

ROY KESEY

*Instituto*

—Good afternoon, *Instituto de Perfeccionamiento*.

—Hi, good afternoon. Look, sorry to bother you, but I'm calling because I was reading the newspaper yesterday and I saw your advertisement, and I was wondering what, exactly, you are capable of perfecting. And also why the name's in Spanish.

—All consultations are personal and in person, sir.

—Yes, but, just in general, what sort of things do you improve?

—We improve nothing, sir. If we improved things, the institute would be called the *Instituto de Mejoramiento*. It is not. We are not. It, we, is, are the *Instituto de Perfeccionamiento*.

—Okay, but again, sorry, what exactly do you perfect?

—All consultations are personal and in person.

—I see.

—Will there be anything else today, sir?

—I guess, well, sure, why not. Could you give me the address? I read through your advertisement, read it very carefully in fact, but—

—We are located on the *avenida*.

—The . . . Sorry, the what?

—The *avenida*. The avenue.

—The . . . Which avenue would that be?

—The *avenida*, sir.

—Madam, is this some kind of joke?

—No, sir, it is not. We do not joke here at the *Instituto de Perfeccionamiento*.

—Right, okay, but this is a city, madam. A large, not a small but a large-sized city, with thousands of avenues.

—There is only one *avenida*, sir.

—Well, but—

—We are not hard to find if you are in need of our services. If on the other hand you are not in need of our services, we are quite literally impossible to locate, but then, that wouldn't be such a problem, would it?

—No, I guess not. One last thing—do you, there at the *Instituto de Perfeccionamiento*, do you speak, in general, English?

—We are speaking English now, sir, you and I.

—Right, but the others, the, um, doctors or therapists or—

—*Perfeccionadores*. Perfectioners.

—Exactly, the perfectioners, do they speak English as well?

—All consultations are—

—Yes, yes I know. Well. Very well.

He went. He left his house and got in his car and drove. He turned left, and turned left again, and turned right, and went straight ahead. He turned left and right and left and left and left, and then he hit the *avenida*. He'd never seen it before, but there it was. He turned right and drove up the *avenida* until it dead-ended at the bay. There was a white fence or railing along the cliff-top, and a fine view: the bay, the seagulls, the sailboats. For a time he stared at the view. Then he got back in his car and drove down the *avenida* until it dead-ended at a white fence or railing along a cliff-top overlooking the open ocean. There was a view here as well. Again the seagulls and sailboats, though fewer of both than before. After staring at this new yet familiar view for a time, he got back in his car and drove back up the *avenida*, and just as he was about to turn right into the maze toward home, there on the corner he saw a sign. *Instituto de Perfeccionamiento*, it said.

He parked his car and walked to the door, knocked and opened and entered. Inside was a small lobby or vestibule and to one side was a desk and behind the desk was a woman. She had large dark eyes and creamy skin and short dark hair and a pretty smile. She smiled prettily.

—Yes? she said.

—Good afternoon. You, we, I called earlier and we spoke, you and I, I believe.

—Yes, sir, we did. One hundred dollars, please.

—But—

—Each session costs one hundred dollars, sir, regardless or regardless, both are acceptable now, of the treatment received.

—But—

He waited for her to interrupt him, and she did not.

—But . . . isn't that a little, I don't know, irregular? I haven't even seen the perfectionists yet. How do I know—

—*Perfeccionadores*, sir. Perfectioners. Not perfectionists, not in any sense of the word. 'Perfectionist,' sir, while likewise from 'perfection,' from the Middle English *perfeccioun*, from the Old French *perfection*, from the Latin *perfectio*, *perfectus*, was first used in or around 1846 to refer to or as signifier for an adherent to the ethical doctrine which states that the perfection of moral character constitutes man's highest good, or alternately b: an adherent to the theological doctrine that a state of freedom from sin is attainable on earth, or alternately 2: anyone disposed to regard anything short of perfection as unacceptable. Perfectioners are something else entirely, and no one ever sees them.

—Oh.

—I believe we will start with your skin.

—My skin? But madam, my skin . . . Well, okay, but it's not what I had in mind.

—Rest assured, sir, it's all part of the program, the program that has been chosen on your behalf. For now, try not to worry about the other aspects, the aspects that you did in fact have in mind. Those will be attended to in due time, insofar as they yield to our treatment—all of them, each and every one, insofar as they yield to our treatment, but in accordance with the program, and in due time. Now. Cash, check, or credit card?

He paid in cash and was shown by the large-eyed dark-eyed creamy-skinned short-haired dark-haired prettily smiling woman into a square waiting room. He sat down in the only chair, and the woman left, closing the door behind her too quickly for him to catch more than a glimpse of her splendid, better than splendid, quite genuinely ideal rump.

The walls were lined with bookshelves lined with books. After fifteen or twenty minutes of waiting he began to walk around, not in circles but in squares with sharp right angles, inspecting the books. None of them were in English. He wished he had paid more attention to his Spanish teacher in high school, just on general principles, just for the good of the thing, as none of the books were in Spanish either. After fifteen or twenty minutes of walking around in squares he sat down. After fifteen or twenty minutes of sitting he got up again and went to the door of the waiting room. There, he

listened. He heard nothing. After five or seven minutes of hearing nothing he opened the door and walked out to the lobby or vestibule. Now there was no one sitting behind the desk. He waited at the desk for nine or eighteen minutes, standing rigidly though not at attention. If there had been a bell or buzzer of any kind, he would have rung or buzzed it. He called out. He shouted. He screamed. At last he rapped his knuckles firmly on the desktop. Then he walked out the door and down the walk and to his parking spot, got into his car, and drove the long drive home.

—What a gyp, he thought.

First thing the next morning, he stopped sleeping and awoke. He opened his eyes and stretched, closed his eyes and opened them again. He stretched again. He got up and went to the bathroom and turned on the light and removed his underpants and turned on the shower and looked in the mirror.

His skin was perfect.

It was blemishless.

His acne, the acne that had plagued him, a forty-year plague, the very acne that had served as Elizabeth Wannaker's excuse for not accompanying him to the junior prom, and she'd said it out loud and to his face and in the presence of many persons, his friends and hers, though mostly hers as he lurked a short distance away, It's those zits, Stanley, those zits, do something about those zits and then maybe I'll accompany you to a prom, though not the junior prom as it will be too late for that and anyways I'm hoping Harold Plansky will ask me. Do you know him? His friends? His phone number?

That self-same acne was gone.

As were his scars. The thin curvilinear pink line across the top of his left big toe from that time he'd dropped the paint-can, and god alone knows why he'd been painting barefoot, freshening up the trim around the front door like his dad had told him to, and what a weird accident, the can had caught him just right, opened his toe down to the bone, and paint everywhere, blood-colored paint, no way to tell what was injury and what was home improvement and his whole foot hurt like a bitch—that thin curvilinear pink line was gone.

And the purple gouge in his left shin from that time he'd been running through the shopping center and had turned mid-flight to see if the bikers were still chasing him and had smacked into the low stone planter—that purplish gouge, filled in and touched up, the same color as the rest of his shin, shin-colored.

And the slight pucker in his glans from that mucked-up circumcision—vanished.

And the jagged slash down his right cheek from that time his ex-wife had come at him with the bread-knife, not that he blamed her, he'd been heavy on the sauce back then and heavy with his hands—invisible as if undone.

And the horrendous molten rippling of his left cheek and ear and part of his scalp from that time he'd gone into the JC Penney's, the whole place on fire, stacks of outerwear and racks of innerwear blazing torch-like, to save the Billingham kid trapped and cowering in the dressing room, who ended up dying anyway the following year, mowed down in a crosswalk by an unknown motorist who did not stop and was never apprehended—all that horrendous molten rippling, now baby-smooth.

And the five mauve nickel-sized welts scattered irregularly across his chest from that time when RT Pickaxe had run into a whole goddamn battalion of NVA maybe ten clicks into Cambodia, unable to hold the LZ and god was it hot, the perimeter brought in tight, calling for air support, calling for extraction, and he heard a voice, the voice of Johnson, and Johnson said the chopper was delayed but air support would be there in zero-six, would lay it down thick and close and give them a chance; three minutes later there was no one to return incoming fire but Stanley and Rahlan Drot, the rest of the team KIA and broken, and Rahlan Drot, the one Montagnard left who'd been with him from the start, Rahlan Drot with a shattered femur, the gooks closing in, and Stanley had taken Rahlan Drot on his back and oh how he'd run, the brush ripping at his face and the air keening sick all around, he'd hit a trail and no choice now, up the trail he ran, three gooks in front of him and reaching but he put them down, and how he ran, he dodged them all, all but one, a short skinny dude with an SKS carbine, and the bullets opened holes across the front of Stanley's shirt, five holes, black-rimmed and loose-fringed, and he'd dropped Rahlan Drot and fallen, and old Rahlan Drot, good old Rahlan Drot had taken Stanley's CAR-15

and waxed that short skinny gook, had picked Stanley up, an unbelievable thing, Rahlan Drot losing blood, the shattered femur, but he carried Stanley to the secondary LZ that Johnson's voice guided them towards, they'd popped smoke, purple and yellow and red, and the chopper had come, had pulled them out, by god an unbelievable thing—those five mauve nickel-sized welts, they had been polished away.

And what had become of Rahlan Drot? Stanley stood staring into the mirror in his bathroom, the light on, the shower running, his underpants balled in the corner. Had Rahlan Drot made it through to the end? They'd kept in touch for a time, but then the letters had stopped. Plenty of reasons why that might have happened, though. Say he made it. Say he is even now an aging man, a smiling happy aging man, the shattered femur healed not by any *Instituto de Perfeccionamiento* but by time and the body itself, the marvelous body, and Rahlan Drot with his wife, a tiny woman she must be, tiny and lovely and kind, and the two of them tend small fields of rice, and at times in the evening their children and grandchildren come, walking the long walk up and along the ridge, the grandchildren laughing and playing and at times oddly cruel, but only in childish ways, and Rahlan Drot rests in his thatched and stilted longhouse, chats with his wife and his children, watches his grandchildren play.

Stanley stared into the mirror, stared at his perfect skin, and an old word came to him, an old and funny and appropriate word, a word his mother had often used back when the two of them were still speaking, and he smiled, and stared at himself in the mirror, and said the word:

—Gadzooks! he said, perhaps from 'God's hooks,' swearing by the Crucifixion nails, archaic, used as a mild oath.

Or perhaps Rahlan Drot hadn't made it.

On Sunday he returned to the institute, and the institute was closed.

On Monday he returned to the institute, and the institute was open, and behind the desk sat the large-eyed dark-eyed creamy-skinned short-haired dark-haired prettily smiling woman.

—Hello, she said.

—Hello, he said.

—Are you pleased? she asked.

—It is a miracle, he answered. Or at the very least miraculous. You even perfected my glans.

—Not me, sir. The *perfeccionadores*.

—Even so. A miracle, or at the very least miraculous.

—We here at the *Instituto de Perfeccionamiento* aim to please.

—But I don't understand. How—

—You are not meant to understand, sir. You are meant only to be pleased. And now, I believe, your hair. One hundred dollars, please.

—My hair?

—Your hair.

—But my hair, my hair, I like my hair. My hair is fine. Or if it's not, and okay, let's say it's not, let's say it's graying, gone a bit thin on top, but no big deal, no particularly big deal, nothing I can't handle.

—You're forgetting about the program.

—Look, okay, the program, but if I want to fix my hair I can just go to the hairdresser and get a damn haircut, can't I. And for a damn sight less than a hundred dollars.

—If that is what you wish, sir, by all means, you may. If what you wish is to get your hair fixed, you can and may just go to the hairdresser and get a damn haircut. Do not let us stop you. We here at the *Instituto de Perfeccionamiento* are neither interested in nor capable of fixing things. If we fixed things, the institute would be called the *Instituto de Reparación*. It is not. We are not. It, we, is, are the *Instituto de Perfeccionamiento*.

—Well, hell.

—Yes, she said, from the Middle English, and that from the Old English, akin to *helan*, 'to conceal,' and Old High German, *helan*, the Latin *celare*, the Greek *kalyptein*, compared metaphorically and perhaps also likened literally to war by General W.T. Sherman. Have you come to a decision?

Again he paid in cash, and again he was shown into the waiting room. Again the chair and the sitting down, again only a glimpse of the ideal rump. Again the bookshelves and books and the fifteen or twenty minutes and the walking around and the sharp right angles and the inspection and the wish. Again the sitting, the getting up,

the walking to the door, the listening, the hearing of nothing, the five or seven minutes, the opening of the door, the walking, the lobby or vestibule. Again the nine or eighteen minutes, the lack of bell or buzzer, the calling out, the shouting, the screaming, the firm rapping of the knuckles, the opening and closing, the walking, the long drive home.

He awoke in the morning with perfect hair. Movie-star hair. Thick and wavy and lustrous, unlike it had ever been. He did not have to open his eyes or stretch or get up or go to the bathroom or turn on the light or remove his underpants or turn on the shower or look in the mirror. He awoke and simply knew: he could feel its perfection against his scalp. He would never have to rinse or shampoo or condition ever again.

And so it went. Skin, hair, refrigerator, eyesight, wardrobe, gastrointestinal tract, sofa, car, unicycle, hearing, pogo-stick, flooring, plumbing, prostate, wiring, fingernails, and so on. Drive, walk, knock, open, enter, chat, pay, walk, sit, glimpse, wait, inspect, wish, sit, get up, walk, listen, hear, wait, open, walk, wait, stand, call out, shout, scream, rap, walk, drive, over and over.

Then she said, Your program, sir, is complete.

—What?

—Your program is complete.

—No, I don't, it can't be, I'm, we're just getting started, just getting going, just getting into the groove.

—No, sir, I'm afraid we're not doing any of those things. Your program is complete.

—Well, okay, but surely there are, there must be, aren't there other programs?

—Not for you, sir. I'm sorry.

—But— But what about my fear of heights? My fear of lows? My nightmares? My echolalia?

—Sir, you do not suffer from echolalia.

—But I can feel it coming on right now at this very moment! 'Sir, you do not suffer from echolalia.' You see?

—I'm sorry, sir. Your program, your only program, the one and only program for you, it is finished.

—But what about Rahlan Drot? I'd give anything just to know if he made it, and if he did, to get back in touch, to know that he's

okay, doing well, being happy. And what about my mother? She's old, extremely old, ancient and kind-hearted and courageous but we haven't spoken in years—she's never forgiven me for allowing my ex-wife to get away. And my ex-wife, speaking of my ex-wife, beautiful woman, I don't blame her a bit for what happened, and she, well, yes, she remarried, but I heard she's since redivorced, so she's free now, reunattached, and there's nothing in the world I want more than to have her as my ex-ex-wife, to try again, to do right by her this time.

—I'm afraid that none of those things fall within our purview, sir. That is to say, none of those things yield to our treatment. Your program is complete.

—But—

Again she did not interrupt him. He sought a way to end his sentence. He found it nonendable.

—So I guess this is goodbye, he said.

—Yes, she said, an alteration of 'God be with you,' 1573, a concluding remark or gesture at parting; see also 'adios,' 1837, from the Spanish *adiós*, from *a*, from the Latin *ad*, and *Dios*, from the Latin *Deus*, used to express farewell.

Back to his car, his perfect car, back to his house, his perfect house. He walked immortal in circles and squares, one perfect room, and then the next. He ran his fingertips across his perfect skin. He ran his hands through his perfect hair. He ran across his perfect carpeting, stumbled over his perfect roller-blades, slammed headlong into a perfect wall, and there was no mark upon it, no mark at all, and his head was also still perfect, no pain, no swelling, no blood, and he ran from his living room to his kitchen to his hallway to his bedroom and the three pictures framed on his dresser: his mother, her apron stained, the rolling pin held up for show, the flour on her cheek, her laughter caught and held; and Rahlan Drot standing next to Stanley, the small brown man and the large white man, their arms interlocked, Rahlan Drot's earlobes pierced and stretched, Stanley's tigersuit faded but clean, this one moment permitted, friendship and trust, this one moment of grace before the next descent; and his ex-wife, the first day of their honeymoon in Cabo San Lucas, behind her the ocean stretched out calmly and blue, the low white wall of the terrace, the orchid in her hair, he'd told her how beautiful she looked, he'd raised the camera and she'd smiled and averted her eyes.