

The Disney Room
Philadelphia, October 8th, 1988

The two men came rushing out of the museum. Johnston's black Lincoln stood waiting for them at the bottom of the steps. Johnston was in no way bothered by the bizarre request to show his companion a work of art as all he could think about was the memory of the accident and any information from Mr. Gold that would help him understand such an unimaginable tragedy. He was totally preoccupied by those few minutes in the Disneyland car park on Saturday May 2nd, 1964 that had been witnessed firsthand by Johnston and his mother. He found it odd to contemplate that someone who had been so close to the site of the accident was now sitting next to him in the car. Rittenhouse Square was empty. They stood in silence in the lift and both stared at the digital display as the count increased. Max had seen a good many fancy apartments in his time but Johnston's place really was something else. He wasn't a particular fan of minimalism but the interior and the view were simply stunning.

"Can I offer you anything?"

"No, thanks. I'd prefer to get to the point."

"Take a seat." Johnston gestured in the direction of a Corbusier leather armchair into which Max just about managed to squeeze himself.

"I would like to take a look at Remington's Cheyenne statue."

"Sure. I promised. No problem at all. But you won't mind me asking how you know that I own such a statue."

"A close friend of mine, perhaps even a mutual friend, told me. I don't want to reveal his name yet."

"Yet? Are you planning something, Mr. Gold? Very well, come with me and I'll show you." Johnston stopped halfway along a corridor leading to the bedrooms and flicked the switch on a spotlight focused on a hall table. Cheyenne stood just inches from Max's touch.

"Here we are: one of Remington's greatest works. Now you've got what you wanted."

"Thank you. Might I go a little closer?" Max virtually had the statue in his grasp. He leaned so close in that his breath blurred its cold bronze patina. His eyes traced every square inch of the glossy brown surface, inspecting its every nuance down to the expression on the Indian's face."

"I would only ask that you don't touch it."

"Do you think that I'd damage it?"

"Not at all. It is just that, as you are my guest, you will surely allow me to set the rules."

"I'll buy it!" Max, spun around on the spot adding theatrical effect to what he saw as wonderful news.

"Yes, and why would you want to do that?"

"I like the statue and I'd like to purchase it."

"The statue is not for sale."

"Perhaps not for a large sum but maybe a ludicrous amount would help sway your decision. I am willing to pay a price of ten million dollars." He produced a cheque from his jacket pocket, already carrying a long line of noughts.

"Thank you, it really is a generous offer, but the statue is not for sale. I wouldn't sell it for ten million or twenty million. I wouldn't even part with it for one hundred million dollars."

Max knew that it wouldn't be the easiest deal to broker but Johnston's determination came like a cold shower. He had already imagined himself handing over the cheque, having the statue wrapped, and walking out with it safely packaged in his bag. How easy it would have been to take a cool three million dollars for one night's work...

"Are you sure that you wouldn't like a drink?" Johnston said, with a change of tone.

"I wouldn't mind a cup of coffee."

"Doesn't the caffeine keep you awake?"

"I'm used to it. I rarely drink coffee in the evening but I could do with one now."

Johnston took the precaution of leading Max away from the statue in the direction of the dining room and sat him at a long, glass table. He made sure to place him at an angle that could be clearly seen from the kitchen. Max had no intention of rushing things, and sat patiently waiting for his hot coffee.

"Why the keen interest in the statue?" Johnston placed the cup and saucer in front of him.

"I'm an art dealer and I have a buyer."

"I'm very sorry but your buyer will have to forget this statue. It's more a part of my life than a work of art; more like a companion with me from childhood."

"Have you owned the statue since you were a child?"

"Not exactly. I saw it for the first time on the day that my father died. I didn't hear of it for a long time after that until I stumbled across it a couple of years back."

"You saw it for the first time on the day of the accident?"

"It's a rather long story but I can tell you if you like. You were there at the accident so you are sure to understand why it is so very important to me."

"I'm listening." Max pulled his chair closer to the table.

"It all started with my illness. I was back home after school one day when one of my mother's old colleagues paid us a visit. We hadn't seen her for ages but she remembered that Mum had a son and so she turned up with a gift. It was a toy bus. I was absolutely over the moon but the box and the whole plastic toy had an odd smell. I trundled it around the place but I kept stopping to sniff it because it smelt so peculiar. Days went by and the smell didn't go away. It kind of stuck to me and my hands, feet, and clothes started to smell just like the little, plastic bus. I couldn't sleep at night and my pillow even took on the smell. No matter where I turned my head, I was surrounded by the bittersweet, sickly smell. Then I could hardly get out of bed one morning. I put it down to tiredness but I even had to lean on the wall when I went for a pee. I thought it was all because of the bus. My parents found me slumped on the bathroom floor and called a doctor out straightaway. Apologies for starting so far back in the story but I find it impossible to miss a single detail when it comes to my illness.

"No problem. Please, go on." Max secretly hoped that telling the story would soften Johnston up and something would eventually urge him to part with the statue.

"I had weeks of tests and they eventually told my parents that I had a malignant tumour in front portion of my brain. My life changed overnight. I couldn't go home, I couldn't play with my toys, I couldn't go to school, and everything that I had known and loved moved further and further out of my reach. I became a different child who suffered his tortuous treatment in silence. I can remember how we all lay in our beds on the ward and when the nurse came around with our breakfast, she found Kevin dead in his bed next to mine. We'd become sort of friends. He lay no more than a foot away, all pale and his mouth half open. The rest of us all knew that the same could happen to any one of us at any time. There was a new boy in Kevin's place by the end of the day and I can still remember his eyes that were so blue they

shone. He was only in for a month because he got better and walked out of hospital as healthy as ever. I read about Disneyland in a children's magazine and decided that there was no way I could die without going there first. My parents came in to see me every day and every day I would beg and plead for them to take me to Disneyland and told them that it was my last wish. The words "last wish" reduced my mother to tears and they got the money together for the flight, accommodation, and entrance fee so that we could all spend three days together at the park. It was only when we were leaving the hospital that I saw Father had traded his car in for something cheaper to help finance the trip. So, despite all advice to the contrary, the three of us boarded an American Airlines flight and set off on our adventure to Disneyland.

"I can remember walking into Disneyland for the very first time and feeling as if all my dreams had come true. I cried when we had to leave and said that I wanted to stay and live with Mickey."

"I was just the same. I wanted to forget about my illness from which everybody was convinced I would never recover. The days flew by and I did all I could to stop time and wallow in the limitless joy of it all like a great big fluffy blanket. Then we only had one day left and we were set to fly back to Philadelphia. I had been on most of the rides a couple of times by the third day and we walked the streets and saw the sights one last time, hand in hand. I only had to ask and I got everything I wanted: hotdogs, hamburgers, ice cream, candy, lollypops. I only had to look at something and my father reached into his pocket to pay and see the smile spread across my face. We were celebrating my life because as far as we knew, the end was nigh and these were to be my last days and moments of happiness. Of course, we had to keep stopping to sit down so that I had enough energy to get through the day. We were taking one such candy-floss-eating break when we noticed that a grey-haired, old man had left his spectacles behind on the bench next to us. They were real granddad, thick-rimmed glasses. By the time that Father noticed them, the old man had disappeared into the crowd. He decided the best thing was to pop them in his pocket and hand them in on the way out. We made the most of every last minute and only got to the main entrance just before closing time. We could have handed the glasses in earlier but I don't think my Father wanted to waste time when I had such little time left. Do you know the town hall in Disneyland?"

"The one with the clock tower by the main entrance."

"Yes, it's on your right-hand side as you walk out of the park. My father reckoned that this would be the best place to hand the glasses in. The fire station was next to the town hall. As far as I know, it hasn't changed much since. Things like this fascinated me as a boy and I had to go and have a closer look. It was built exactly like a little fire station in an idyllic, country town with its very own old-fashioned fire engine. We were standing looking at it with Father when I noticed that the lights were on upstairs. Most of the buildings in Disneyland are just elaborate sets and look as if there are people living behind the curtains but that's all part of the show. This time, the light shining from the windows seemed more genuine. It isn't all that hard to imagine how fascinating a fire station is to a small child. If only I could get to meet a real fireman, I thought, and I opened the door at the side of the building.

My parents followed me and there was no suggestion of 'come on, let's go'. They walked behind me at a decent distance until I reached the steps at the end of the courtyard. It was completely obvious that this staircase lead to the upper floor. I put my foot on the first step and my mother shouted to say that we had better be going. My father grabbed her hand and waved for me to carry on, no trouble at all. It was my day. The stairs turned off to the right and finished at a doorway in the back wall of the building. I opened the door and waved

eagerly down to my parents to follow me. Then I disappeared from view. I wasn't greeted by what I had expected to see. Instead of all the paraphernalia of a fire station, I found myself standing in a richly appointed apartment. The plush red furniture stood on a carpet of the same colour with dark red drapes hanging at the windows. The place had a feeling of comfort and homeliness. The walls were dotted with paintings, a vase of fresh flowers on the coffee table, and the sight of a gramophone stopped me in my tracks. The horn was pointing right at me and I couldn't take a single step further without having a good look at the fantastic contraption. I was just about to touch it when I heard a man's voice from behind. 'You like music?' he asked. I nearly jumped out of my skin and spun around to see who was speaking. I could hardly believe my eyes. Standing there in a grey, short-sleeved shirt, hair swept back, and a thin moustache was none other than Walt Disney himself. Like all grownups, kids recognised his face just as easily. He was always in the newspapers, magazines and films. I stood rooted to the spot. One part of me felt caught red-handed while the other part was stunned to meet my first famous person who had always seemed so distant and unreal. Disney was very kind. He acted as if we had known each other for a lifetime as he placed his hand on my shoulder and set the old gramophone playing for my entertainment. He flopped down into one of the soft armchairs and gestured that I should do the same. He'd wound the gramophone so well that it must have played for a good ten minutes before slowing to a halt. I don't recall the recording but I remember it as being very pleasant and melodic. Then my parents walked in. They must have started to wonder what was going on inside. Disney stood up and walked over to the door. Their expressions looked glazed and my embarrassed father offered a trembling hand to Mr. Disney. They couldn't quite understand what the great man was doing there and quite what I was doing sitting so comfortably in a great armchair."

"It's hardly surprising. No one would ever predict such a meeting. What we would have given back then to shake the hand of Mickey Mouse's creator..." Max's eyes sparkled at this unexpected turn of events.

"Disney had the secret apartment built specially so that he could keep a close eye on the building of the park. Then when it eventually opened, he would sit at the window and watch the crowd to assure himself that everyone was having a wonderful time. Disneyland was his great dream and he wanted to see people's reaction for himself."

"I never knew that he had a secret hiding place."

"Only the smallest circle knew of its existence. It was very tiny and it had everything including a bathroom and a kitchen so that he could spend a couple of days there in complete comfort. We had literally stumbled into his inner sanctum. What's more, we had Walt Disney as our personal host. The whole thing was just so unbelievable. For a second, I thought that my parent's had staged the whole thing but their own surprise made me realise it had happened by chance. He served us all with refreshments; we sat in the lounge and he asked questions about me. Did I like the park? Which was my favourite? Was there anything that I would have done differently? I guess we'd been talking for a quarter of an hour before my father eventually told him the story behind our trip. He told him that I was seriously ill and that it was my dream. My mother started to sob as my father told the tale and she began to dig in her handbag for a handkerchief. Disney's expression transformed completely. It was as if a cloud had passed over the sun and he stared into my eyes but didn't say a word. We sat in silence. He was so touched by what he had heard that he was lost for words. He suddenly stood up and I thought this was to signal the end of our visit but instead he held both my hands and said: "You're going to get better. I'm positive that you're going to make a full

recovery and when you have children of your own, you'll bring them along to Disneyland too. You'll look up at this window and you'll say: 'See, this is where Daddy got better.'

Still holding my hands, he led me over to a little, black table standing by the wall. There was a statue on the table."

"The Cheyenne?"

"Of course, I didn't have the faintest clue back then but it was the Cheyenne, yes. He told me to touch the Indian's face and concentrate on what I wanted the most. I didn't dare touch it at first and then I turned to my parents who saw the well-meaning game behind the whole thing and nodded that I should reach out and stroke the Indian's head. What could happen?"

"Disney didn't say a word, just that you should stroke the statue?"

"Not a thing. I did as he asked and he looked instantly relieved. You could tell he felt that he had done all that he could and was sure of its success."

"Didn't he say anything about why it had to be that statue in particular?"

"He neither mentioned the name of the statue nor the artist. I only discovered that it was Remington's Cheyenne much later on when I started to look into things for myself."

"So you managed to beat the illness completely..."

"The story continues. We said goodbye to Disney. He gave my mother a kiss on the cheek, shook my father by the hand, and then escorted us outside. We were in total ecstasy. He was such a fantastic man and we were so lucky to have met him. We didn't talk about it but none of us could get over the odd scene with the statue. We virtually floated out of the park and my father didn't give the glasses a second thought. We joined a crowd of thousands as they left with children clutching balloons accompanied by tired but satisfied parents. We were outside and on the edge of the car park when my father suddenly shouted that he could see the old man who had forgotten his glasses. He let go of my hand and started to run after him shouting: 'Sir, your glasses!' The man didn't turn around and carried on walking away. My father was only a few yards away when a car hit him at full force. One minute he was chasing the old guy, and the next he was sprawled ten yards down the road under a car. We just stood and stared. We froze in panic as a crowd of strangers gathered around my father, his one shoeless foot sticking out from under the car. Then we broke into a desperate run, yelling and crying. Then the strangest thing happened. The driver of the car jumped out, took a look at Father then got back into the driver's seat and reversed out of sight. He simply sped away without a word. But I suppose you saw that too.

"Yes, I remember that too." Max listened as if it hadn't been him sitting in the car but a notorious criminal who had surely been punished for such a terrible crime.

"My father died at the scene. I lost my father at the gates to Disneyland."

"It must have been atrocious. I'm terribly sorry. But what happened to your illness?"

"I didn't see a doctor before the funeral. We went back to the hospital after it was all over and they gave me a full examination. My doctor searched for the symptoms, pinched me, pummelled me, took measurements, and did tests but there wasn't a single sign of my illness. They sent me home. There was even an article written about me in one of the medical journals and the word 'miracle' didn't appear but they used a long list of medical expressions that said much the same."

"Unbelievable how you got better like that." An idea started to take shape in Max's head.

"I went back to school and started everything all over again. I couldn't get the thought of the statue or Walt Disney out of my head and I was convinced that my father had given his life for mine."

“When did you find the statue?”

“The art teacher at school helped me with the identification. It wasn’t that hard; a couple of catalogues and books... I found it soon enough. I stuck a picture of Cheyenne on the wall above my bed. I used to talk to it at night before I went to sleep and I know it sounds absurd but I was convinced that the statue guarded my father’s spirit and allowed me to communicate with him.”

“And how did you track down the statue itself?”

“I started to collect Cheyennes. I must have had my hands on every good and bad fake there is over the years. I went on to practice medicine and the Amon Carter Museum allowed me to photograph an original that they had in their collection, so I got to touch an original for a second time.

“But how did the ‘seven’ or ‘seventeen’ end up here?”

“You are well-informed! So, you know about the serial numbers?”

“Sure.”

“I’m not certain which one this is but I have a strong sense that it the self same statue that I saw as a child in Disney’s hideout.”

“What makes you think that?”

“The statue influences the fate of it’s owner. I can sense it guiding my life and dealing the cards in such a way that I always seem to come out on top. If it had come into my possession any other way, I might not be so sure, but that answered so many questions.”

“Do tell!” Now, Max was confident that his plan would work but he couldn’t quite believe it was going to be that easy.