

A Killer Pesto

The Narbonic Filename Story

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When Octavius Winter told people—normal people—that he was an evil attorney, they always responded with some jolly variant on “Aren’t they all?”

Winter had a special gaze reserved for those people. It was on the surface almost identical to his usual cold grim workaday glare, the only discernable difference was that it inspired the target to instantly stagger back, gibber an apology, or burst into tears—generally all three.

He was an evil attorney. Like only the best evil attorneys, he knew that his clients (whether world-conquering despots, twitchy mad scientists or the slick and reptilian heads of sinister corporations) appreciated a modicum of the appropriate style from the henchmen and servitors in their hire. For a lawyer, this meant a complexion of fungal sallowness, a dour visage carved in deep and portentous lines, hair slicked back from a widows peak, expensive dark suit with shoulders broad enough to accommodate a brace of vultures and, whenever possible, a cloak. The gaze was just the maraschino cherry on the macabre hot-fudge sundae of Octavius Winter, Evil Attorney at Law.

For what he charged, it was the least he could do. Evil law was steady, rewarding work. Winter’s practice attracted the types of clients who had plenty of liquid cash, suffered frequent difficulties with the law and were generous in their peculiar way to those willing to help them. Villains are a lawyers dream.

Winter did get the occasional bad apple, one of those shortsighted would-be overlords who try to murder their own hirelings, up to and including licensed legal representatives, simply to prove their ruthlessness, but it was for just such frivolous individuals that odorless poisons had been developed, after all.

Winter didn’t much mind handling the bad apples in the evil community. He always politely but firmly requested payment up front. Yet the functions of an evil attorney do include some genuine unpleasantness and Winter, as his tasteful black sedan slid through the shadows of the university’s sunny tree-lined drive, suspected that he might be approaching some of it.

He was not pleased.

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True, the Narbon estate was in many respects the finest entry in his impeccable portfolio and he was willing to endure much for it. Before Dr. Helen Narbon had hired Winter, her family's legal affairs had been handled for uncounted generations by Elijah Threadham, one of the true legends.

Winter remembered reading with boyish awe in his days as an amoral law student of how the mere entrance of the venerable lawyer into a courtroom, stapled-together flesh dripping and eye sockets emitting their familiar red LED glow, had won the Narbon family many hasty and agreeable out-of-court settlements. When Threadham had at last gone irrevocably to pieces and Dr. Narbon had reluctantly stopped digging him up and hooking him to the galvanizer for one last case, Winter had been honored to assume the position of the Narbon's new attorney.

But that had been many years ago, when Dr. Narbon was an ambitious young mad scientist with a string of zombie-related lawsuits still ahead of her. Winter had liked Dr. Narbon as much as he liked anything. He would miss her nasty, brutish, and consummately professional business demeanor. He knew only two things about the younger Helen Narbon, the girl with whom he was about to deal: she was old enough to sign legally binding documents, and she was sane. The first point made his job much easier. The second, he reluctantly admitted in the clammy depths of his heart, worried him.

Well, this was her dormitory. Time to protect the Narbon interests.

Gamine coeds in undersized T-shirts idled in the sunshine outside the ivy-dappled building, smoking slim cigarettes and listening to bubblegum on a portable radio. Winter descended on the tableau like the bad fairy storming the enchanted palace, freezing the girls mid-smoke. He carried a black leather attaché case in one hand and a bone-handled walking stick in the other, and he was the worst thing they had ever seen. The radio actually fell silent as he passed.

A good entrance was the backbone of an evil attorney's courtroom work. It was hardly to his credit that so few of his colleagues rehearsed as conscientiously, or took tradition as seriously. When, however, the

plump woman behind the desk in the lobby fell backwards over her chair in her panic to scurry away from him, then lay on the floor like a pastel beetle with her round legs kicking helplessly at the air, the corners of Winter's colorless lips did turn briefly, incrementally upwards before he remembered himself.

He loomed over the desk. "I am looking," he intoned (thanks to years of careful practice, it was difficult for Winter not to intone) "for a Helen Narbon."

The desk attendant popped into a sitting position. Her face glowed with the relief of someone who has just been informed that the bell tolls not for her, but just for old Quasimodo again.

"Oh, oh, her. I—I think she's waiting for you in the common room." She pointed eagerly down the hall, her arm quivering.

The common room, Winter reflected with distaste, was as brainlessly pleasant as the rest of the campus: rose draperies, fuzzy armchairs, a few abandoned textbooks fading in the late-afternoon sun. The whole place was a round-bellied puppy begging to be kicked.

Dr. Narbon would never have been seen dead (or undead) in a place like this. She had of course occasionally lectured at colleges; usually in the dead of night, usually in an institution with Invisible, Arcane or possibly Enochian in its title. This was not the same thing at all. And meanwhile, the younger Helen Narbon, having abandoned her familial responsibilities seven years past, the sole inhabitant of the parlor, was curled in a burgundy armchair, her back to the door.

Winter loomed forward to investigate. The girl's blonde ponytail swung over the open pages of the textbook, casting pink shadows over complex biological diagrams which Winter, had he been asked, could neither have identified nor feigned any interest in.

Winter was not in the habit of making polite noises to introduce himself for much the same reason a tiger on the stalk is not in the habit of clearing its throat. "Helen Beta Narbon," he demanded.

The girl jumped, then turned to face him.

Winter chided himself for the chill that ran up his spine. He had, after all, expected this. The Narbons were mad scientists all the way

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down their makeshift line. Winter had only the mildest interest in what his clients did with their time when they weren't being clients, but he was vaguely aware that mad scientists had their specialties. Professor Caesar controlled the weather, Lupin Madblood and Felix Madblood before him were killer-robot men, Madame Onyx had been into particle physics before vanishing into that parallel dimension. (Unfortunately business, she still owed him a retainer from the vanishing-island settlement.)

The Helen Narbons were biologists. Reviving the dead was a talent of theirs. So was engineering beast-men. So was cloning. It was how they made more Helen Narbons. It was hard to picture them going through the usual biological channels. Winter should not have been startled then that Helen Beta was a photocopy of Dr. Narbon at twenty-five: the age lines erased from the round apple-cheeked face, the calculating gleam wiped from the large blue eyes. He should not have been startled, and was deeply disappointed in himself for it, but he was. In the course of his career Winter had seen the dead rise from the grave, usually smelling awful and angrily demanding personal-injury suits, but not like this. This was eerie.

Helen Beta gazed wide-eyed into the long grim face of Octavius Winter, a face that made strong men whimper when it frowned and shriek when it smiled. Her brow puckered. "You're one of Mom's people aren't you? You've got the look."

Winter inclined his head. "I am, among other things, Dr. Narbon's attorney and executor. You received my letter?"

"That's right. Why did you want to see me? And what happened to Mr. Threadham?"

"Elijah Threadham died not long after you ceased communications with Dr. Narbon."

"He was already dead."

"This time it took."

"Oh." Helen frowned. "Well, I don't know what Mom told you, but we went over this with Mr. Threadham. She doesn't have any control

over me. It doesn't matter that I was created as an experiment. She can't—"

"I fear you misunderstand the situation, Miss Narbon. Do you know of a decent Italian restaurant?"

"What?"

"I prefer to discuss matters of a sensitive nature over dinner. Unless you would prefer a more private venue?"

"Sensitive? Look Mr., was it, Winter?"

"Winter."

"Mister Winter I cut my ties to Mom and her thingies when I left home. I'm putting myself through college. I'm working toward my doctorate."

"In biochemistry, as I recall."

"Lots of people study biochemistry. Lots of people are good at it. It doesn't mean anything. And when I graduate this spring without blowing anything up, without unleashing any horror, without tampering in god's domain even a tiny little bit, I will find a nice job doing something nice that helps people. You understand, I'm out of the family business. I don't care what horrible thing Mom has done this time, and I'm not bailing her out again."

"Miss Narbon, you are the most recent in the long line of Narbon women—"

"Immaterial."

"—and as such you have certain legal responsibilities. Dinner?"

Helen deflated. It was as Winter had, with distaste, suspected. Underneath a thin, brittle coating of bluster the girl was pure marshmallow.

"Okay. Fine. Let's go."

Helen stuffed her textbook into a lilac backpack and stood. She was wearing a pretty pink blouse. This struck Winter as particularly obscene. How dare this girl dress Dr. Helen Narbon's body in a pretty pink blouse? It had tiny hearts embroidered around the collar.

Winters small sour stomach turned.

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The radio on the front lawn had resumed normal play, the bucolic sorority tableau was restored. As Winter, Helen bobbing nervously in his wake, passed the college girls his ears picked up hisses of conversation.

“Oh surprise, it’s her again.”

“What do you think they got her for this time?”

“Hope she’s not coming back.”

He flicked a glance at them. This time the radio exploded.

“You don’t seem well-liked here,” said Winter, casting about for light conversation.

“Oh, those girls.” Helen tossed her head. “There were accidents. Early on. Some people will believe all kinds of rumors.”

“But you’re much better now, I imagine.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sure you’ve never even laid a finger on those particular young women.”

“Exactly.”

“And it didn’t so much as occur to you how very easy it would be to convert their bones to some highly corrosive acid which would eat their soft young flesh from the inside out?”

“I’m much better.”

Now that Winter had time to reflect he saw that the really remarkable thing about Helen Beta, all things considered, was how much she didn’t resemble her creator. Dr. Narbon’s shock of dandelion hair had stuck out from her head in the mad scientists regulation finger-in-the-lightsocket formation with the odd clump burned or bitten off. Helen’s was bound back in a tight neat ponytail with a stiffness that suggested too much styling gel, or perhaps wood glue. Dr. Narbon’s electric blue eyes had flickered behind a formidable pair of black-framed Army-issue BCDs. Helen also wore glasses, of course, but hers were fanciful little loops of filigree perched on her nose as if ready to bail out at the first sign of trouble. If it were possible for glasses to make a person look less intelligent, these were the frames. And Helen hunched

(something Winter considered only acceptable for licensed hunchbacks), and chewed her lip, and worried her brow. And that teeny-tiny voice. . .

“Mr. Winter?”

Winter sighed. “Miss Narbon?”

“Are you going to tell me what this is about?”

“Over dinner, Miss Narbon. I am very sorely in need of dinner.”

Twenty minutes later, Octavius Winter was glowering.

He seldom felt called upon to glower. His normal expression was more than foreboding enough to communicate his disapproval, often across state lines. The very fact that circumstances had gotten bad enough to require a full glower was enough to dampen his already thoroughly-mildewed mood.

“This is a nice place,” said Helen Beta bouncing in her seat a little.

Winter allowed his gaze to travel slowly and witheringly around the room. He was not accustomed to dining in well-lit establishments, and the very fact that he could see his surroundings was enough to make him dislike them. His dark little avian eyes squinted into the flat fluorescent light.

“There is,” he intoned, “a jukebox.”

“It’s a perfectly nice bistro,” Helen said defensively, ducking behind her laminated menu.

It occurred to Winter that the glower had relatively little effect on his dining companion. She might be a damp little ball of pink fluff, he reminded himself, but she had been raised by Dr. Narbon. Evil probably didn’t bother her that much. More likely it just made her faintly homesick.

He allowed his face to realign itself along its well-worn grooves and glanced down at the table. His aching eyes gazed blearily at artifacts he found utterly alien and horrific: paper napkins, fiberglass surfaces, little foil-wrapped pats of butter and a little sign urging cheerfully “ask you’re server for our daily specials!” Enough was enough.

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“To business,” said Winter. “Your mother is dead.”

Helen stared blankly. “What?”

“Your mother, dead.” Winter squinted crosswise at the menu as if trying to avoid direct eye contact with it. “Do you imagine they know anything whatsoever about tortellini?”

“What do you mean, dead?”

Winter glanced up. “You’re a biologist aren’t you? Now, as her executor I have certain duties at this time, as do you as her heir.” His attaché case snapped open. “There is, to begin, some paperwork to be signed.”

“Wait, what?” Helen shook herself. “How—how did she die?”

“Angry mob, I am assured. It was slow and agonizing.” A rare blush of human feeling moved Winter to attempt a consoling word or two. “She would have wanted it that way.”

“You ready to order?” snapped a waitress.

Winter returned to his paperwork. “I will have whichever of your a la carte items is least tasteless. Do not under any circumstances bring me anything you people consider wine.”

Helen rubbed her forehead. “He’ll have the tortellini. Bring me the special and beer.”

As soon as the waitress was gone, Helen turned on Winter. “Mr. Winter, I don’t appreciate this. My mother is not dead.”

Winter didn’t answer. He could see no particular point. Two gold-tipped pens emerged from his attaché case and took their place at the table flanking Dr. Narbon’s last will and testament.

“She’s not,” said Helen, her voice strained. “She’s got you fooled. She’s played dead any number of times. Don’t you know that?”

From the depths of the case winter unearthed a slim, black, poisonously expensive-looking laptop computer. It yawned luxuriously, spreading its paper-thin alligator jaws with surprising speed. Winter’s pale fingers flew over the ebony keys. Winter’s interest in technology extended strictly to owning the best and wielding perfect control over it. His approach to his clients was similar.

He hoped Helen Beta would stop being tiresome soon.

“Are you listening?” Helen was saying. “She’s not dead! She couldn’t be!”

Winter turned the computer so she could see. It was impressive, he had to admit, the quality of video available on a really good computer these days. He didn’t bother watching this time, but the sound was crystal clear: the cries of the enraged mob, the roar and crackle of the flames, and above all the screams. It wasn’t an exceptional end for a mad scientist, not remotely, but high-def digital really did add something. It certainly left no doubt whatsoever that Dr. Narbon was dead.

Afterwards, Helen sat in silence. The pink had drained from her cheeks.

“She’s not gone,” she said at last. “It’s a hoax, she faked the video somehow, she—”

“I don’t believe so,” said Winter. “There are several other videos, if you’d care to see them. Evidently a number of the villagers brought camcorders.”

“My mother—”

“Is quite dead, yes. Now as you can see from the will you stand to inherit—”

“She can’t be dead—”

The couple at the next table stared then glanced away.

Winter, maintaining a cold grip on his nerves, looked up from his laptop. He ignored the unaccustomed warmth of blood pumping in his veins.

It was probably nothing, he thought, almost certainly nothing. But for a moment he thought he’d heard in Helen Beta’s voice a minute dissonance, a tremor, the twang of a very fine thread stretched to its limit. It was probably nothing.

It had better be nothing.

Winter had worked for many years with mad geniuses of various stripes, but only once had he actually seen one in the process of going mad. It had been happening for several hours by the time Winter had arrived on the scene and no one could get within half a mile of the building where the boy was holed up. No one living, at any rate.

Winter recalled the afternoon as a fever dream of fire, shadows, creeping circuitry and objects turning nauseatingly inside out. If the boy hadn't been knocked out by a chunk of falling plaster he almost certainly would have pulled the building and possibly the surrounding town down around himself, thereby thoughtfully simplifying Winter's job. As it was he'd survived and had awakened in a much calmer state, albeit still as mad as any number of hatters. He didn't make things turn inside-out anymore, though mad geniuses were said to be at their most creative during the initial breakdown, which was why no one wanted to be anywhere near them at the time.

Whenever he thought of the incident, Winter remembered exactly how small the boy had looked when the EMTs had carried him out of the ruins, how small and unremarkable with black head scabs on his thin pubescent cheeks and plaster in his greasy black hair, and how impossible it was to imagine any connection between this scrawny boy and the horrors that had come from his head and hands.

It was usually boys, Winter reminded himself, teenagers. They went insane when they were young. Helen Beta might have been a copy of her mad mother, a pale, washed-out copy, Winter thought, but she hadn't gone mad or shown any sign of going mad, and now she was getting a little too old to lose her mind.

Winter reprimanded himself for letting his imagination get the better of him. He was no great fan of having an imagination in the first place.

"You don't understand," Helen Beta was saying. "She can't be, I mean, she wouldn't—how could she leave me with—" She broke into heaving messy sobs.

Winter snapped the laptop shut and gazed grimly at the ceiling, not quite sure where to put his eyes. He was accustomed to dealing with people who reacted to news of a death in the family with peals of maniacal laughter. Tacky, he'd always thought, but still vastly preferable to this damp display. He considered offering the girl a handkerchief but decided against it. It was silk, after all.

"Dr. Narbon," Winter said at last, "was a mad scientist. Surely even

you are aware that mad scientists are not noted for long and healthy lives? I don't believe a Dr. Narbon has ever reached her fiftieth birthday. Admittedly it's more common for them to destroy themselves before the mob gets to them—"

"She's not Dr. Narbon!" Helen Beta shouted. "She's my mom!"

The bistro fell silent for a long, level moment. Winter stared at the girl across the table, her tangled hair, her pink face covered in red blotches and glossy with tears, but still unmistakably the face of the infamous Dr. Narbon. Then he laughed. He couldn't help himself, it was just too ridiculous.

Helen Beta stared at him, sniffed loudly, then ran for the restroom.

Winter glowered at the rest of the restaurant. He felt a sudden fierce irritation at Helen Beta and at Dr. Narbon for subjecting him to this ordeal. Why she couldn't have died unloved by anyone like a sensible person was beyond him. It was that strange maternal instinct in the Narbons. Kindness and mercy were clinical curiosities to them, Winter knew all too well. They were unmoved by love, but when it came to their creations, they went just a little bit soft.

Winter's mind wandered at the thought of Dr. Narbon, perfect save for that one weakness.

Not until the waitress arrived with two plates of rubbery pasta did he realize that Helen Beta had been away from the table a little too long. His blood was always chilly, but this time it froze with creeping horror. He realized what he had done.

He had laughed.

He had laughed, and he was a fool.

Helen stared at her face in the restroom mirror. Her mother's face. No, her face, hers. It kept going blurry as her eyes went in and out of focus. She was having interesting ideas again, all kinds of interesting ideas, and it was harder than usual to stop thinking about them because of the laughter.

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That fool and his laughter, it echoed around and around the part of her head where she went to get away from interesting ideas.

“I am having a schizophrenic episode,” Helen told her mother’s reflection, enunciating crisply, “of the type characterized by general disorganized thinking and possible auditory hallucinations. This is a commonly observed phenomenon among individuals afflicted with hypercognitive dementia, also known as *Walton’s disorder*, also known popularly as *mad genius*, DSMIV numeric code 29533. If this disorder is genetic there is a 100 percent chance that I have inherited it. I know exactly what is going on. It is perfectly comprehensible.”

She laughed hysterically for a minute or so (not a good sign, she thought) and then the thought fluttered away. Her face, when it skipped into focus, was pale and blotchy. Possibly she had been crying. Yes, someone had definitely been crying sometime. Not her, not when everything was so funny, and she had so many interesting ideas. It was all so funny, so funny with everywhere the laughter, then she couldn’t think about that anymore because she got distracted by the hand soap.

Hand soap, primary active ingredient probably $C_{12}H_7Cl_3O_2$, better known as triclosan, harmful only to bacteria at low concentrations but at higher concentrations a potentially powerful wide-spectrum biocide. Also present: glycerin ammonium chloride, some kind of alcohol, various artificial dyes, good old flexible dihydrogen monoxide, and goodness knew how many other entertaining chemicals, innocuous in this specific combination but so easy to pick apart and link back together, and such a priceless shade of pink. . .

She’d need more organic material, though, you couldn’t do anything really interesting without a few carbon chains. She spent some time admiring the paper towels, absently yanking piles of them onto the floor. She giggled, heterodyning with the laughter in her head. With this and a few key molecules isolated from the soap she could make something that would wedge delicate white tendrils—no, pink tendrils, they ought to be pink—through walls and floors and the joints between human bones, burning everything it touched with chemical

love.

She could make all kinds of funny things.

“I am having a schizophrenic episode,” Helen murmured, splashing in a puddle of soap. For a moment she screamed at herself to get a grip, and then the person who used to be Helen Narbon was washed away forever in a bubbly pink rush of ideas.

The floor. The floor was dirty. She could do so much with a dirty floor, bleached paper, and a little fungus. There wasn't really much usable organic matter in the restroom. The fatalities might have been kept to a minimum if Helen hadn't wandered her fingers, pink and slippery, across the hall and into the bistro kitchen.

Winter's instincts were good.

He ran the moment he realized what he might have done. He bolted from the table knocking his chair to the floor and causing the waitress to spill an amateurish-looking minestrone down the front of her blouse.

He ran for the door, and he almost made it.

Behind Winter a woman screamed, and then something strong and moist lashed around his ankle. He hit the floor hard, ripping the jacket of his blackest and most evil bespoke suit. A sharp green smell clouded his lungs coiling around like something alive.

He coughed. It was, he realized as his eyes watered, the aroma of a not thoroughly hopeless *pesto alla genovese*. Pity she hadn't had access to a proper parmigiano reggiano, he thought wildly.

Another tendril whipped around his chest pinning his right arm with his left. He grabbed for something, anything: a chair leg, a dropped knife. He didn't intend to go down without a fight. Threadham hadn't gone down without a fight the first six or seven times he'd been killed.

His manicured nails scraped linoleum, came up empty, then the tomatoes were upon him and the tomatoes were horrible countless little tomatoes with tiny sneering faces. They melted into a pearlescent

jam and seeped into his mouth and ears and nostrils. The taste was fresh and tart, with just a hint, distinctive but not overpowering, of olive oil.

Someone trampled on Winter's hand in the rush for the exit. Through ears muffled by tomato sauce he heard burbling screams, then silence. Then, softly at first, from the far end of the room a sweet tinkling little girl laugh.

"Miss Narbon," he heard himself saying, "that's enough!" His voice slipped out high and thin. "You can stop now, please, you've shown us all!"

A pink shadow fell over him. Despite himself, Winter looked up. Ah, there it was at last, the face of Helen Narbon, the real one, smiling that beautiful, horrible smile. . .

"Oh hello, Mr. Winter," said Helen, brightly. "You were saying something about an inheritance, yes?"

"Glurb," said Winter, as sauce dribbled down his chin, hissing.

"Now, now, Mr. Winter, we can't monkey around. This is business of a sensitive nature, isn't it?"

For a few moments Helen seemed distracted by a mobile heap of pesto climbing up a screaming waitress's leg, or possibly a parmesan cheese shaker. She hummed softly to herself until Winter started coughing up a mixture of blood and marinara, then a light clicked on behind her big blue eyes.

"Yes, the inheritance," said Helen. "I don't want to be all boring and materialistic about this, but I'm going to need a little nest egg to get my own lab going, aren't I? This isn't going to do at all."

Her disapproving gaze took in the ruined restaurant, the clouds of pink and black smoke billowing out of the kitchen, the sniggering tomatoes, the sauce-splattered corpses.

"A proper lab, you know, with test tubes and centrifuges and pretty science lights and a sign for the break room. 'You don't have to be crazy to work here, but it helps!'"

This, a tiny miserable voice in the back of Winter's head noted, seemed to strike her as hilarious.

“I know, I know,” Helen continued, “the whole grief thing, I’m moving too fast, but I’m thinking fast now, you know, I can’t waste time doing things like normal people. Here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else you must run at least twice as fast as that.” She grinned, baring her teeth.

Winter found his voice. “I’m sure it’s what your mother would have wanted.”

“My mother is dead.” The smile clicked back into place. “But won’t it be nice? A storefront laboratory with a little doomsday device in the back and henchmen, well, we can make do with interns to start, see where it goes from there... oh, oh, you know what longitudinal study I’d like to build on? It’s the funniest thing—”

Something was eating Winter’s arm. He was glad he couldn’t turn his head far enough to see what it was.

“Narbon—”

“No, no, you lie back and relax, Mr. Winter. I’ll have you up and about in a bit.” Helen turned back to the kitchen “You’ll be dead, of course. I hope that’s okay.”

Yes, Winter realized. Yes, it was okay. He was an evil attorney. He had always assumed one his clients would do him in someday and he had expected—no, no, might as well be honest—he had hoped it would be Helen Narbon. This girl wasn’t Dr. Narbon, but she was close, so close. That horrible smile for the first time in years, and the last time ever.

Winter felt his heart skip a beat. He thought back to his first private consultation with Dr. Narbon, that first zombie lawsuit. He remembered taking over from Threadham. He remembered her hair.

In the kitchen, machinery whirred. It sounded sharp, creaking with the strain of disuse. Winter’s lips curved into a smile.

At last, he thought, he had come full circle.