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Richard Demers  
500 East Grant Street  
Apt. 701  
Minneapolis  
MN  
55404  
763 370-6899  
rademers@comcast.net

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A BILLIONAIRE'S ODYSSEY

by Richard A Demers

## ROLAND SWANSON

Roland Swanson III, the founder and CEO of the eponymous Swanson Fund, was driving home in his golden, Bentley Mulsanne sedan from his office in Stamford, Connecticut. He was doing the driving himself because he had given Charlie, his chauffeur, the day off to attend his mother's funeral. He didn't mind doing the driving for a change because, well, sometimes it was fun to drive, and besides, that was the kind of guy Roland thought himself to be—someone sympathetic to the needs of other people.

His thoughts as he drove, however, were a jumble of contradictory questions and angry assertions: *I had to meet with Jasper, today. He makes my skin crawl. He always has, even when we were kids at school. He still blames me for stealing Lillian away from him—as if he ever had a chance with her. God, I hate that fucker. He is always whining. The fund's doing great, but he always wants more—the greedy bastard. It's a good thing Bill mostly keeps him away from me. Where was Bill today? Oh yeah, he's visiting Sapphire Mining out in Colorado. I don't know why he's wasting his time. Mining stocks are dead meat these days.*

Ahead, the light turned red, and he came to a stop behind several cars. This gave him a chance to look at the neighborhood: *Lower middle-class commercial—not very well maintained*, he thought. While he'd been through this part of Stamford many times, he had always been in the back seat with his nose in papers from work, while Charlie drove.

The traffic light turned green, and he crept forward, continuing his internal monologue: *I wonder how Lillian is doing. The house is so empty without her. Will she ever forgive me? Probably not—not that I can blame her. She says I worked too much and ignored her. I did spend too much time in the office and I took too many business trips. All I have now, for all that work, is a giant pile of money—not that it does me much good.*

The car ahead of him came to an abrupt halt to avoid hitting pedestrians who were j-walking. This forced Roland to jam on his brakes, just barely avoiding a rear-end collision. Pulling forward, his musings resumed: *Why, oh why, did I fall for Reggie at the San Antonio conference. A one-night stand? Who was I kidding? It went on for months. I still don't know how Lillian found out. We*

*were really discrete. It doesn't matter now. She found out and divorced me. I can't blame her. Well, that's over with, but where am I now? Living alone in a mansion I built for a family. And dining alone every night. What's for supper tonight? Probably more rabbit food. Yeah, I need to lose weight, but does it have to be salads every night?*

Approaching the Dunkin' Donuts store on Prospect Street, the image of a chocolate-filled éclair came to Roland's mind, overriding his mental soliloquy. He couldn't resist the urge to indulge in what was a rare treat, since his cook, on doctor's orders, refused to serve him sugary foods. He turned into the store's parking lot and found two spaces for the car to straddle: *I don't want some fool to accidentally scratch the Bentley's expensive, metallic paint job*, he thought.

He got out of the car and walked to the front door of the store passing a gray-haired Black man sitting at a picnic table with a cup of coffee and a strawberry-filled Bismarck.

"That's a mighty fine automobile you have there," the man said. "You must be the chauffeur since you're the one driving it. Where's your peaked hat? Aren't chauffeurs supposed to wear peaked hats?"

Roland just smiled: "Yes, it is a fine car, and no I don't have to wear the hat when the boss isn't in the back seat."

"You wouldn't want a car like that scratched," the man retorted, getting up from the picnic bench.

"I sure wouldn't—that's why I parked it in two spaces."

The man nodded his head: "That's good thinking, but what if someone pulls in and needs one of those parking spaces? It wouldn't be good for them to see you have two. Who knows what they'd do?"

Roland shrugged his shoulders: "Oh, I don't think anything is going to happen. I'll only be in the store a few minutes."

"I'll keep an eye on it for you," the man promised.

"You do that," Roland replied, with a questioning smile, not sure if he was being hit up for a tip. He entered the store and found himself in line behind another customer, a harried-looking young woman with two children in tow. They seemed to be having trouble deciding what donuts they wanted.

"Mom, can't I have a glazed donut and a lemon Bismarck?" the boy asked.

"No dear," she replied, I told you I only have enough money for one donut for each of you."

The boy sulked for a moment and chose the Bismarck. Then, his sister asked for a cream-filled Long John.

*Great, at least the girl knows what she wants*, Roland thought impatiently, *now that that's settled, I can get my éclair and get out of here*. He really wasn't comfortable surrounded by so many poor people—at least poor by his standards.

But no, the mother proceeded to fumble around in her change purse, pulling out coins for the exact amount of the kids' donuts. Roland noticed that she wasn't getting one for herself. He thought about chipping in to buy her a donut but realized that could be seen as condescending.

She turned around finally to leave the store. In doing so, she bumped into Roland's arm and began to say, "Excuse me," when she looked at his face and recognition dawned on her. She glanced through the store's front window and saw the gleaming, golden Bentley straddling two places in the parking lot. This sight set her off.

A stern, angry look came over her face: "I know who you are," she growled. "Your picture was in the paper. You're that fat cat fund manager, Swanson, who merged my husband's company with another one. My husband lost his job because of you."

Hardly stopping for a breath, she continued, shaking her fist at him and backing him into a corner: "Do you want to know what's wrong with this country? I'll tell you what's wrong with this country! It's greedy bastards like you who don't produce a damn thing but think nothing of screwing little people like my family. I hope you rot in hell."

Roland tried to say, "I don't know what you're talking about," but she talked over him, laying out a long list of his sins. In the process, she attracted other customers who learned they had a big shot in their midst. They added themselves to the choir of voices assaulting him.

Roland Swanson III wasn't used to being treated in this way, and an éclair just wasn't worth enduring verbal aggression by people he didn't know. He pushed his way out of the store and passed the old Black man on his way to the Bentley.

"Have a nice day, boss-man," the old man yelled at him. "And don't forget your peaked hat next time."

Roland ignored him, quickly got into his car, carefully backed out of the store's parking lot, and headed toward his estate in the hills north of Stamford. He was trembling; his hands on the steering wheel were shaking. He had never experienced animosity like that before.

Instead of pulling the Bentley into its garage when he reached home, he left it in the *porte cochère* for Charlie to park later and stormed through his mansion's ornate front door. Ignoring Reginald, his butler, he headed straight for the liquor cabinet in his walnut-paneled study, where he poured two inches of Johnnie Walker Blue Label scotch into a Baccarat crystal tumbler and plopped himself into the warm embrace of his Osaki leather massage-recliner.

*What was she so upset about?* he wondered. *Something about a merger? So why was she mad at me? Mergers are good for the economy, aren't they?*

Slowly, his memories converged on the merger he had brokered the previous year between two Connecticut companies that manufactured machine parts for helicopters: *It was a good merger; one that eliminated the excess capacities of both companies and maximized their efficiency. That's good, isn't it? But were there consequences I never intended? I knew there would be layoffs, but surely those people found other jobs. What have I done? What does she want from me?*

Reginald stood in the doorway wondering what had so badly upset his normally unflappable boss. He began to enter the study to ask if there was anything Roland needed, but Roland dismissed him with a wave of his hand.

## LILLIAN SWANSON

Lillian Swanson greeted her daughter, Emma, her younger sisters, Agnes Fredericks and Winnifred Wallace, and her BFF, Simone McKee. They had a standing reservation at Sarabeth's restaurant, at 40 Central Park South in Manhattan, for its elaborate Sunday brunch. After checking their Spring coats, they were seated at their regular table in a quiet corner.

Each woman ordered a Four Flowers mimosa and an elaborate salad. While waiting, their conversation drifted inevitably to the subject of the men in their lives, or more precisely, the lack of husbands in the lives of four of them. All, except Emma who had never married and Simone, whose husband doted on her, were divorced, each for a different reason.

Lillian Swanson, the most recently divorced, was forty-seven years old, and the chair of the Psychology Department at Columbia

University. Her dark green eyes and elegantly styled, shoulder-length, auburn hair complemented her forest-green, tailored suit by Chanel. Her ensemble was completed by a floral, Hermes scarf loosely tied in a French knot.

Lillian's workaholic ex-husband, Roland, had an affair with a woman he met at a conference. Since their divorce, she had concentrated on her work at Columbia. She really didn't have to work because the divorce settlement had made her extremely wealthy, but work distracted her from the loneliness of living alone. Aggie and Winnie were encouraging her to begin dating and each had suggested men they liked, with new names coming up weekly. So far, however, Lillian had not been receptive.

Emma Swanson, twenty-five years old, was tall, slender, and a Ph. D. candidate in Child Psychology at NYU. Her eyes were light blue. Her long strawberry-blond hair was tied in a French braid and had a bright red streak running through it. She was wearing designer blue jeans and a cornflower-blue silk T-shirt with the words "Psycho(logist)s Have More Fun" on the front.

Aggie and Winnie were actively dating, in a *Sex and the City* kind of way, which is to say they were playing the field and enjoying relationships and sex with a variety of appealing men. While open to more permanent relationships, they were being careful not to make the same mistakes, or each other's mistakes.

Agnes Fredericks, forty-five years old, was the chief editor for international fiction at Random House publishing. She had dark brown eyes and light brown hair tied in a low bun. She was wearing a low-cut, white, silk blouse over white pants. A black Lucite jaguar broach by Alexis Bittar adorned her fitted white jacket by Zak Posen. Her first husband, while not physically abusive, had been a tyrant in his own way, forever trying to control her. Her second husband was a non-stop talker, a bore who endlessly repeated the same insipid jokes and stories.

Winifred Wallace, forty-three years old, was the owner and manager of her eponymous gallery of modern art in the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan. She had hazel eyes and curly, blond hair. She was wearing a sleeveless silk sheath dress in a colorful abstract print by Oscar de la Renta. Her ex was a gambling addict who had nearly ruined her financially.

"Oh," Simone McKee said to Lillian, "I've been meaning to ask you about the guy I saw you with when I met you for dinner at

Columbia last week.” Simone was forty-seven years old and a business consultant with the Gartner Group. She had dark brown eyes and long black hair, and was wearing a ribbed-knit, off-the-shoulder dress by Michael Kors. They all envied Simone’s rock-solid marriage to her college sweet-heart Bill.

“The guy I was talking to?” Lillian asked, perplexed. “Oh, you mean Miles Harrington, the chair of the History Department. He is persistent. He keeps coming up with excuses to talk to me in the hall between classes. I even get the feeling that he’s stalking me. At first, I took the time to chat with him, but he has become a nuisance. So now, I just get away from him as quickly as possible.”

“Don’t you want a man who is attentive?” Aggie asked jokingly.

“Sure, but the right kind of attention. Miles gives me the creeps,” Lillian replied.

“So how do you plan to find the perfect man?” Winnie asked.

“Perfect? That’s not likely,” Lillian said, with an exasperated expression. “But I would like a husband who is kind, attentive, and fun to be with,” she said. “I had that with Roland, but I guess nothing lasts forever. The missing ingredient was fidelity.”

“Well, you did have a pretty long run with him,” Winnie said.

“I’d really like to find someone like my old Roland,” Lillian said with a sigh.

“Don’t hold your breath for that,” Aggie volunteered. “We’ll find you someone who’s even better.”

“Who’s this we?” Lillian retorted. “Do you four think I can’t find my own Prince Charming.”

“No, it’s not that, but it always helps to have ‘a little help from your friends’,” Simone answered, quoting the Beatles.

“And your ever-loving sisters,” Aggie added.

Simone, however, was thinking: *If only there was a way to get Lillian and Roland back together again!*

Emma remained quiet. She and her brother Bobby—actually Roland Swanson IV—still harbored hopes that their parents would someday reunite—they’d had such terrific childhoods. Even as adults, their parents’ divorce was emotionally upsetting to them, but now, neither of them had any idea how to get past their mother’s anger and their father’s guilt. They’d hoped time would do the trick, but so far, no go. What they needed was something dramatic, something that would push them back together. But what?

## ROLAND'S DEEP FUNK

Bill McKee struggled up out of the overstuffed leather chair in which he'd spent most of the afternoon and evening. He stretched and walked slowly to the French doors overlooking the patio and swimming pool. In the west, there was still a glimmer of sunlight in the highest clouds. Roland Swanson, the owner of the house and McKee's boss, remained firmly planted in his recliner. He'd been in it since supper—he'd hardly budged from it in a week. McKee couldn't believe the depths of despondency to which Roland had sunk. He'd been gloomy and out of sorts ever since his divorce, but this was something else.

"I get it," Roland said, with a sigh, "you want me back doing what we've always done. But I'm already ridiculously rich, and so are you. How much more do we need? Isn't there more to life than piling the gold ever higher until, like King Midas, we choke on it?"

Bill hesitated before responding; they'd been over this ground too many times already: "Don't we have a responsibility to our investors?"

"That greedy bunch?" Roland asked. "You know what they're like. Jasper Murdock was in my office last week when you were in Colorado. He went on and on about how we weren't giving him the returns he expected. If we couldn't do better, he said he'd find someone who would. Damn it all, let him try."

Bill turned from the window: "You do know that Jasper already owns three percent of the fund's stock, right? He has been trying to buy more shares, and he's talking to the directors and other major stockholders about replacing you?"

"Let him try," Roland said sharply, leaning forward and pounding the arms of his recliner with his fists. "I have eighteen percent, I have a firm option on Lillian's eighteen percent, and with the seven percent you and Simone hold, we have forty-three percent. I can still count on your support, can't I?"

"Of course," Bill said, "but time doesn't stand still. Who knows what Jasper is telling other stockholders? We could very well have a proxy fight on our hands at the Annual Meeting in December. If you want to keep control of the fund, you have to come back to work."

"I'm just so tired of the same old, same old," Roland whined, as he sank back into his chair.

Bill walked over and sat in the upholstered chair next to Roland: "There has to be more to what's bugging you than that. We've been



dealing with people like Jasper for years, and it's never bothered you before... not this much."

"I always thought of it as part of a game. Well, I'm sick and tired of it!" Roland said angrily.

"It's not a game," Bill countered. "What we do is important to a lot of people."

"Yes, I know all that," Roland admitted. "But I've been doing some reading. The mergers we've done hurt people and damaged the economies of whole towns. Maybe that woman in the donut shop is right and we're just parasites feeding on other people's work."

## *LILLAN THE WORKAHOLIC*

Dr. Maria Gonzales, the dean of the undergraduate college, knocked on the door of Lillian's office in Schermerhorn Hall at Columbia University. It was past normal office hours, but she was not surprised to see Lillian at her desk. As chair of the Psychology Department, there were endless details for Lillian to handle, on top of her teaching schedule, office hours for undergrad students, and the two doctoral students she was supervising. And further, Maria knew Lillian was an active member of the Cosmopolitan Club and a Trustee of the Guggenheim Museum. It was a busy schedule, perhaps too busy, but Maria knew why her dear friend was pushing herself so hard. It was to keep her mind busy and away from the memories of her marriage and divorce from Roland. It seemed to work during the day, but at night, Lillian had confessed over wine at a bar near campus, she couldn't help obsessing over both the memories of a wonderful family life and then of a crushing betrayal and divorce.

"You're working late again," Maria said.

"I just had a few papers to correct, and I didn't want to lug them home," Lillian answered.

"You're not planning to take the subway tonight, are you?" Maria demanded.

"Well," Lillian admitted, "it's what I usually do. It's what I've been doing for years, with no problems from anyone."

Maria leaned against the door frame and crossed her arms: "You do know that your name and picture have been in the news a lot lately, what with Cosmo events you've chaired and donations to the Guggenheim and to charitable organizations. It's nice that you're being

recognized, but it comes with a price. There are a lot of people who would love to get their hands on you. A rich divorcée who rides the subway is way too tempting a target.”

“I suppose you’re right. I just hadn’t thought of it in those terms. It’s not that I have to skimp by taking the subway. Maybe I should look into hiring a limo service when I want to get around town,” Lillian said.

“That’s a good idea, but for tonight, please take a taxi,” Maria said as she continued down the hall to her own office.

*Yes, I can afford a limo, Lillian thought: There’s no need for me to skimp on anything. I am a billionaire. But why, oh why, am I divorced from the man I loved so much... and still love so much?*