse. “The natives are revolting” he said to himself, and giggled. At least he had not lost his sense of humour. Though the other trappings of his culture had been absorbed long ago by the dense mist that lay like a disease among the unfamiliar trees of the jungle.

It was dusk, and the slime-ridden forest was a dark blob outside the rectangle of the cabin’s only window. A yellow light shone fitfully from the bedside table. It made the mosquito net more like a white pagoda than the tattered tent atop a sweaty mattress that was the miserable reality. Maddox planned to sleep shortly. But only after he stunned his senses with a final drink.

Rolling his glass between grimy palms, the man stared dolefully at its beige contents. The fumes from the liquor pinched his nose, and he scowled in momentary disgust – partly at the rotgut smell and partly at the demise of his own character. The previous manager at the Station had said to Maddox that death had its own smell. That was just before the final exhalations from the livid wreckage of what had once been a fine human frame. Now, Maddox wondered if the gasoline fumes of the cheap whiskey were not the precursors of his own death smell.

The curved surface of the tumbler reflected back an image that he hardly recognized: grizzled hair with premature shots of grey, a furrowed forehead that shone with perspiration over deep-sunk eyes, and a slack mouth from which booze ran into an unintended beard.

A streak of stubborn pride, however, still survived inside an alcohol-fuzzed brain that had once been famous for its sharpness. He would *not* give in to the fetish-driven demands of the natives. And if they insisted on playing rough, then so be it...

Maddox shifted the glass of whiskey to his left hand, and patted the revolver in his belt with his right hand. The metallic bulk of the weapon gave him temporary courage, and the sunken eyes took on briefly the glint of determination. “*Damm* them,” he growled.

But the surge of his old allegiance to Civilization died almost as quickly as it had been kindled. He sat for a while, thinking; and staring at the glass. An alcohol-induced tear formed in

the cusp of his eye and began meandering down the mottled skin of his cheek. Irritated, he brushed it away. In that instant, a shadow moved across the surface of the glass...

Maddox reached with surprising speed for his gun.

He was too late. The dart had already passed from the figure in the window to his exposed neck, where it buried itself with a slight *thunk!*

Maddox dropped the glass, sending its contents splashing onto the rough planks of the floor. His right hand grabbed the gun from his belt, while his left grasped the dart and yanked it out. The tip glistened in the yellow light with the oily sheen of poison...

Already he could feel the fire of the alkaloid rushing down the artery in his neck towards his heart.

Maddox raised his gun towards the window, and the *Bang!* of its discharge shattered the silence of the jungle with a futile clap of thunder...

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(2) She walks towards me, a beautiful naked form, with the dancing eyes that promise *everything* sensual in return for my own insignificant life.

I am eager, if slightly guilty. But why shouldn't I finally do everything that lies within a man's fantasy, if all I have to give up is my already proscribed existence?

The thick, puckered lips need kissing. The trembling mounds of her breasts need fondling. The smooth inside of her thighs need licking – upwards, to the damp wellspring of her being; and then inside...

I feel the heavy stiffness of my maleness, pointing the way. But I am cautious, not wishing to throw away the promised long ploy of passion for the quick squirt of merely animal release.

My strutting organ touches her rounded body. Her bright almond eyes transfix me; but their magic does not completely capture me, and I notice that her perfect white teeth are too long and too pointed, and growing...

Puzzled, I realize that she is eating me.

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(3) I bowed to acknowledge the applause of the ten thousand spectators, including the King and Queen, who together with their odious Prime Minister sat in the first row, clapping sedately. My black coat-and-tails outfit felt like a straightjacket; but the crowd was enthusiastic,

and I sensed that we would not be allowed to leave anytime soon. By my side, Gomez held out his violin at the end of a thin arm, and caught my eyes as we rose from our second bow.

“No encore, Maddox.” The words were clear to read on Gomez’ lips, though they were drowned by the audience, which clearly wanted a response.

Puzzled, I held the tips of the violinist’s fingers in the approved fashion, his other outstretched hand holding the Stradivarius and mine holding my conductor’s baton. We must have looked like some weird bird, about to launch itself into flight from the stage.

“Why?” I demanded silently, as we rose in unison from our third bow.

I was annoyed. Not that I had any great desire to do an encore. I was uncomfortably hot in the penguin suit, and had that tingling in my jaw which meant that my face would soon go embarrassingly red. By comparison, Gomez’ face looked white – even ashen – as if he was struggling with some bad dream. And for all I knew, he might be. Always a rebel, he had spent the previous day at the Ministry of Security, at the “invitation” of the Prime Minister. However, he had been released in time for the regular rehearsal with the orchestra. And there could not be anything seriously wrong, as he continued to be trusted with the Stradivarius on loan from the State Museum. Both the instrument and its custodian had just performed brilliantly: Furtwangler’s First Concerto for Violin was notoriously difficult, and Gomez had just given a flawless performance. One enhanced by the dulcet tones of the centuries-old fiddle, which he now proceeded to raise to his lips. In front of the adoring crowd, he planted a bloodless kiss on the rich, russet wood. Then he made a condescending gesture in my direction, inviting me to make a solo bow.

Baffled, because this was not the normal procedure, I bent low for the fourth time. And on rising, found the priceless violin being pushed into my hand.

Instinctively, I took it.

Anger, flared in me. What the hell was Gomez doing? Trying to pull some juvenile trick, designed to show that *he* was the star and that *I* was merely a conductor who could not handle a violin? Fuming, I stared at the Stradivarius. However, there were ten thousand eyes focused on me, and the applause was still terrific. So I did the only thing I could think of – take yet another bow.

Rising, I noticed that the King and Queen had stopped clapping and that the Prime Minister was looking at me from the front row with an unfriendly stare.

Gomez had disappeared.

There were sounds of indeciveness from the members of the orchestra behind me; and the audience in front of me was slowly falling silent.

In the growing quiet, my ears detected a mechanical *tick! tack!* sound. It was coming from the violin.

My last thought, as the blast did its assassin's work, was that it was a pity we had lost the Stradivarius.

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(4) It was high noon, and the Sun lay as heavy as a stereotype on the dust of Main Street.

At the east end stood "Blacky" James, the more evil of the two brothers who had been terrorizing the town. His face was pockmarked by the craters of indulgent disease, through which cut the canyon of an old knife wound. The black juice from the cheroot which inhabited the edge of his leering lips ran indolently down his chin – mirroring the darkness of the soul within. Only yesterday, Blacky had *kicked* the school-mistress's pet hamster...

At the west end of Main Street stood "Madman" Maddox. He was clean-shaven, with a neat parting in his freshly-washed hair. Properness radiated from every pore of his cherubic skin. He knew that the townsfolk had faith in his invulnerability. In addition, he was sure that he could not be killed, because this scenario was patently artificial. It was the result of a not-very-well-adjusted false reality, of the kind known as 'total immersion' video. The fact it was not real was evident in numerous ways. For example, the six-shooter on his hip looked authentic, but lacked the revolving chambers into which bullets could be inserted. Also, history told that the James brothers of wild-west history had been of Caucasian ancestry, while Blacky lived up to his name by being a misplaced negro. Full of assurance and bravado, Maddox walked forward and stopped about twenty paces from his imaginary enemy, an assured smile on his lips.

Blacky said: "This town ain't big enough for the both o' us." His voice had the raspy, drawling quality of a cheap movie whose writers had as much imagination as a flock of pigeons.

Maddox regarded him calmly. "Oh, I don't know about that," he said in a compromising manner, "We could agree to subdivide – you take the east end and I'll take the west end." Then, remembering the protocols, added: "Always assuming, of course, that Town Council approves it by a vote."

Blacky James commented on this succinctly – by spitting a blob of tobacco juice onto the street, where it lay briefly like a guilty memory, before slowly being absorbed by the dust. “You don’t seem to git it, Mister Fancy-Pants.” The drawl now had a distinct edge of threat. “One of us ain’t gonna walk outta here alive.”

“That statement lacks logic,” pointed out Maddox, reasonably. He was clearly the mental superior to this simulacrum. However, in the interest of making progress, he decided to reduce the intelligence measure of their conversation to the level of his adversary. “You-all jest drag yo’ sorry butt outta town by sundown, else’n I’ll come an’ chew it off myself.” Proud of his command of the vernacular, he added recklessly: “An I ain’t no hamster!”

The effect of this challenge on Blacky James was electric. The thug flexed at the knees, his hand moved like lightening to his hip, and as if by a miracle of slow-motion photography the six-shooter was pointing at the heart of his opponent. The gun barked, and a death-laden bullet sped on its unerring course.

Maddox nonchalantly raised his palm against the incoming projectile.

By the force of knowledge, the bullet hit his hand and dispersed into a harmless cloud of leaden dust.

Maddox laughed. So much for the effect of a second-rate reality show versus the logic of the coolly-functioning mind. He turned, his hand resting on the top of the gun he had not even been obliged to draw from its holster. He took three swaggering steps, and stopped.

Blacky’s brother stepped out from the false front of the town bank, a shotgun cocked and ready. Its blast took away both the head of Maddox and its illusions.

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(5) I usually enjoyed the atmosphere of power which suffused the boardroom; but today the oxygen of profits was in short supply, and the Company gasped on the edge of bankruptcy. The dozen members of the governing board regarded me with distrustful looks, and Pogers was openly hostile. It was known that he owned nearly a third of the Company’s stock – which was now almost worthless – but instead of trying to come up with anything positive, he sat in a sulk at the other end of the table, doodling.

In exasperation, I spluttered “Doesn’t *any* of you have a good idea?”

None of them would look at me. Some stared at the boardroom table, which despite its rich brown burls could not be all that fascinating. A few regarded their expensively-manicured

nails. And the rest seemed to find something interesting in the artwork of the ceiling. The latter had been sculpted at the start of my presidency into a suitable symbol: the world, cupped in two supporting (or some claimed, grasping) hands. But the meaning had gone from the artwork, and so apparently had the intelligence of those who sat beneath it.

Angry at their silence, I grabbed a couple of candies from the bowl in front of me and popped them into my mouth. Crunching the sweets made me feel a bit better – as if I was grinding up the bones of the useless crew in front of me. Everybody has their own way of dealing with stress. It could be alcohol, food or drugs. For me it was candy, and my predilection for what the supplier called *bon-bons* was well known in the Company. The trouble was that today, for some reason, my custom-made sweets did not taste right. Disappointed, I turned an even more sour gaze on my main opponent, Pogers.

The second most powerful person in the Company sat at the opposite end of the boardtable, the sharp seams of his pinstripe business suit etched by the light from the window behind me. That light had gradually faded during the course of our long meeting, and without turning round I knew that the Sun would shortly be setting. The fact that the boardroom was on the two-hundredth floor might buy a short extension of daylight, but the symbology of the setting Sun was not lost on me.

Pogers, under my prolonged stare, finally stopped doodling and looked down the length of the table at me. His normally light-brown eyes picked up a reddish tinge from the pollution-bloodied Sun. Feeling abruptly uncomfortable, I found myself looking into the eyes of a demon.

Whatever juicy rhetoric I had intended to spout seemed to dry into a blob of phlegm in my parched throat. I tried to swallow, but there seemed to be a constriction in my neck; and when I attempted to speak, the only sound that emerged was a kind of defiant croak.

Pogers watched me carefully. The attention of the other board members appeared to have revived also. They regarded me with a mixture of disdain and pity. Gone was the respect and subservience of former meetings, when as manager I had rammed through decisions over their objections and carried the Company forward. Now, all I saw in their faces was the pent-up distaste of numerous old feuds. Pogers, in particular, stared at me as if I was the human equivalent of a junk bond.

I sneered, emitting a strangled growl of contempt. For even if the worms had turned, they were still worms.

Pogers, taking advantage of my temporary problem with speech, stood up. “You are through, Maddox.”

I staggered to my feet. Something was wrong. Both with the meeting, and with me.

Pogers walked slowly but assuredly from his end of the table to mine. He was holding something in his hand. But his first action involved something else: he picked up the bowl with my remaining candies, and dumped them into the pocket of his pinstripe suit. “These have served their purpose.”

Then he plonked down in front of me a circle of paper, which had been cut from the Company’s letterhead but had been carefully covered with dark ink.

The Black Spot!

So that was their game. Mutiny in all its nastiness. I opened my mouth to protest, but no sound emerged. Looking hate at the board members, all I saw was the stony contempt of those who had gained the upper hand.

A sound at my back caused me to turn. Pogers stood by the side of the window, which he had opened. His hands were clasped over the front of his pinstripe pants, as if protecting his gonads from the evening air which pushed into the hot atmosphere of the boardroom. His red eyes were fixed on me, and his face was expressionless. “Maddox,” he said, “you will do the honourable thing.”

I growled my defiance, and tried to stop my feet from moving towards the open window.

“There’s no point,” explained Pogers. “The dose of Trumacin in your candies is more than enough to guarantee your compliance.” An ironic smirk wrinkled his lips. “It is, after all, one of the Company’s few products which you failed to wreck.”

All I could do was spit out a useless “Grr..” My leg muscles moved against my will, controlled by the animal part of my brain. I was no more in control of my body than a well-trained dog who is ordered to perform a circus trick.

My hair ruffled in the wind as I clambered awkwardly onto the sill of the window. Two hundred floors down, the dots which were the Company’s employees were debouching from the building in a flurry of home-destined dots. The nausea of vertigo swept over me, momentarily overpowering the influence of the drug.

“*Go On!*” Pogers ordered.

Vomit, from the nausea I felt, backed up behind my teeth. By a tremendous act of will, I forced myself to look backwards into the room, cursing the board members with my gargoyle grin. It was painful – like a toy robot whose head is twisted around by a malicious child. My breath exploded, carrying foul-smelling stuff onto Pogers’ neat suit.

Unnecessarily, he reached out and gave me a push...

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(6) As long-time companion to Master Maddox, during an age when the Empire appears to be crumbling, I have developed a considerable respect and admiration for him. You, dear reader, will doubtless also be aware of his dedication to justice, from the occasional accounts which I have been able to lay before a long-suffering public. If I have been reticent of late, it is because Maddox has been recuperating from the injuries he sustained during the affair of the exploding toilet. His latest exploit started in iconoclastic fashion, with a telegram.

It read: *Need your help. Come if convenient. If inconvenient, go to hell.*

I chuckled. Typical Maddox! Turning over the crumpled, yellow paper, I saw that it had been dispatched from Paddington at noon. Glancing at the sundial nailed above the fireplace, I saw that the missive had been delivered post-haste, and grabbed my bowler hat. Outside, traffic rushed by No. 221 x 10⁶ B. I hailed a cab and was soon tearing along the streets of the metropolis, headed for the railway station.

The luncheon room at Paddington offered a quiet haven from the cacophony of roaring trains, and a pool of fresh air relatively free of their sulphurous emissions. I lounged at the counter, regarding the meat sandwiches, whose curling slices of bread provided a convenient manner in which to view their contents.

“Don’t touch ‘em, young man,” warned an ancient woman, dressed in a shawl and headscarf, who hovered by my side.

I turned, meaning to offer some paltry assurance, and ... found myself staring into the mischievous eyes of Maddox.

Swaying, I would have swooned in surprise; but my companion grabbed my wrist in an iron grip and hurried me out of the luncheon room. “C’mon,” he yelled above the din of the locomotives. “I’ve ordered a special train. It’s the only way to catch Moriarty!”

In the richly-appointed carriage, I finally had time to draw my breath. I would have preferred to relax among the plush cushions, but Maddox was quivering with excitement. He

had extracted a map from beneath his cape, and spread it on the vacant seat. The mouthpiece of his reeking pipe stabbed at a place where two hatched lines ran side by side. “That’s the place to catch him!”

“What’s he done, then?” I asked. In truth, I was somewhat confused. It felt as if my brain were rattling around inside my skull like the ball in one of those infernal kids’ games. I knew that Maddox regarded Moriarty as his arch enemy, and that the two had frequently crossed paths in the past. However, I had not kept informed about recent burglaries and murders by the criminal classes. Partly, because the whole State had been fixated on the diplomatic consequences following the disappearance of the top-secret plans for a submarine dreadnought; and partly because I had been fighting an attack of the chicken pox.

Maddox replied: “Moriarty’s got ’em!”

“Got what? I asked innocently. “The chicken pox?”

“No, you idiot!” Maddox said in his jocular manner. “The plans for the secret submarine.”

“Oh!” I replied, and would have said more, except that the carriage just then gave a fearful lurch that sent me careening over to the window. Outside, the trees and bushes of an otherwise sedate countryside were streaming past in a blur.

I opened my mouth to express my concern at our prodigious speed, but Maddox had grabbed a brass speaking-trumpet and was shouting into it, presumably to the engineer in charge of the train. “Can’t you get more speed out of this tin can?” he demanded.

There was a muffled sound of protest from the other end, and the only thing I heard was the terrified voice of the engineer saying “... going as fast as we can!”

The carriage was swaying from side to side in a most alarming manner. Feeling sick, I staggered to the window and opened it. I stuck my head out, but the rushing wind forced the air back into my lungs. My watering eyes could make out the shape of another train, running on a parallel track, at a speed almost as breakneck as ours.

“It’s him!” I yelled. The head of a man protruded from the carriage on the other line. Its long hair was flying over a high, domed forehead from which a pair of frenzied eyes burnt like the cinders that packed the air. I fell back, coughing from the smoke and ash of our wild ride.

Maddox leapt to the window. In his hand he gripped his trusty army revolver, and I saw the spurt of flame from its muzzle. Almost instantly there was an answering shot from the other train. Maddox reeled back from the window, crashed into the far wall, and collapsed.

I scrambled over to him, horrified to see red blood oozing onto the purple plush of the cushions. "I'm hit," he said simply.

Tearing off his cloak, I heaved a great sigh: the bullet had gone clear through his shoulder, scraping the scapular and missing the lower part of the carotid artery.

I turned, consumed by fury. In the window of the opposite train, Moriarty's demonic face writhed with laughter. But our carriage was going faster, and his evil visage was slowly falling behind.

I made a grab for Maddox' gun, but it slithered out of reach as the floor bounced beneath me with a stomach-turning lurch. Immediately, there was a screech of metal from under the carriage, which continued in a banshee scream as the train started to rock violently. Were we off the rails?

Somehow I managed to get to the window and stick my head out. The train was speeding down a narrow cutting, whose rock-strewn slopes were dotted with weeds and discarded planks. In some manner, we had been switched to a side-line.

Behind, the train of Moriarty was flying down the same disused track. The master-criminal was hanging out of the window, as if he were attempting to clamber out of its small aperture. Seeing me, he gesticulated furiously with his arm.

I turned, and my blood seemed to curdle in my veins. Ahead, the track ended in a large, murky hole.

On the far side of the hole, a derelict gantry stooped drunkenly over a string of abandoned carts, whose final load of ore lay discarded in the dust.

I turned to Maddox. He was on the floor in the corner, trying to brace himself against the erratic motion of the racing carriage. His eyes were full of pain, but focussed on me as if asking some question. He opened his mouth, but his words were drowned by the frantic sound of the train's last whistle...

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(7) The real Maddox woke up and blinked. Instinctively, his age-mottled hand moved to the slack skin of his cheek, trying to rub away the imaginary soot from a doomed train.

“How d’you feel, Mister Maddox?” The secretary put her communications console on hold, and regarded the ageing man with a solicitude as false as the episodes he had just lived. “At *Deaths R Us*, we aim to give you an end-of-life experience that is truly unique.” Her voice had the sing-song quality of the much-repeated phrase; but its banality was lost on her still-fuddled customer.

“Er...,” stuttered Maddox. He stopped rubbing his face, and looked around with bleary eyes that peered out defensively from under silvery brows. The bags beneath the eyes resembled the prunes from which he had made a living before the cancer had taken hold of his inner body. “I liked the last one,” he said finally.

The secretary smiled encouragingly. Her eyes were startlingly blue, widely spaced, and completely lacking in empathy. Above them was a forehead devoid of wrinkles, about which fell a luxuriant thatch of shiny yellow hair. Her neck, likewise, was long and lacked lines. From beneath a shirt of sky blue that was custom-matched to her eyes, there peeked the slightly sun-tanned mounds of a perfectly symmetrical bosom.

Maddox abruptly detested her. Maybe she was an android? Defiantly, he said: “I didn’t like the second one. About the sex.”

The secretary was unphased. “I threw that in as an extra,” she explained. “And as a change from the others. After all, the ones you requested were pretty much of a type.”

“I like adventure,” said Maddox defiantly. He was significantly annoyed. It seemed to him that the choice of how he would die was entirely up to him. He certainly did not want to end his days in the palliative-care ward, hooked up to a pain-killing drug machine while his body was slowly devoured by the cancer. At least, this way he would go out with a bang rather than a whimper – even if it was an imaginary bang. He had thought about it for a long time, and had made up his mind. If you were going to die anyway, then why not do it *properly*? With style.

Yes, *style*. That was what it was really about... Maddox collected his wandering thoughts, and said “I didn’t have much adventure in the prune business. No *style* to it.”

The blonde girl glanced briefly at her console, which told her that she was running late for the next preview. Barely suppressing her impatience, she asked: “Did you like the first one?”

Maddox searched his memory, trying to sort out the rush of situations and feelings he had recently experienced. “Yeah,” he announced. “The poisoned dart was pretty exciting.”

The secretary made a note. Then moved on. “How about the orchestra and the violin bomb?”

The old man shifted uneasily in the chair. Its special attachments made him feel uncomfortable, especially now that they had served their purpose. Of course, if he decided to go through with things, he would have to be connected to something similar again. Though then, he would be in bed; and the movie (as he liked to call it) would run its full length; and he would not wake from it...

“I’m not much one for orchestras and such,” Maddox explained. And then, thinking about the fifth scenario, added: “I don’t much care either for business boardrooms, though jumping out of a window is pretty classy.”

The secretary made a couple of annotations. “What about *High Noon*? It’s one of our most popular choices. You know, the cowboys, the standoff, the gunfight..?”

Maddox looked at her stonily. Did she get some extra commission for the *High Noon* episode? Remembering the defective sixgun, and other unconvincing features of that (too often run and maybe worn) scenario, he shook his head. “It didn’t work right.”

“So,” summed up the blonde girl, “It’s a choice between the poison dart and the train wreck.”

“I s’pose so,” said Maddox, though without conviction. He was having strong second thoughts about the wisdom of making his death into a spectacle. The attitude of the *Deaths R Us* folk was altogether too businesslike; and there was the question of cash...

“I need to talk to you about money,” he began, but stopped when he saw that the secretary was chatting into her throat microphone. The meaning of her subvocal conversation was lost on the old man, who ran a hand down the wasted muscle of his thigh, and took an unsteady step out of the chair in order to stretch his cramped legs.

The office was sparsely furnished but had the feeling of opulence. Maddox realized that this was largely due to the floor: rich hardwoods, their reds and yellows juxtaposed with barely discernable joints into the shape of a star. His experience on the farm told him that the rare lumber and the skill of the carpentry must have cost a lot. It was the kind of floor he would have expected to find in the entrance hall of a rich man’s ranch. Its presence here was puzzling in a (what to call it?) funeral parlour, laboratory, interview room. Certainly the wooden floor of his own farm in the vine-covered hills had been crude by comparison. Though *it* had seen many

good and happy days, with the wife and the kid and the occasional rare but valued guest. Until, that was, the quake took out the big culvert – and with it, his small family. And then there had come the second blow of a cruel and indifferent world: the cancer which now riddled his bones, and made every step an ache-filled effort.

Watching his own uncertain feet shuffle over the precisely-laid hardwood blocks of the floor, Maddox wondered if he had been right in spending so much of the money he had gotten from the sale of the farm on the expensive drugs administered by the state hospital. However, they had worked for a while. Giving him extra days of life even as his savings dwindled, in a barter he had thought reasonable at the time. By contrast, the money he had given to that shaman up on Indian Ridge had been a pure waste. But desperate people *do* desperate things, often calmly. And he had never been one to duck a chance or a challenge. Like the time he planted thirty extra acres on the sun-blasted side of Bighorn Canyon, during a period when the price of prunes was lower than a snake's belly. Why, if that venture had worked out, he could have...

"Mister Maddox," interrupted the secretary, "you were saying something about money."

Surprised that she had caught his previous comment, he stared at her in momentary confusion. Now sure how to interpret his look, the girl applied her fingers to the console set into her desk. A hologram popped up, displaying in cold numbers what the last fling of his life would cost him.

The old man swallowed. There was a long silence, during which a small frown of impatience grew on the young girl's forehead. "That's a lot," Maddox eventually said.

The secretary glanced briefly at the display on her desk, the wrinkle above her nose deepening as she attempted to calculate the balance between a customer in the office versus one waiting outside. Abruptly, she switched on an automatic smile and said in a pseudo-helpful voice: "We have our budget option: *Earth, Water and Fire.*"

Maddox, whose dislike of the androidal secretary was now almost a taste in his mouth, asked "What's that, then?"

"It's subsidized by the state," she explained. "But for the best dramatic effect we recommend that the scenes be experienced in reverse order: Fire, then Water and lastly Earth."

Talking to a very pretty moron can be a perplexing experience. But Maddox had now spent considerable time in the offices of *Deaths R Us*, and was in any case reluctant to give up on

the idea of a spectacular finale to his life. Looking up from the intricate floor, he said: “What exactly is involved?”

The blonde secretary delivered the official, short-form patter: “Fire is the ebullient, cleansing agent. Water laves the material body, washing away its sins. Earth clasps the surviving form in a close embrace which promises regrowth.”

Maddox stared. Did this nincompoop even understand the words she had just uttered? A sense of unreality gripped him. He had a sudden urge to go along with this farcical set up. “Sounds great!” he said facetiously. “So you burn me up, squirt me with water to get rid of any hanging bits of skin, and then cover me with clay to seal in the works so I can be chucked into a pauper’s grave that will soon be ploughed over to grow corn?”

“Yes!” exclaimed the secretary. A relieved smile appeared on her face. This old man had seemed to be a difficult case, but he had grasped the gist of the matter, and now everything seemed to be smooth going.

Maddox was excited by his own oratory. The fire of his new-found irony invigorated his slacking veins. “It’s great!” he repeated. “Where do I sign?”

“No need,” replied the grinning secretary. “We have voice identification. You’re all set!”

“But...” Maddox objected.

The star-shaped floor opened beneath him. For a moment, he hung over the black pit. Then a gorgeous red flame snaked up, encircled his wasted body, and drew it into the depths.

The floor shut, drowning out the last scream of Maddox. The mechanism operated so quickly and precisely that only a faint fume spread into the antiseptic air of the office.

Fanning her face, the once-again businesslike secretary turned to her communications console. “Send in the next one, please.”