

Chapter Four

PREVIOUS YEAR
Early September

After a summer in the protective cocoon of his parents' home in southern Illinois, Turkey awakes from a crumpled night on the train into Union Station, Washington D. C. . Turkey figures he is supposed to feel something momentous. What is it? To be as free as a jaybird? Not while dragging around a suitcase of lead. He has had to maneuver it and himself through a bus, a taxi, the train and now a subway. He speaks only if spoken to. Not until he emerges from the underground, into a rotunda of automobiles, does he venture to acknowledge his return to earth.

Unlike any previous release, Turkey faces a predetermined reality. He has an objective. He pats the shirt pocket, its slip of paper.

He has not read newspapers for a while. He should learn the currents, which waves are safe, which tides strong. He has not taken his medication. He floats, a foot or so off the ground. He must think of his every move twice.

"GOOD MORNING" he says, frightening the nearest stable face.

The kiosk vendor startles. "Hey, bub."

"And How Do You Do?"

The dealer studies Turkey. Suitcase. Swarthy. Diction staccato. Probably a foreigner.

Turkey gambits, "What is your name? Sir?"

The man smiles. He enjoys serendipitous improbabilities such as this one. They spice his days. "McKnight," -- the dealer plays -- "Sir?"

"Melvin. Melvin Panos." Turkey sticks out his hand. "That's my name!"

"Yeah..." The vendor lets Turkey's hand dangle, likes to get a rise. "You want to buy a paper, bub?"

The hand stays levitated. The vendor plays for suspense, extends it by picking up a paper and waving it under Turkey's nose.

Turkey's eyes swim. He is being made fool of. But what can he do? His brain woozes. Is it because of months of medications? Or because of one day without?

"What's this?" Turkey asks, saying anything, hoping to cover his confusion. He knows it is a newspaper. That is obvious. It is what he was looking for. But these things cost money. They require transaction to acquire. He had not considered the ramifications of wasting his few pennies. He's stumbling. In the outside world they expect responses surefire. His head pendulums with the waving newspaper. He's almost hypnotized.

"What's this?" McKnight asks. "What's this?" The vendor greets Turkey's catatonic handshake. "It's a newspaper," McKnight asserts. The guy's not a foreigner. Maybe dim. Maybe hung over. "A newspaper," he repeats. "Mister ... it was ... Pan? No. Mister Panos!"

"Yeah." Ah, a glow of recognition. "Melvin Panos." Turkey relinquishes McKnight's warm palm. He withdraws coins from his pants pocket. "Here's my tribute," he says.

Thus, the first material object to pass between McKnight and the Congressman-select is a newspaper. The headline reads "Sortition Passes Last Court Test; Training

Begins.” Much later, amidst pitchers of philosophical boozing, their hindsight names that newspaper "oracular."

Turkey sticks the paper under his armpit, folded. That feels natural, the right thing, mark of a civilized gentleman. "Nothing like disinformation to keep a man disinformed," laughing at his cleverness.

"What are you talking about?"

Sure of himself now, Turkey proceeds, "And could you tell me, my good man ... " -- he feints -- "And could you tell me, kind sir ... " -- the clown's two-step -- " ... where the White House is?"

McKnight has no other customers. Never have seen this guy, never will again. Nobody else to talk to. So what if they guy is some kind of freak? It's a bit chilly but the clouds have cleared. The stage is large, actors play as best they can. Why else do I run this money-losing, irrelevant, out-of-date business? "Sure, buddy. What kind of a white house are you looking for?"

"I said *The* White House, sir."

"Oh, yeah, sure. Going to pay your respects to the President. I should have known.” A true loony. Should he alert his friend on the beat? Nah. It'd just mean another bogus terrorist report. This one is harmless. Why should the guy be exiled? "What I meant was," McKnight apologizes, "was that I live in *a* white house. That's all, Melvin."

"Melvin?" Turkey starts. "*A* white house?"

McKnight shrugs, quizzes.

"Look, what people call me is *Turk*." Turkey turns tough, needs to show talons. "Thought I'd try out that *Melvin* bit. A new image. But all you had to do was to say it once." He spits. "Nope. It won't work."

This guy wants to fight. McKnight likes to fight. "So is that *Turk* as in *Oversize Cluck*?"

"I'm a patriot!" Turkey lets feathers fly. "You know what Ben Franklin thought? *Sir*? Ben Franklin preferred turkeys to eagles" -- announcing God's Truth.

"So what's new? Everyone knows that. We're all carrion eaters, all of us. A friend likes to say 'When it comes down to it, it's all shit.' He's right. Brown, brown, everything's brown. Give it time, it turns fecal."

"Mr. McKnight, please." Turkey's sensibilities are offended. "Has a turkey ever been known to eat rotten fish?"

"Ah, young man ... What you don't know about rotten fish. Or eagles or turkeys, for that matter. The wild turkey is a trusting soul until he learns of man. Then he becomes as wily as any. And the eagle is not the only one to enjoy rotting fish. I've had the pleasure myself, Melvin ... or Turkey ... or is it *Turk*?"

McKnight lets the jumble of thoughts slow him long enough that he can revel, for a split second, at the northern lights splattered inside his skull. "Good rotten salmon heads, son ... can't beat 'em. They turn green with mold and as soft as Limburger cheese. Athabascan women up north are proud to serve you some."

Turkey, trying to avoid vomitus, grabs one of McKnight's safer lines. "It's *Turk*. I used to be a wrestler and I wore a mustache and I was ferocious." He is, forever after, glad of this lie. "My mother is Anatolian, at least a quarter, and I have Mohammedan

bloodlines.” Turkey stands, bold and cold – scraggly black beard dangling from high and hollow cheekbones.

“We were talking about Ben Franklin, remember.” McKnight maintains relentless grip.

“Ah, yes! Yes, indeed. It was Benjamin's essay on the turkey that intrigued my father most. I heard him pop off to his friends so often I know Franklin's words verbatim: 'The bald eagle is a bird of bad moral character ... generally poor and often very lousy. The turkey is a much more respectable bird and withal a true native of America.' Good old *Mellea gallopova*. Pop stayed around long enough to use his Audubon Index. He decided: *Mel* if a boy; and *Lea* if a girl. They tried the Melvin as a compromise but more often called me their Little Turkey.”

“You're not kidding, are you?”

“Nope, but as I said, I went on to become ferocious. I tarred-and-feathered all my opponents. As I reached adolescence, they shortened it to *Turk* ... which, as I said, given my matrilineal background, was appropriate.”

“Perspicacious parents of yours, the Anatolian and the birder. They knew a ferocious Islamic wrestler -- as an infant -- when they saw one.”

Turkey nods assent. Serious, considered assent. “It was Ben Franklin. They both liked Ben Franklin.”

McKnight motions Turkey hold further digression while he turns to his two-burner hotplate and pours himself a cup of soup. This guy is all right, McKnight ponders. Quirky, strange, probably a liar. But all right. McKnight turns back again. “So you, the

patriot, have a date at *The White House*. Is that it? Have they finally proclaimed that the turkey is to depose the eagle?"

"Ah! A nice way of putting it, McKnight. Yes, I am off to depose the eagle. Or, to put it another, more legally rigorous, way ... I'm off to make a deposition. It's time I left the cloister and claimed my harem, my due."

"Is this an invitation, my young man?" McKnight probes.

"Does it matter, does it?" Turkey fingers the paper bomb in his shirt pocket. He might explode it right now, in front of this old man, the invitation to his seat in the First United States Representative House. The Citizen Legislature, already being acronymized -- the 'CL'. "May I speak straight, McKnight? Or doesn't it matter?"

"Matter, matter ... a good question. Are you to be a meatball to me, a turkey, too stupid to come in out of the rain? Is that a matter of consequence? Or are you to be a mellow Melvin fellow ... a wet dish rag wiping up the yuck-yuck of quotidian thanksgivings?"

Turkey grins at the old man's appreciations. McKnight accepts the attention and presents a gift. "If it's a matter which matters -- and a name is -- I'll call you, from among the choices you give, *Turk*."

Turk jumps from a jolt, over his heart, emitting from that little paper he has hidden there. The paper is not simply his ticket *out* ... not just an escape from flophouse floozies on the barroom's backstage of life. The paper is a ticket *in*. Turk has hit a place where he can not lie. "It isn't just diplomatic immunity you're talking about, is it, old man?"

"Of course not, son. It is before beginnings, back to the play of animals, transformed into the games of civilization. Welcome to the begin of the beginning, from an old bag of bones."

A fly lands on Turk's nose. He uses his newspaper to slap at it. His nose starts to bleed. "Ah, a little blood." Turk pulls a white handkerchief to dab at it. "Excuse me, my nose. A remnant of my wrestling days. It's a delicate nose, always a crowd pleaser. They loved to see the red stuff flow."

"No need to apologize, Turk my son. It's a fighting nation we belong to. Don't you know, don't you know." He hands Turk a paper towel from beneath the kiosk counter. "'Course I don't believe your wrestling story. Not one bit. I like to lie myself. I'm a fight fan, Turk. Let's collude."

"All right, old man. I give up, you win. All I'm saying is that I aim for the White House."

"Cool down, my boy. Cool down. What round are you in? You say you're looking for a place to stay, right? I'll give you access to *a* white house. Not *The* White House but the one I live in."

Turk is shocked to realize he has become comfortable in the place he stands. He has not moved and he has reckoned some bearings. "So, you've decided I'm not a wino or a whacko."

"Well, you've got to do something with that suitcase. I've got a white house and a clean white kitchen. Two bedrooms, one bath and nobody else. For a few days I'll take a chance on helping you land."

Hours later Turk is panting like a pooped out pigeon when he knocks on McKnight's white door. "Come on in, my fine-feathered fakir. Glad you could make it. Glad."

Not having taken the opportunity to do anything but loll around his parents' house during the long slow summer, it has been a long time since Turk has walked more than a couple hundred yards and that was through bland, tiled corridors. Gathering a last gasp, he turkey trots through the door. "It was more harrowing than I remember. All the colors, the swirling people, the yawning buildings, the corridor streets."

"Turk, I told you to take the bus. It's more than half a mile from my stand."

"A half mile! Aw, that should be nothing. I used to do a half mile on all fours. I did it in caves, small spaces, to strengthen myself as a wrestler, had to. I've weakened but I ought to be able to walk."

"There always comes a time when the champeen fails. I know that well, son. Do you?"

Chest heaving, Turk flops into an overstuffed chair. "And that's when they kill the bird, hey? Royalty fails so they give thanksgiving."

"Forget it, Turk. Welcome to my bachelor's pad. I told you it was a white house. As far as I'm concerned, it's *the* white house. You think you can settle for less than classical columns?"

"Capitalized columns', don't you mean? Like at the White House. It's all laid out in *Das Kapital*. Out to be standard reading at The Capitol."

"You did have time on your hands in the institution, didn't you, boy?"

"As Ben Franklin, poor Richard the good capitalist, said: 'I shall never ask, never refuse, nor ever resign an office.' I've been *out* but I am obliged now to accept the accept the invitation *in*."

"In, out. Out, in. Sex talk, Turk. Where are you coming from? Where have you been?"

"Earth, McKnight. The sweet soothing mother, the dirt earth. That's where I've been."

"I should have figured as much. I've been there, too."

Turk lolls back, imagining oceans swelling. "*Sampanku*, McKnight. The whites of my eyes, beneath the iris, are showing." Turk rolls his eyes to the ceiling. For a moment an apparition appears. His social worker, Mrs. Hardnose. Safe, mechanical. But the ocean, the mama, the wave.

"It's Jerusalem, McKnight. Or Salem 1692 all over again. The White House thinks itself holy. Armageddon its purview." His words drag. "They got the missiles.. There's an old in-out." He takes two breaths. "The launch pads are white." Turk's lights go out, he begins to snore.

"Powerful demons," McKnight muses out loud. The slumped form goes on snoring. "This man is at war."

McKnight turns two steps to his kitchen. From the cupboard he removes small cans and dumps the contents into a pot. Within minutes he is sitting with the paper spread, the same paper Turk had bought from him. He reads the headlines and laughs to himself.

Turk wakes at midnight. He is alone with one dim light and a note. The note invites him to raid the refrigerator and concludes "... Make yourself at home, Honorable Mr. Congressman."

Relieved that his secret is out, he does raid the refrigerator and constructs a monument to eclectic gastronomy. Taking a moment first to pride himself upon its dimensions, he then abandons himself to his hunger.

McKnight stirs from the shadows of the bedroom. "I thought you might be a night owl. Alone all these years, I can feel in this house when the air moves."

"If air is your medium, then cosmic rays are mine. If I'm a bird, early or late, I'm a raven. Rhymes with craven."

"Tough luck then, boy, since it looks to me like you're going to have to deal with hawks." He points to the newspaper on the table.

"Figured it out, hunh? They say anything about me in there?"

McKnight lifts the paper, thumbs through to a page. "Let's see ... They were kind. The article gives some selected numbers: nine waiters, one medical doctor, four registered nurses, seven truck drivers, two lawyers and ten firefighters. They list all five hundred names. And mention, too, 'one recently released mental patient, name withheld'."

"I'm that obvious? You going to kick me out now?"

"Haven't said a thing like that. You're welcome to stay until you get situated. What I want to know is what you're going to do on the Hill? So you're out of the hoosegow -- I call all those places prisons -- and you're in through the oaken doors and into the leather upholstery. What do you have planned for yourself?"

"Haven't given it a thought." One edge of Turk's lip hints at a smile. "I'm just glad to be out."

McKnight pours himself a beer. "Turk, this is destiny. Look, you've got to jump in there, make a splash. Grab the reins of power. You ought to angle for a seat on the Rules Committee. It's a whole new ballgame and that's where the power begins. You can play Zeus, start hurling thunderbolts."

Turk shrugs.

"Who's to be your staff director, Turk? Look, I've been following the arguments about this thing. You're in over your head. No offense, but you'll need help. Just because you've had your head shrunk doesn't mean you aren't worthy of your say. But you're going to need help in how you say it. You're still confused, aren't you? You admit it. What do you expect, after being locked up all that time? But now you've got business to attend. You're going to be giving orders. You're supposed to be deciding the nation's course."

Turk continues to deconstruct his eclecticism.

"Listen, buddy, I'm your man. I'm not sure about this new set up, selecting representatives with a wheel of fortune. 'Sortition', it's called. I guess I'm for it. Funny, the way the Supreme Court finally OK'd it." Picking up the paper, he reads, "*The 5-4 decision hinged on challenges to the constitutional amendment that requires a civics test – the same that immigrants seeking citizenship must pass – in order to place one's name into the pool from which the random selections are made.* Interesting, the way that battle has progressed. I remember the first skirmish when some hotheads wanted to push through random selection without the constitutional amendment. The article mentions

that history: *The question then was about the Constitution's Article One, Section Four: 'The Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature thereof...' The ones who wanted to push ahead coupled the original meaning of 'election' -- from the Latin electionem, "pick out, select" -- with the longstanding right of states to choose the 'Manner' of selecting. Namely, by random selection.*" McKnight sets the paper on the table. "The over-enthusiastic -- the ones who hoped no amendment would be necessary -- withdrew when they realized a staggered three-year term was the only way the idea would be accepted. There was no way they could get around the fact that that change required the amendment."

"Yeah," Turk grins, "before I got my head way messed up, I followed all of that. They fought some of it using the Tenth Amendment, about powers reserved to the States. Municipalities and state legislatures had already begun using random selection. As you know, they use it not only for legislative offices but for smaller bodies, some advisory and some statutory. There is more decision-making by more citizens than ever. It fits Aristotle's idea that 'One factor of liberty is to govern and be governed in turn.' My state, Illinois, had fought and won the battle about using the citizenship test. I took it while I was *inside*. Had plenty of time to study up on my civics."

"I guess that blind chance can't give us any worse than the politicians did," McKnight continues. "Still, you're going to need a man of experience to deal with the sharks. I been around, let me tell you. That little newsstand is a hobby, my way to stay in touch. I spent most of my life in garages. You meet a lot of people, different types, when you take care of cars."

“Already you’ve got former Senator J. Rastus Daymond and his religious sidekick the Reverend Gutierrez employing their well-honed capacities to connive, wheedle and manipulate. Besides their willingness to confuse the public with lies and deceptions, they also control a considerable militia. You aren’t going to be playing tiddlywinks with those boys.

"I'm not saying I want to steal your show, Turk. How could I? You're the one with the ticket. You're the bossman, the one who will vote. But it looks to me that you've got nobody to protect you. Blind luck, without a seeing-eye dog, will lead you stumbling into blind alleys and worse. You're not going to find somebody as experienced and, I presume, as simpatico as I am."

Turk nods. Swallows. Nods again.

"Do you care, boy?" He opens the refrigerator's freezer and removes a pint of chocolate ice cream. "It may not matter, Turk. I'll grant you that. If you think you can make it, you can. Rush in where angels fear to tread, go ahead. May the luck of the Turks be with you! He laughs, scooping the ice cream into two dishes. "I'm not after the money, if it's your windfall you think I'm after. I like the gamble. So, Turk, open up. What do you think?"

Turk starts in on the ice cream. "So you want me to be your black body, is that it?"

"What are you talking about? Cut the riddles. What's skin color got to do with it? I don't care what kind of sun tan you have."

Turk smiles the smile of an interrogator. "Testing, McKnight. Testing. A 'black body' refers to a theoretical object which perfectly emits all the energy radiated onto it.

He flips his eyebrows, chuckling to himself for employing another of those exoticisms accrued from his former institution's library.

"I said there's no way I can run your show." McKnight talks turkey. "I like my news stand. I'd as soon stay there the rest of my days but I'm about to be jettisoned by the marketing department. They want to replace me with a vending machine and 'online'. Anyway, I'm an old man and you're a late surprise. Surprises are harder to come by these days." Finishing the ice cream he lifts the dish and slurps the melt. "You've got tough tasks ahead. I could help you. I'd be willing to take another leap. Another fracture to the old noggin wouldn't make much difference now."

"All right, McKnight. You're on. Better you than someone who might come seeking me out. If this is luck, this ticket in my pocket, then maybe you can double it. Spread it around, that's the best way. You're right, I'll need a steady hand."

Turk finishes his ice cream. McKnight picks up the dishes. Through the windows they hear rain.