

CLARENCE THE FAT BOY

BY JESSICA RAIMI

The printing firm where I used to work was a family business, established when the last century was new, on the lower west side of Manhattan, and it was there that I came to know Clarence Perweiler.

When I first saw him he was in his late twenties, although I couldn't tell that from a glance. While his height and coloring were unremarkable, his girth was prodigious. When he walked, his sausage-like arms bounced off the sides of his spherical torso. He moved short distances with a shuffling roll from side to side, settling into a chair like an ocean liner coming into dock.

He did not walk much – the exertion made him pant. While the Perweiler clerks penned estimates on ledger paper or typed bills in the large office they shared, Clarence could be found lolling at an unoccupied desk, eating a souvlaki sandwich and drinking a soda. Or he would be smoking a Marlboro and holding forth about something or other in his loud, harsh voice.

His shirt met and struggled with a pair of enormous blue jeans, which gave way to large high-top athletic shoes, worn unlaced – I suppose even his feet were fat. His features were half obscured by fat, like a landscape under heavy snow. He wore his greasy brown hair long, and sported a carefully shaped mustache and goatee, above which his beady eyes peered out unreadably. But he didn't seem to be looking out; he seemed insulated, totally uninterested in the world outside his vast corporeal self.

It was a peculiarity of my situation that while I worked at the office of Perweiler Lithographing, I did not work for them. Instead I worked on a casual basis as a typesetter for another printer, Martin, who occupied some of Perweiler's space in exchange for giving them some of his jobs to print. Because I had so little contact with the Perweiler firm, and was not in the office every day, it was some

weeks before I found out who Clarence was.

I never saw him do any work, but from the way he made himself at home it was evident that he was neither a client nor a salesman. Dinah, the bookkeeper, and Florence, the estimator, laughed at his jokes and treated him with utmost politeness. There were few clues to his identity in the fragments of his conversation I overheard. "Sure, I've got a couple of guns," I once heard him say. "I've got a .38 and a .22." I mentally classified him a potential suicide — mostly to reassure myself that he would not one day bring those guns to the office and start on what the newspapers would call a shooting spree.

Since Clarence did not resemble Zachary, the firm's owner, in any way, Zachary being an ordinary-looking man except for a deeply flushed complexion that suggested imminent coronary disaster, it did not occur to me that Clarence was his son. But it turned out that Clarence was the only son, and in fact the vice president of Perweiler Lithographing. His office, next door to his father's, was a windowless cubicle decorated with color posters of racing cars. There was a computer on his desk, though I don't think he knew how to use it. He didn't spend much time in his office, or at Perweiler Lithographing. When he did come in he didn't like to be alone, preferring to sit in the main office near Florence or Dinah, where he could chat and interrupt their work with capricious requests.

Clarence not only did not look like Zachary, he didn't act like him. Zachary was aloof and civil, but Clarence loved to order people around, with so little veneer of politeness that he was more like a child pretending to be the boss than an actual boss. If he was on the phone and the receptionist announced another call for him, he would bellow out his office door, not bothering to use the intercom, "Tell him to hold!" Then he would continue his conversation, oblivious to the caller kept waiting. When he wanted Dinah or Florence, he would call out in a singsong voice, "Oh, Di-Di! Oh, Florie-Dorie!" These were not their real nicknames.

His favorite employee was Jorge, a small, frightened-looking Dominican who was a janitor and messenger for the firm. Jorge spoke hardly any English and Clarence loved to page him, broadcasting to all corners of the plant: "Jorge, report to the front office! Jorge, *mach schnell!*" Jorge would leave his desultory sweeping and scurry over to Clarence, who would order him to run down to Thompson Street for a pizza, or to the next room to sharpen some pencils. A favorite office story concerned the time Clarence, having a drink in a bar down the block from the office, used his pocket phone to summon Jorge from the office — to fetch him

the afternoon paper from the store across the street from the bar. Jorge was a drinker himself, and not an exemplary worker: He was willing to fetch and carry, but mostly went through the motions of cleaning. At intervals, Clarence would fire him, but Jorge had a family to support, and he would beg, and Clarence would take him back.

Clarence was fond of a nap. His office was too small to contain a sofa, so he had to doze sitting up in his chair, unless he could find another hideout. A few times he had used the sofa in Martin's office, but Martin had managed to forbid this liberty. Sometimes Clarence copped his z's in the pressmen's lunchroom, the spot most remote from his father's office. Legend had it that he had once slept past closing time and been locked in until the night elevator man rescued him. I myself once saw Florence trying to place an order with a visiting paper salesman, the two of them bravely ignoring Clarence as he sat at a desk few feet away from them, head lolling on his chest, loudly snoring.

For a change of scene, Clarence would hang out at the souvlaki cart on the corner of Sixth Avenue. The cart was across the street from a little park, and a good place from which to watch the world go by. At lunch time on sunny days people would eat their sandwiches sitting on the broad stoop of the building on the corner. Clarence, too bulky to perch on the steps, would make Jorge bring out a chair for him, which he placed on the sidewalk next to the food cart. This way he could be company for the two Greek brothers as they supplied the noontime queue with hot dogs and shish kebab. The Greeks were a textbook illustration of immigrant entrepreneurial zeal, their quick movements choreographed to work their little grill to maximum efficiency without tripping over each other. Sometimes I thought I could read on their faces a deep, silent frustration with the whale beached beside them: "Why us? Why doesn't he go away?" Clarence, meanwhile, was a textbook illustration of corrupt inherited wealth, a poster boy for confiscatory death duties.

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Perweiler Lithographing occupied the top floor of a huge old factory building at the western edge of Soho. This neighborhood, which wags have variously dubbed HoHo, for Holland Tunnel and Houston, or NoCal, for North of Canal, is a district dominated by the publishing and printing trades.

While New York is of course home to many large printing firms, much of the business is conducted by people like Martin, the man I worked for, who sell printing to clients and coordinate the efforts of a number of small concerns that specialize variously in design, typesetting, camera work and color separating, stripping, plate making, presswork, stamping and die-cutting, binding, trucking, mailing, and combinations thereof. There are dozens of these firms within a radius of a few blocks, many of them so small that they share offices or pressrooms. Like so many things in life, the printing trades have been increasingly computerized since the late seventies, and the business has contracted in recent years.

The venerable Perweiler firm had once been larger and more populous. The office entrance was decorated with awards for excellence in printing, all won decades earlier. The main office featured a handpress from about 1900 that now served as a plant stand. The company was sufficiently down on its luck to have offered its choicest office space to Martin and his employee, Vinnie. Thus our corner consisted of two fair-sized rooms with windows along the entire north wall, windows that framed an almost ridiculously dramatic view across the factory lofts of Soho and the brownstones of the West Village toward the Empire State Building, which we could daily admire in every light and weather.

The real action of the firm was not among the clerks and salesmen but in the pressroom, a huge space behind the offices where the several Heidelberg presses rumbled and rolled. Between the banks of presses were islands of equipment and material: yards of shelves holding cans of inks, and neat pallets of stacked paper — Perweiler's were all sheet-fed presses that did not use paper in rolls. There were barrels of trash, canvas carts of discarded paper, hills of cardboard boxes waiting to be re-packed or cut up for filler. In the dark corners near the freight elevator, more shelves held piles of flats and plates from jobs past, and broken chairs that would never be resurrected but were too much trouble to throw out. Near one window was the paper cutter, a six-foot-long blade in its own console, mean enough to cut your hand off. Near another window was a worktable for looking at sheets as they came off the press. Off the main floor was a smaller room for the copy camera and stripping tables, where the flats of text and picture negatives were assembled and the printing plates exposed. Farthest toward the back of the building was the pressmen's lunchroom, equipped with a large color television (owned by the head pressman; the Perweilers would not have sprung for such a luxury) and the changing room in which the pressmen donned their blue overalls with their

first names embroidered on the chests.

The pressroom had been painted white at some point in history, though now the ceiling was brown and the paint was peeling. For decoration, there were bulletin boards displaying yellowing official notices about workers' compensation and sexual harassment policies, and a large display of snapshots from office Christmas parties past, none from recent years. Here and there were life-size color posters of buxom young women with tousled hair clutching towels to their fronts; there were also small, faded posters with cartoons of smiling workmen in overalls, captioned: "SAFETY IS JOB #1" and "WHEN YOU THINK YOU DON'T HAVE TIME TO DO IT RIGHT — THINK HOW LONG IT TAKES TO DO IT OVER."

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Florence and Dinah shared the main room of the office suite with an old man named Norm, who spent most of his time smoking cigarettes and reading the Daily News, and an eager youngster named Bernie, who was desperately trying to sell printing. Rumor had it that his technique consisted of cold calling from the telephone book, which, as anyone knows who has tried, is a pretty sure route to disappointment. He and Zachary, the president, were the only people at Perweiler who regularly wore suits. Bernie wasn't around much, and his desk was almost bare; he was usually in the field, and I often passed him on the street as he pursued his fruitless quest, walking briskly, briefcase in hand, chin jutting out hopefully.

While Martin's people did not work closely with the Perweiler white-collar staff, we all shared the services of the receptionist, Xiomara. She was a rather pretty girl in her early twenties with a slender but striking figure. She wore tight sweaters, tight jeans and high black boots, and affected blood-colored lipstick, long curly hair dyed a purplish red, and a twitchy walk. I often wondered whether anyone had ever cautioned her about looking cheap, and if so, how she had responded. She had a notion that she was overqualified for her job. "I used to do research for a writer," she once told me. "I'd really like to go back into journalism." She was one of the few people in the office ever seen reading a book, though the books she read were the trashiest sort of romances and thrillers.

Xiomara frequently omitted the date and time from the phone messages she took, and she was a slow typist with a poor grasp of spelling, punctuation and

business forms. She coped with requests from anyone but Clarence or Zachary by playing so dumb that the requester would be forced to conclude that it was easier to do it himself – she once told me she didn't know how to order extra copies of the phone book. She paid no attention to her colleagues' comings and goings, though we all dutifully informed her whether we were in or out, and she would put calls through to extensions that weren't being answered, letting the phone ring a dozen times until someone yelled, "He's not here!" or gave in and answered, which, of course, saved Xiomara the trouble of taking the message herself. She was even rude to clients. My biggest client once told me, "If I hadn't already worked with you and Martin, I would have taken my business away just because of the way that girl spoke to me today."

Every conversation about the need for a receptionist who could take messages followed the same script, which proceeded through "What do you expect, with what they're paying?" on the way to "*He* likes her. Well, maybe she'll quit."

Clarence had fallen hard for Xiomara. Everyone knew she had a boyfriend, but could that have seriously mattered to Clarence, who had surely given up on the idea of having a girlfriend? He would hang around the front entrance, clumsily trying to flirt with her, leaning on the counter behind which she sat smoking and reading. On her birthday, he gave her a party at the office, which followed the format of all Perweiler office parties: a lunch of cold cuts, potato salad, pickles, soda and beer laid out on the packing table in the main office. Disco songs would play from a boom box, and everyone would make slow conversation, Clarence loud and foul-mouthed, Dinah and Florence appreciatively giggly, the pressmen nervous in their blue coveralls, sitting on the desks sipping beer among the white collars, waiting until the flavorless bakery cake with sculpted sugar frosting was brought out and "Happy Birthday" sung, when they could escape back to the pressroom.

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When I first worked for Martin, the rhythm of the giant Heidelberg presses was a *basso continuo* under all other sounds, like an ocean in the distance. The big packing table in the main office was usually covered with press sheets of jobs in progress – cents-off coupons for medicated foot powder, flyers advertising mutual funds, circus posters, department store placards showing impossibly beautiful women modeling new shades of lipstick.

When business was good, there was a constant coming and going. The front elevator brought business-suited paper salesmen whose attaché cases divulged samples of North Woods Reklame Laid Recycled Cover, eighty- or hundred-pound, in white, cream, ecru, beige or blush, and other fine sheets. The back elevator brought foot messengers bearing litho plates and films, and burly men hauling hand trucks stacked with paper stock or cartons of finished catalogues. From both directions came bicycle messengers who produced manila envelopes from battered canvas bags. They looked like spacemen in their black tights, zippered doublets and sparkly helmets, their ears wired to radios clipped to their belts.

It was hard to tell how it all kept running. Obviously Clarence served no useful function. Zachary did not come into the office every day, and left early when he did come in. Bernie, the eager young salesman, gave up and went to work at his father's bindery, and his desk remained empty. From Vinnie I learned that Norm, the man who silently read the paper all day, was the production manager, and that he had cancer and would soon retire, and that Maurice, the head pressman, was the one who kept things moving.

The atmosphere at Perweiler was rarely lighthearted. Florence's conversation was mostly complaint festooned with a small stock of colorless profanity: "What the fuck does he mean he can't deliver the fucking paper by Thursday? What kind of shit is that?" She suffered from migraine headaches, and much of the drama of her life concerned her search for a doctor who could cure them. She had a fiancé whom she had promised to marry if he would join Alcoholics Anonymous and get a job. She had been at Perweiler sixteen years, and she worked hard and joylessly. When things were slow she would sit slumped in her chair, cigarette in one hand, a strand of her hair in the other, which she rolled between her fingers and studied as though it were the map of her life and she were looking for the place where she had lost the trail.

Unlike Florence, Dinah voluntarily said good morning to me without my having to speak first. She had a smiling countenance, but on analysis did not appear to have much going for her. She did not have a boyfriend, nor any intellectual pursuits apart from listening to country music; her disposable income was spent on a vacation in Dollywood and stuffed animals for a small niece and nephew. Her position as bookkeeper was a recent and hard-won promotion from receptionist, and she seemed to enjoy it. I thought of her as young and was surprised to learn, the week she left, that she had been at Perweiler twelve years.

Their manner toward Clarence was so sincere one might actually have believed they liked him, although Dinah thought him pitiful at best, and Florence referred to him as “that fuckhead” when he wasn’t around.

Why had Dinah and Florence worked there so long? According to Vinnie, being an estimator was an unusual accomplishment for a woman, so by some standard Florence had a good job and it wasn’t surprising that she kept it. But I think she was cursed with that passivity that traps one in familiar misery, which is so much safer than unknown misery. However much they complain about their situations, if one asks such people why they don’t look for something else, they reply with a list of ironclad rationalizations: It’s just a short subway ride from home, and the other firms aren’t hiring now anyway, and they’re pretty good here about letting you have a day off if you have an emergency . . .

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One day I happened to walk a few blocks with Xiomara, when we were on separate lunch time errands. “Guess what!” she told me, “I’m going to have a baby. I’m not showing yet, but I’m going to tell everyone soon.”

I congratulated her. “I’m so excited!” she went on. “My boyfriend and I are getting married. I’m going to make Perweiler give me maternity leave. I wish I could just quit this job. I’m getting totally sick of this place! I’m so sick of Clarence. People are calling all the time asking to get paid. The credit card companies are after him, and he makes me tell them he isn’t here. His boat was repossessed. One time he wanted me to make out an invoice for six thousand dollars’ worth of furniture and charge it to the firm, and he took the cash. I can’t believe when I started here, I felt sorry for him. He would talk to me about how much he hated himself and hated being fat. But now I’m disgusted.”

In the weeks that followed, her tiny waistline began to swell. Her skin got paler and she always looked tired. She began to miss work more frequently, and when she did show up, she was much occupied with making lists and phone calls to do with her forthcoming wedding.

Vinnie told me that she had made Clarence and Zachary sign an agreement giving her three months’ maternity leave and promising her a job when she came back. If they fired her or laid her off, she threatened to sue them for sex discrimination.

“Now we’ll never get rid of her,” I said.

But we did, at least for a while. To fill in for her the Perweilers hired a sweet young college student who sincerely wanted to do a good job.

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The summers were always a slow time for business, and that summer, the third that I was there, seemed slower than usual. In the afternoons Martin would go out to play tennis, telephoning every hour to ask, “Anything?” Vinnie would disappear for long lunches. On his return, having finished with the Times earlier in the day, he would read thrillers or mysteries, or even Italian poetry in a dual-language edition, while he monitored the phone that rarely rang. On the hottest days he would doze off sitting upright at his worktable.

From our air-conditioned aerie, we would look down at the river of traffic flowing up Sixth Avenue toward the Empire State Building, and watch the workmen on the roof next door, who were building a wooden deck. When it was finished it was adorned with potted plants, a hammock and a barbecue, though we never saw anyone use the facilities. Vinnie asserted that the building was occupied by a Korean whorehouse, but we had only his word for it.

The presses were quiet for days at a time. Maurice, the only pressman not intimidated by the white-collars, would sometimes come into our territory to read the paper or talk baseball.

“We’ve cleaned the press twice,” he complained one day. “There’s nothing else to do out there. Personally, I don’t care if this place stays in business. I’m retiring in a couple of years. But I’ll feel bad if they let more of the guys go. Tomorrow we’re doing a job at cost, just to do something.”

“Ah, this business stinks,” said Vinnie. “I should’ve gone into something regular, that you can count on. Farming, maybe.” He winked at me. He too was nearing retirement, and this was an old joke.

“Zachary wants to retire,” Maurice said. “But of course he’s scared to leave the business to *him*.”

“Well, can you blame him?” asked Vinnie. “I remember one time, Clarence was sitting out there having lunch, which is an understatement. And Zachary walked by and gave me this look, like, ‘What can I do?’”

“Does Clarence actually *do* anything?” I asked.

“Sells, supposedly,” said Maurice. “But, obviously . . . ”

“How much do you think he weighs?” asked Vinnie. “Four hundred?”

“Gotta be more. You know, he says he lost some.”

“Could be. I think the fortune’s going up his nose.”

“He used to always say he’d never see thirty,” said Maurice.

“And when he turned thirty, he started saying he’d never see forty,” said Vinnie. “But he’s still here. All of him.”

“If Xiomara had any brains, she would’ve married him,” said Maurice. “Divorce him after a few years, get a bunch of alimony. Wouldn’t it be worth a few million to, you know . . . ”

I said, “Maybe some things aren’t even worth a few million.”

“It’s sad, really,” said Vinnie.

“Sure it’s sad,” said Maurice. “How long can he last? He went to the hospital a couple of weeks ago. He was having trouble breathing. But they just kept him a few hours and let him go.”

“I saw a baby picture of him once,” said Vinnie. “Not a baby, exactly, he was maybe five or six. And he looked — sort of normal. He was chubby, but he looked like a regular, cute little boy.”

“Maybe it’s because he’s adopted,” said Maurice. “Though as far as I know they treated him all right. With what that family’s worth, how bad could it be?”

“I’d rather have my health than his millions,” said Vinnie.

“Yeah, well,” said Maurice. “It’s sad.” This was the way most conversations about Clarence ended.

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One day Clarence brought his dog to work. The dog was a small, fluffy white creature who peed on the floor when he got excited. Dinah and Florence mopped up without complaining, but I shut our office door, which normally we left open.

A few weeks later Clarence brought in Perdita, an ugly mutt along the lines of a German shepherd. But after a few hours Perdita got sick — from licking ink puddles in the pressroom, it was rumored — and Clarence had to take her home.

“You know why Clarence brought Perdita to the office?” Vinnie told me later. “He was having work done on his house. But the workmen refused to be left

alone with her after word got out that the big dog had eaten the little dog.”

Another day, at noon a huge feast appeared on the office table – foil trays of lasagna, garlic bread, salad, beer, sodas. Clarence was encouraging everyone to dig in, not failing to lead the way. When I inquired whose birthday it was, one of the pressmen told me, “Nobody’s. Clarence was driving on the Long Island Expressway and he stopped in a deli. In the deli he overheard a guy complaining that a client had just refused delivery on a meal for twenty people, so now he was stuck with all this food. Clarence bought the whole load from him and brought it here.” After an hour or so everyone went back to work, but Clarence continued to sit at the packing table, pouring vodka into his soda and talking ever louder, until he disappeared into his office to pass out.

After that, for a time we saw Clarence more often than before, sometimes before noon. Rumor had it that Zachary had ordered him to shape up. Occasionally Clarence could be seen dressed in a suit that resembled a small tent in charcoal wool. But most days, he wore a sport shirt open to the waist, revealing a growing collection of gold necklaces. He let his hair get long enough to tie back in a little ponytail, as was the fashion that year. Without any of his usual sarcasm, he would ask Dinah and Florence whether they liked his hair that way. They assured him they did.

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First one pressman, then another, came into the office to announce that it was his last day, that he was retiring. A new pressman was hired, but was let go after a couple of weeks when nothing materialized for him to do.

“What do you think’s going to happen?” I asked Vinnie.

“Who the hell knows?” he said. “They’ve still got some of the big clients. Some of the pressmen are really good. But they don’t have anybody selling for them. Bernie was a joke – he worked out of the phone book. He never got anything. They depend on what Martin brings in. And I don’t know what Martin’s planning to do if they go under – he doesn’t tell me anything. It’s a shame. A family business like that. Three generations, ending up with the Fat One.”

One day the messenger service refused to take a package for Perweiler until they received money on account. Zachary came into our office fuming: “We told them sixty days! That was the deal! This is ridiculous! Vinnie, we need to find an-

other service! We have stuff to send out!” Vinnie was noncommittal. After Zachary left, he called the messenger service and explained, “Me and Martin just share space with Perweiler here. Our bills are separate from theirs. We pay on time, okay? Don’t cut us off!”

Later that day, as I waited for my shish kebab at the souvlaki stand, I saw Clarence saying to the Greeks, “I’ve only got thirty or forty dollars on me right now. Can I pay you next week?” It was the first I had heard of someone running a tab at a pushcart.

“Perweiler owes me money, too,” said Vinnie when I related this vignette. “Who knows if I’ll ever see it? They take a lot more than sixty days to pay, let me tell you.”

The stories about Clarence grew wilder. It was said that he had gone to lunch with some girls at a nearby restaurant and had summoned Jorge to procure and bring over four live lobsters – but the lobsters were all for him. One day I saw Clarence stumble through the office at the unusually early hour of ten o’clock. He was wearing his suit, but his shirt was half untucked and he was sweating profusely. I had the impression that he had been up all night.

Another day he came to work with two black eyes and a bandage on his left hand. He looked as though he’d been in a fight, though it was hard to imagine him having the energy or agility for such a thing.

I asked Florence what had happened. “Frankly, I don’t know. I haven’t asked. Because I really don’t care!” She laughed hoarsely. “With any luck, I’m gonna be out of here soon.”

“He was on vacation in Colorado,” Vinnie told me. “He was driving on the expressway. Somehow he totaled the car. And that’s not all. He rented the car on Maurice’s credit card. Now the Perweilers probably got a lawsuit on their hands. He’s lucky he didn’t total himself.”

“Maybe he was trying to,” I said. “I guess God considered taking him but then He thought, ‘I don’t want that fat slob hanging around Me!’”

Vinnie laughed, but he ritually concluded, “It’s sad, really, is what it is.”

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It was on a Monday morning in September, a few weeks later, that Vinnie gave me the news when I arrived at work.

“Clarence died.”

“Are you serious?”

“Absolutely. Saturday night. Heart attack. He went to a movie with a friend and stayed over on the friend’s sofa. In the morning he was dead. That’s all I know. Thirty-two years old. Do you believe that? Martin’s going to the funeral. They’re going to bury him out on Long Island, I guess.”

No one talked about it that day. What could one say—what a shock? What a shame? What a loss? Some people might as well wear a sign. It was obvious that Clarence had known little joy. He had devoted himself to suicide of a gradual and cowardly sort, and it was a final irony that his suffering should end so peacefully.

The silence and malaise in the office lasted most of the week. On Thursday at noon, Clarence was laid to rest, and suddenly everyone was more jovial than they had been in months.

That week was to have been Florence’s last; she had finally landed a new job and given notice, but now her voice was strident in laughter, not complaint. With her nemesis gone she had decided to stay. And when Zachary came back to work a few days after the funeral, he had traded his business suit for a sport shirt in a windowpane check. He had decided to sell Perweiler Lithographing. Was his heart lighter now that the event he had surely foreseen had come to pass? Was he officially retired and dressing the part?

Florence told me that Clarence had named his sister beneficiary of his life insurance.

“I didn’t know he had a sister.”

“Oh, yes. And he hated her, or that’s what we all thought. It’s funny he left her the money.”

A few months later, Zachary sold the firm. The new owner seemed friendly and ineffectual, and the new regime was quieter than the old, without Clarence’s bellowing voice. Some of the lost noise was made up for by Florence, who had begun to display a crude sense of humor, laughingly calling people “poopoo-head” instead of “shithead,” as formerly. She and Dinah, who had always got on well with everyone, chattered all day with the new receptionist.

Xiomara, back from maternity leave, was now assisting Dinah with the books. Since becoming a mother she had grown thinner, her breasts smaller. She had begun wearing a dark red lipstick that accentuated her pallor and the circles under her eyes, making her look like a vampire. She often missed work, pleading

babysitting crises. She left her husband, then reconciled with him. One night after she had gone home I saw on her desk a spiral notebook open to a list of printing terms in her girlish handwriting: “Halftone; line art; knockout; tint; trapping; four-color process; imposition; form; signature . . .” Was she trying to learn to sell?

Perweiler Lithographing carried on for more than a year after Clarence’s death. When the end came it was no surprise to anyone, and no one seemed at a loss. The few remaining pressmen had found jobs elsewhere. The new owner had found a situation in Chelsea and was taking Maurice and Florence with him. Dinah was bursting with excitement at being hired as controller at another firm. Xiomara had long since gone to work for another printer across the street from Perweiler, without even giving notice — she simply quit showing up one day. It was announced that Perweiler would close its doors at the new year, and a week before Christmas the new owner threw one last party.

It was more lavish than usual, with lasagna and salad, mixed nuts and candies, beer and wine. The pressmen had changed into their street clothes and slicked back their hair. The guests included half a dozen gray-haired men I had never seen before, pressmen who had retired years before. Xiomara showed up wearing a black spandex dress; she got drunk and flirted. When the pressmen departed, they carried satchels containing the few belongings they had stashed at work over the years.

Not everyone was leaving at once. Maurice would stay to oversee the move; Florence would be going through files and throwing away old job tickets. Martin, Vinnie and I would have a few weeks to get organized before moving in with another printing firm three blocks away.

The Perweiler presses had been sold, and the press movers arrived. For more than a week we heard the irregular clanking of metal as they dismantled the huge machines and carried them away, before the pressroom finally fell silent.

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Vinnie has kept one souvenir of Clarence, a two-by-three-foot masonite clipboard. It came from a store in Soho, now also gone, called Think Big, that carried nothing but four-foot-long toothbrushes, one-foot-wide golf balls and the like. The clipboard used to hang on the door of Clarence’s office, where it held a proportionately oversized pad of pink “While You Were Out” message slips. I never knew

whether Clarence had purchased it for himself or whether it was a gift from an admirer, but it was a logical joke for the Fat One. It was sadder with the message slips, of course, suggesting that the biggest things happened while he was out.

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