

A MOMENTARY DISTRACTION

By Ian S. Johnston

Sanders McQuimby knew there was something odd about the man standing in front of him, but he couldn't quite figure out what it was. Sizing up this fellow would take a bit of gray matter, that was certain. As he stood in thought, he absent-mindedly scratched above his right eyebrow with his index finger--a nervous twitch he had developed from years of drinking too much Darjeeling tea. The sounds of the room faded into the background as he concentrated.

The intense-looking, middle-aged gentleman had graying temples and a close-cropped, lopsided haircut that looked like a divot from the lawn had been stuck unceremoniously on his head. A small scar in the shape of a dolphin on his left cheek was punctuated with the stubble of the man's five o'clock shadow, just emerging from his pasty white skin. His flinty-eyed stare seemed to bore into Sanders, looking deep into an otherwise shallow soul.

I wonder what this guy's story is, wondered Sanders to himself. Perhaps he's a military veteran. Or maybe a carnival barker or mortician. It's hard to say. And that spider tattoo on his right forearm is certainly intriguing. No words, though. That makes it harder.

Using his keen powers of imagination, Sanders pondered the possibilities of the man's background, coming up with numerous outlandish scenarios in his mind, each one more grandiose and preposterous than the last.

Was he a bouncer at a local bar? wondered McQuimby. Perhaps a mercenary between jobs overthrowing small, unstable central African governments? A former astronaut? Hmmm. He certainly has the look for just about any of those things. I wonder which?

The man was speaking to him now and, while Sanders could certainly hear him, the intensity and depth of his imaginings prohibited him from making out the words. Why did this man look so familiar? What was the message he was trying to convey?

In the distance, Sanders could hear the ambient noises of the room getting louder. People's voices. That's what it was. Or was it? Distracted from his previous reverie, he began now to focus on the new sounds around him, swelling slowly in volume.

"Sir," said one. "Sir!"

Sanders snapped to. Suddenly, he could hear quite clearly. The man in front of him was frowning. The voice had come from a lady standing directly behind him.

"Yes?" said Sanders, turning to face her.

"Could you place your order, please? We haven't got all day," she said, arms crossed in frustration.

"Um, yes," said Sanders.

He remembered now. He had stopped in this burger joint to grab a quiet bite before taking the smelly subway to work. The man in front of him, dressed in the brown shirt and black slacks of the restaurant's uniform gazed intently down at his register, awaiting Sanders' order.

"May I take your order, sir?" he said in a deep baritone voice.

Charles! thought Sanders. The revelation was as though he had solved world hunger at that very moment. *That was his name! Should have read the name tag to begin with!*

"Why, certainly, Charles!" said Sanders, regaining composure. "Give me a cheeseburger combo. Hold the cheese. Oh, and can I get that to go?"