

Can Crusher

by Kip Cassino

© 2018, Kip Cassino. All rights reserved.

The door slammed loud and sudden. It broke the heavy silence in the little house, and woke Millie from the fitful sleep of her nap. She jumped from the bed, startled, not quite awake, and rushed to the bannister bare-footed.

“Hank, is that you?” she called softly, peering down the stairwell.

After a long moment Hank moved into her line of vision, staring up at her, smiling. It was a big joyful smile—the kind she hadn’t seen from him in what seemed like years. “Millie, come down, right now!” he said, almost laughing. “I have some good news! Great news!”

“I should hope so,” Millie replied, rubbing her eyes, now fully awake. “Slamming the door like that! Probably scared the whole neighborhood. My goodness! Now, give me a minute. I have to brush my hair.” She looked down and shook her head. “You gave me such a fright I forgot to put on my slippers.”

Millie turned and walked back to the upstairs bathroom. There, she brushed her hair, slowly and methodically. Although her husband’s excitement had infected her as well, she knew the coming conversation would go better if he had a few minutes to calm down. By the time she came downstairs, he was sitting at the kitchen table, coat and tie removed. His excitement hadn’t abated. As he looked up, he had been thumbing through a large brochure lying in front of him.

“Millie,” he said, “I had to come right home. I found a program that can help us. Things don’t have to be as bad as we thought. Not anymore. I think we have a way out. Sit down. Wait ‘til you see ...”

“All very nice,” Millie interrupted, gliding past him. “First I’m getting myself a soda. Want anything?”

As she opened the refrigerator, a terrible thought startled her. She closed the door and turned. “Hank,” she cried, “What are you doing home? It’s only just now four. Dear God, there’s nothing wrong at work, is there?” She sank into a kitchen chair, put her head in her hands. “Please tell me there’s not.”

At seventy-three, Henry Reynolds still had two years left before social security kicked in. With it, and the 401K, and the other money they had managed to save, they might just make it another ten or fifteen years. Might just. If he was laid off or let go, all bets were off. Unemployment was still above ten percent, though the government kept saying it would go down. Jobs for people Hank’s age were as rare as hen’s teeth.

Hank had a good job, and he worked hard to keep it. There weren't many of the old nuclear plants left anymore, but those still online had to be serviced and maintained—and decommissioning took expertise as well. Hank was one of a rapidly shrinking group of engineers who could still do the work. His company needed him as much as he needed the job.

He rose from his chair, rushed to his wife's side and hugged her fiercely. "Honey," he said, "It's nothing like that. I promise. But you know it's been hard keeping up with the work these past few years. When they upped retirement age to seventy, I thought that would be O.K., and even seventy-two seemed doable. I'm just not sure I can make it all the way to seventy-five. These next two years ... they frighten me, Millie."

He went back to his chair and sat heavily, then held up the material he'd brought home. "This new thing, this Hiatus, sounds much better."

The tone at the west wing meeting was grim and blunt. It was an intimate gathering. President Jarvis had only a few top aides in attendance, men and women who had worked with him through most of his public career—people he could and did trust. There was no standing on ceremony in the room, no turf fights or posturing. The facts had to be laid out, as bad as they were.

The meeting was convened by Jonathan Dancer, the president's chief political advisor. Young and brash, rail thin, he seemed the exact opposite of aging, ponderous Raymond Jarvis. Dancer wore a perpetual smile, as though the world amused him, while Jarvis was more prone to frown. The two men appeared terribly mismatched. Yet together they formed one of the most successful political teams the nation had seen in decades. It was said that Dancer could bring in whatever Jarvis thought up—often before Jarvis knew he had thought of it.

"The bottom line, Mr. President, is that the jobs won't be coming back," said the Nobel Laureate economist, concluding his briefing.

"Unemployment is ten percent now. Are you telling me it won't get better? For how much longer?" Jarvis asked. A big, florid man, he'd run a state so well he was coaxed to run for the presidency by his party. He brought Dancer with him to be his eyes and ears. They soon found that Colorado had been a cakewalk compared to the street fight that was national politics.

Dancer shook his head. "He's telling you they won't come back, Mr. President. Ever. And the unemployment rate—the one we use in public—only counts the ones still looking. If you count the ones who quit looking, the ones off unemployment insurance after five years without a job, it's closer to twenty percent."

"How could this happen? What's broken?" Jarvis asked. Even though he knew the numbers, hearing them said aloud still shocked him.

“There are a lot of theories,” the economist said quietly. “Some people claim the industrial revolution was just an aberration, that mankind was never meant to have full employment or a big middle class, that things are just going back to their natural order.”

“You believe that?”

The economist showed a wintry smile as he shook his head. “No, Mr. President, I don’t. I think we hung ourselves when we decided that short term profit was the most important business goal. Once you go down that road, you end up outsourcing everything. That’s when the jobs go away. Automation hasn’t helped either. Not many people at the checkout stands or on the production lines we still have. Not anymore.”

Jarvis frowned. “I didn’t call this meeting to comb through the past. I need answers about what we can do to fix things. I need plausible, achievable alternatives. Damn it, I need answers.”

“Get rid of about eighty million people,” the economist replied quickly.

“Are you insane?” Jarvis growled. “What the hell do you mean?”

The economist cleared his throat, nervously pulling at his tie. “It’s all in the numbers, Mr. President,” he answered carefully. “Right now, our economy can comfortably support a population about twenty percent lower than what we’ve got. If we got down to that level tomorrow, there’d be enough jobs. The strain on federal programs would ease, and that would free up investment capital. Imports would plunge. Things would be a great deal better.”

“I respect you,” the president said, “Or you wouldn’t be in this room. But when I ask for achievable, concrete proposals, I don’t expect bullshit answers.”

Dancer intervened. “Don’t make your mind up too quickly, Mr. President,” he said. “I think this is something we can work with.”

“It’s called Hiatus,” Hank explained, opening the brochure as he spoke. “It’s all right here, Millie. I heard about it from a guy at work. He and his wife are going to do it. We can too.”

Millie frowned. “Hank, when will you learn? First it was those penny stocks, then the lead and silver. We just don’t have the money to waste on these schemes people keep throwing at us. They never work out. We always end up holding an empty bag.”

“Look, I’ll admit I’ve drilled some dry wells. Nobody ever thought the economy would stay so bad for so long. My God, Millie, it’s been ten years. But this Hiatus, it’s different. It’s not an investment scheme at all. It’s just what the name says: it’s a chance to step back, to rest, to catch our breath.”

“Tell me. I know you’re dying to do it.”

“You bet I am. It all began with the space program. NASA. You remember. Back in the last century, they were planning to go to Mars.”

“Hank, be serious. They cancelled NASA years ago. We couldn’t even keep the space station up there, let alone go to Mars.”

“I know, Millie. I know all that. Just hear me out. One of the ways NASA planned to get people to Mars was to make them hibernate ... you know, like bears. They invented this drug. It’s called Ursinol. It slows down a person’s metabolism. Heart rate drops to almost nothing, respiration and brain activity too. Time passes, but your body just sleeps through it all. I have all the reports, right here. It’s for real.”

“So what are you telling me, Hank?” Millie stifled a giggle. “Are we going to Mars?”

Hank laughed as well, slapping his knee. “Oh no! Nothing like that! Mars! Ha ha! No, we won’t go to Mars. We’ll stay right here on God’s green earth. We’ll just take some time off, that’s all.”

Millie continued grinning. It was all so silly. “What do you mean? She asked.

“Well, that’s where Hiatus comes in. They purchased the old NASA patents. They’re building centers all over the nation—including one right here in Pittsburgh. When we sign up we’ll go to one, get into their capsules, and turn our bodies off for fifty years.”

“Fifty years? Why would we want to do that?”

Hank’s hearty smile returned. “Because in fifty years the problems we’re facing now will be over,” he said laughing. “There’ll be new medicines, new technology, new opportunities! It will be a whole new world! Millie, they tell me we’ll even lose some weight! We’ll look better and feel better. What do you say?”

“I don’t know. It all sounds so crazy.”

“Think a moment. What do we have to lose, really? Twenty more years or more worrying over every dime, living in this house until it falls down around us, eating cat food? Or we can bet on the future, take a nice rest—a rest we need, Millie—you as much as me. I’ve seen the worry in your eyes, no matter how you try to hide it.”

“You say others are doing it?”

“A lot of the men I work with. Not just the old ones either. Some of the younger guys are just as frightened as we are.”

“God knows I could use a rest. Hank, will it hurt?”

“Hiatus, huh?” Jarvis rolled the word around in his mind. It had a solid, calming feel to it. Maybe Dancer had really come up with something. “Are people using it now?” he asked.

Jonathan Dancer flashed his famous grin. “Ten thousand so far,” he said, “and they’ve only been marketing a few months. It’s been mostly word-of-mouth at that. The whole thing has stayed way, way under everybody’s radar.”

“Ten thousand is a lot, but not anywhere near enough,” the president continued. “We need millions. Is it scalable?”

“What if we made it easy?” Dancer asked. “What if we pipelined funding to the company, finance through one of the MACs. Building on a massive scale, buy-backs on mortgages, reverse social security loans. Hell, we’d have trouble keeping people out!”

“Only one thing wrong,” Jarvis said, shaking his head as he chuckled. “Jonathan, you almost had me hooked. So, tell me what happens fifty years down the road, when these people wake up? All we’d have done is kick the can down the road. Way the hell down the road, I’ll agree. But once they wake up again, all we’ve got is a bunch of empty buildings and an instant population explosion. It just won’t work.”

“Mr. President, I wouldn’t have taken you this far if that’s all I had,” Dancer replied, still smiling. “What if I told you it gets even better. Hiatus isn’t just a can kicker, it’s a can crusher!”

Millie spent days choosing what to take along. It was hard, getting rid of fifty years of life and the belongings that went with it. Neither she nor Hank had ever been hoarders, but it seemed like everything in the little house had a memory attached to it. Just touching an item to be saved or discarded brought the thoughts around it back. She cried more than she had meant to, glad that Hank was not there to see her so. He had enough to do, finishing up at work and seeing to the finances. The reverse mortgage on the house and cashing out the 401K had taken care of the Hiatus requirements. One of the items they’d take with them would be a bank book. Their savings would stay where they were, accruing interest for half a century. When they came back, it would be a solid nest egg.

Then there were the kids. Donna, their daughter, tried to stay calm and understanding, but eventually the tears came. “Oh, mom,” she fretted, “I know it’s selfish. I know it. But I wanted you to see Grace graduate. She will miss you so much. I will too.”

Hank junior was less emotional, especially when his father offered to take grandson Bobby with them. “They’ll have a cure for autism by then,” Hank told his son. “Have to. Three

of every twenty kids get it now. We can afford it. Give him the chance.” In the end, Bobby’s mother wouldn’t allow him to come, but they appreciated the gesture all the same.

Time seemed to rush by, pulling them both along with it. As the final day approached, Hank took Millie to the Hiatus center they’d be using. It was a giant building, far bigger than the old football stadium the company had razed to accommodate it. There she was shown the capsule that would hold her for half a century. To Millie, it looked like a very large plastic clam shell. “It’s all space age material,” the guide explained as he lifted the hatch. “Here, sit down. There’s nothing to be afraid of. Look how the cushion molds to your shape. During your Hiatus, you’ll be constantly massaged by the fluids in your capsule. When you awaken, it will be as though you’ve had the best night’s sleep ever.”

“Hank ... that is, my husband said something about ...” she whispered the word, “weight?”

The guide smiled. “Yes ma’am, it’s true. An unplanned benefit. Just as a bear sheds a lot of weight during hibernation, so will you. Thirty to forty pounds is not out of the question.”

In what felt like far too short a time, the day arrived. Hank and Millie had made arrangements to be picked up at their daughter’s home, following an afternoon family get-together and dinner. Everyone there tried hard to be happy and upbeat, but the underlying stress was palpable. Everybody was relieved when the limo finally pulled up.

As Millie climbed into the car, granddaughter Grace ran to embrace her. “I’ll wait for you, Nana,” she said as the tears streaked her cheeks. “I won’t forget. I will always love you.” She was still crying when the limo pulled away.

“OK,” Jarvis said, “Tell me the rest of it. What’s the punch line?”

“Statistics,” whispered Dancer, now in his element. He had always wanted to bring home the biggest political prize—the policy that would make the man he loved like a father revered as a great president. Now, he was sure he’d found it.

“Spell it out.” Jarvis rumbled.

“Ursinol was developed for NASA astronauts—men and women in the best physical shape imaginable.”

“So?”

“So, the people going to the Hiatus centers aren’t in good shape—most of them, anyhow. And they’re going to be under the drug for many times the length of a trip to Mars.”

“You mean ...” the enormity of the thought raced through the President’s mind. “How many?” he asked.

“I see you get it,” Dancer replied, nodding. “Our tests suggest a minimal attrition rate of thirty to forty percent. But that’s based on five year data. It could go higher, much higher.”

“In other words,” the president said slowly, “If we did this and it worked, we’d kill millions of people. I’d be a mass murderer, right up there with Hitler and Stalin.”

Dancer slammed his fist on the table. “No, damn it! You can’t look at it that way!” He turned the president’s swivel chair, so the men faced each other. “What we’d do is offer millions who are out of hope the chance for a better life. Some won’t make it, but what will they have lost, except the certainty of wrenching poverty and despair in a dying economy? Their sacrifices, voluntarily given—remember that—will set the country on a new, better path. If we don’t take this chance, the nation will fail. It will fail, Mr. President. You and I will be there to watch it fall. If we do this, we will have the chance to make this country right again. The ones who make it will bless you. The ones who stay will too. You’ll go down in history as a national hero.”

The room was suddenly silent. No one moved or spoke. Jarvis sat, slumped in his chair, looking at the floor. Thoughts tumbled through his mind. The implications of his decision, no matter which choice he made, were stark. He felt—he knew—that he must act. After what seemed like a very long time, he looked up.

“OK,” he said, staring at Dancer as if seeing him for the first time. “How do we make this happen?”

Hank and Millie walked into the giant center, hand-in-hand, like kids on a date. They entered a large, glass-walled room, where a uniformed attendant rushed to meet them. “You would be the Reynolds party, Henry and Millicent. Am I right?”

Hank nodded, as Millie held his hand even tighter.

“Right on time!” the attendant said. The emblem on his uniform was a clock without hands. “Please, follow me. Everything is set up and waiting.”

They followed him from the hall to an elevator that seemed to rise forever. It finally stopped smoothly, with just the slightest hiss of displaced air. Before them, less than ten feet away, were their capsules, open like sleek, ceramic clamshells. The lights were low in the room, and background music was faintly audible.

“The one on the right is yours, Mrs. Reynolds,” the attendant explained. “You can change from your clothes in the booth behind it. I’ll take care of your luggage for you. Mr. Reynolds, you’re on the left.”

Hank entered the booth and removed his clothes, donning the plastic coveralls provided within it. Millie was already by her capsule when he stepped out. She smiled, laughed.

“You look just like Flash Gordon,” she teased, as a technician helped her lay down, connected the IV and telemetry.

Hank was suddenly sad. “I’m going to wait until you go before I get in,” he told her, his voice thick with emotion. “I want to be the last face you see tonight, and the first one you see when we get up.”

Millie smiled dreamily. The Ursinol was already beginning to work on her. “I love you,” she sighed. “I will dream about us.” The clamshell closed and she was gone.

Hank got into his own capsule as quickly as he could. There was no reason to wait, not any longer. As Ursinol consumed his thoughts, he didn’t wonder what the world would be like when he next saw it. He was, he discovered, bone-tired. He just wanted to sleep.

Dancer made sure the votes were there. The last piece of the legislation he designed passed without a hitch, revamping Freddy Mac into a conduit for funding the project. Construction of the first massive centers had already begun. It was enough, by itself, to revive the moribund construction industry.

Keeping the gargantuan project on track was a tricky, time-consuming business. One day, Dancer hurried to the president’s office to set up a needed meeting.

“Where is he?” he asked the president’s personal secretary.

“Where he always is, these days,” she answered with a sigh. “Every afternoon, about three, he goes down to one of the Hiatus centers. The secret service guys tell me he just sits in the car, watching the people go in.”

“Text me the location,” Dancer said, turning on his heel to rush from the oval office. “I’ll catch him there.”

He found the president just as described. Staring from the window of his personal car, Jarvis sat watching couple after couple walk through the doors of the capital’s latest Hiatus center. Dancer opened the car door and slid next to him. “I need to talk to you, Mr. President,” he said.

“This center has only been open a week,” Jarvis said without turning. His voice was steady but low, almost a whisper. “Look at them: over a hundred in just the last hour. Not all old, either. There are lots of young people, Jonathan. Some of them bring their kids. Some of them come to the car when they see me. They want to shake my hand. They’re all so happy.”

“The centers fill up within a month,” Dancer replied with a shrug. “Even the new, bigger ones. There are forty in the D.C. area alone, and more on the way. If the current rate continues, we’re predicting over ninety million in Hiatus by the time the program ends.”

Then Jarvis turned to face him, and Dancer could see he’d been weeping. “What have I done?” he asked.

“You’ve saved the nation, Mr. President,” Dancer answered softly. “You’ve become a national hero. They say you’re the greatest leader since Lincoln. They compare you to FDR.”

“How do you think their sons and daughters will feel when those capsules finally open, Jonathan? We can’t even guess how many will survive.”

Actually, Dancer could. In fact, his guesses got better every day. He simply forced the Hiatus brass to tell him what was going on inside the centers. That had been easy, once they found out he already knew what they were just discovering. Mortality rates inside the clam-like capsules were high and rising.

It took an iron hand to keep the numbers from going public. “Work with me,” a smiling Dancer told the Hiatus execs. “We have fifty years to figure this out.” Most of them got on board. For those who didn’t ... well, there were lots of empty capsules around. No need to torture the president any further, Dancer assured himself. There was plenty of time to take care of the problem.

Those who remained revered Raymond Jarvis. For them, his policies had ushered in the dawn of a better time. Everybody had a little more room, a little more opportunity. The jobs were finally coming back. During his next seven years in office, with Dancer’s help, Jarvis made sure the nation stayed firmly on its new economic track. Then, near the end of his second term (after gently refusing a third), he made a startling announcement.

At a hastily-convened press conference, the nation’s forty-ninth president made public his decision to take Hiatus himself. “I’d like to share the hope of the future with so many other Americans,” he announced. “God knows, I can use the rest.”

Jonathan Dancer watched the press conference from just beyond camera range. People nearby later remembered it as one of the few times they didn’t see him smile.

###