

GOOD BULLETS MAKE BAD NEIGHBORS

a novel of accidental discharge

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~ Author's Note ~

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Is there
Bus → Cla
how to explain

Merry files for
(snapshot)

Americruiser Two,
65 miles per hour,
Pennsylvania Turnpike

THE BUS CRUISES WEST BELOW A THOUSAND CLOUDS. Not convulsive, not slung with storms, these clouds still impose: coiled vapors chained like mail, they bramble the sky from back to front and grant the sun an early retirement. Inside the bus cabin, last row right, window seat, Wayne Milton sleeps. A man by law though not by exploit, he is young enough, and boyish enough, to arouse ID checks and maternal dispositions. His pale arms wrap his body and his body nuzzles into the seat cushion's foamy contours. At the edge of the headrest lingers his head, a nudge away from slipping free and knocking to the windowpane. Would such a knock rouse him? His slumber is fierce.

Last night, gunshot. Today, ricochet. A man has died in front of him. Died, perhaps, because of him. This glinted notion, this shard of guilt, circles Wayne's unconscious and scrapes it clean of peace. Angry bugbears grow new fangs and shred their leashes; they stalk through deep canals dragging visions that consume, not inspire. These visions are twitchy and nervous, hostile and scared—a reflection of Wayne's role as an incompetent fugitive, neither crafty nor quick.

Ahead in the road is a craterous pothole, a yearning maw, the pit of an asphaltic ant lion. The bus, helmed by a driver bored witless, barrels towards it. *Cham! Cha-cham!* Tires bounce, axles twang, struts flutter. A jolting blow, but hardly mortal. Despite having caved many a wafer-wheeled econobox, this pothole cannot subdue the sauropodian might of a charging Trailhound motorcoach. Scoffing and bucking, the bus roars onward, bay bags joggled and spring-mounted cabin bobbing merrily.

Upset by this ruckus, Wayne Milton's head rolls off the seat and hits the window, neck trailing behind like a string on a puckered balloon. His face begins to shimmy and sag down the cold glass, and within a minute it drops below the window's rubber molding and onto the underlying vent. Toasty metal fins bite his chin and then his cheek, mapping the tilt between the points. Warm currents escape the vent and push against skin, ruffle uncombed hair, soften the late October chill.

Soon these currents dwindle and stop—some cabin thermostat has been satisfied, some temperate goal achieved. Immediately the air starts to cool, and Wayne's face loses its newfound flush.

Philadelphia at dawn: that was where and when he boarded the bus, his breath thin and chest patterning. Now, many hills and dales and miles later, the Trailhound enters Ohio at the approach of twilight. Youngstown is minutes away; Cleveland, a couple hours. Wayne's one-way ticket expires in Cleveland. He's never been there and until this morning had never thought to visit, but fear and urgency can connive strange roadmaps.

Wayne wishes to defy his ticket, to cocoon within the bus until he or the world transforms. A pipe dream, he knows. Come Cleveland, the bus will dump him at the banks of the Cuyahoga and motor off with perfect indifference.

A small notebook is on his lap. Centerbound, pages spread, it flirts with imbalance yet clings to the curve of a tilted thigh. Stuck in the spine is a green mechanical pencil, its clip hooked on the curled wire. The pencil's eraser caps the top curl, the point reaches the bottom, and along the drop between, tightly ruled sheets fan out and float above their binding like the wings of a rectangular butterfly. They hover, they tremble, and the writing upon them seems to blur and sprain.



In the adjacent aisle seat, a man of common generation and deeper coloration straightens up from a crossword magazine, eyes in a squint. His name is Percy, and the diminishing daylight compounds the challenge of his puzzle. He looks out the window, then at his watch. Autumn is settling and the nights are dropping ever faster, true, but this rapid darkfall outpaces the usual pattern.

A premature solstice, an ominous dusking? Percy shrugs it off. Today's weather has been ripe for foreboding, were he in the market. The morning had come as fog and then burst alive—vapors parting, rays shining, cerulean splendor uplifting. Such bright promise, but one scuttled by the onset of noon, that mid-day hour tugging along a hulking entourage, a horizon-gulping armada of cloud which anchored in for good.

Percy sees a tint of black on the deep gray sky; he feels the approach of eventide. The miracle of electricity makes all things possible. He clicks an overhead switch, a circuit connects, and a tight beam shoots down to his crossword magazine. His eyes relax, his focus returns. Comfort and light! "Chicken wire," he murmurs, pressing his mechanical pencil to the puzzle—

Snap! The tip breaks off. He clicks the advance button but no point rises. He shakes the barrel but no rods rattle. Total graphite depletion. A minor snag, and scarcely that: Percy is savvy enough to

tote multiple pencils. He unbuckles and digs into his knapsack's utility pouch, where he always keeps a spare, or two, or four...or none? Damn! More proof that love done boggled his mind! He's packed extra underwear and four *eaux de cologne* but no reserve pencils? He grumbles and pouts at his useless utensil.

Diversionless, now. What to do? He leans back and casts about. For lack of better scenery, his attention falls on the contorted fellow sleeping beside him—this man whose face is smeared over the heat vent, this man who is no doubt drooling down the grooves. This is a man of mystery, of secrets, of doleful bearing. This is the one—and likely only—Wheyant.

Wheyant! Percy mouths the name silently, accent towards the front. *Whey-ant*. They first met at a roadside market in the later reaches of morning, and Percy remembers the swapping of introductions: Hey, I'm Percy. Nice to meet ya. You are?

Whey-ant, Whey-ant, the guy replied with conspicuous propulsion, his arms flapping, *Whey-ant's* my name, don't you know it's French Canadian!

While Percy lacks a Québécois to poll, he sensed then and senses still a *souçon* of bullshit. Far from slick, this Wheyant—he and his codename would crumble at a chisel's lazy tap. But why intrude? Nobody loves a snoop, and Wheyant's malaise dampens the urge to poke and pry. The man generates a rangy aura, and sallies between sleep and incoherence

with distress wafting out his nostrils. Youth and decay, co-mingled.

A chill enters the air. The cabin's heater has shut itself off, a habitual event. It fires in bursts, triggered by some algorithm Percy can't decipher. No hardship, he is cozy and rosy in outfit and outlook. His bozo neighbor, however, embodies a meagerly clad contrast. Without coat or jacket, without layers, Wheyant is sickly and short-sleeved and goosebumped. Again Percy looks him over, thinking to lend him a sweater, maybe toss it at his fool head from a safe distance—

Then Percy's eyes speed to the open notebook teetering on Wheyant's thigh. The tablet itself is a secondary focus; rather, it is the pencil in the spine that excites attention. This pencil is mechanical, the cheap disposable kind, much like Percy's own. Very much, actually. Same brand and bore, same olive body and gray clip. Ringers they are, but for slightly disparate eraser abrasion and a far more critical, though invisible, difference. While Percy's pencil is spent and sorry, Wheyant's pencil is most assuredly chockablock with rich, black, lustrous graphite.

It calls to Percy, this pencil does. It purrs his name. *Purrr-cy, Purrrr-cy*, claim me, use me. After casting a dyspeptic eye to his gap-toothed crossword, Percy sets a covetous regard on the slender siren. Yea, this prize of Wheyant's he shall steal, or at least borrow for a time. How best to nab it, to spring it

from that spiral cage? He must case the scene. First he studies the metrics of captivity, noting the pencil clip's visible tension on the spine's uppermost coils. Then he sizes up the notebook itself, creasing his brow at the wavering, marked-up pages that bracket the pencil's barrel.

About these marked-up pages, Percy admits some curiosity. In the rare intervals between playing deadpan and playing dead, Wheyant has been fixed to this notebook, scribbling in it, grimacing at it, darting his eyes like a fearful rodent and hunching over whenever Percy dared a deeper-than-peripheral peek. Why the zealous security, what so sensitive lay within? Dark desires? Steamy confessions? A top-secret recipe for the crispiest, moistest, most mouth-watering hush puppies ever?

Percy tilts closer and tries to spy, but the thin sheets jitter intolerably. He spreads his thumb and forefinger and touches them to the paper. Ah, stability. Sleeping Wheyant doesn't rustle or twitch at this gentle manipulation, and Percy reads:

*Is there a soul? Does it die w/ body?
Bus → Cleveland → don't know.
how to explain myself: as victim/guilty/both.
memory fades and bloats at the same time.*

Percy's vision fades and bloats at the same time, too. The notebook's illumination is feeble, the sharp

glow of Percy's overhead lamp confined to his lap alone. Under shadow, Wheyant's erratic letterforms tangle and blend, his penmanship anything but. Percy squeezes his eyelids, rubs his eyes, tries to refocus. He could always reach over and click on Wheyant's lamp—

The idea terminates, nixed by a moment's consideration: the spotlight's flash may traumatize Wheyant's crazy dreamworld and uncork idiotic consequences. And Percy's no coward, but he has empirical and percussive experience with Wheyant's crazy dreamworld. Case in point occurring mid-afternoon, a few hours ago, when Wheyant—who'd as usual been passed out all slop-jointed—suddenly surged up and, fighting some nightmare beast, cracked a bony elbow to Percy's innocent, unassuming face.

Since that manic assault, Percy has felt less than secure. He likes his teeth. He cares for his teeth. They do not belong and will not reside on the trodden floorboards of a Trailhound bus. He rubs his jaw where the bruise from Wheyant's strike still tingles, though the swelling has eased. Then he returns his tired eyes and stabilizing fingers to the notebook, playing graphologist with Wheyant's disorder:

*Resolution isn't on turnpike. (ditto absolution)
chest hurting again. fingers sore.
so much for confession.*

Percy drifts his hand aside and, minding the notebook's iffy balance on Wheyant's leg, flips to the next page. In mid-flip he accidentally brushes an elbow to Wheyant's chest. Wheyant gives a twitch and a snort—and Percy eyes him warily, forearm set defensively. But the man doesn't rage awake like a dynamite dervish, he only murmurs a single word, hard to hear, something like *nothing*. Percy waits for a follow-up but gets only silence and stasis. He drops his guard and checks out the new page.

Eureka! Cryptic maundering gives way to pictorial intrigue, a sketch of a woman's face. Whence came this? For all his sly glances, Percy hasn't seen Wheyant draft anything past crooked scribble. The mystery has a ready answer, though. Absorbed by iridescent fantasizing, the cabin's lullaby rhythm, or smoky grooves on his mix tape, Percy on occasion has been less than omniscient, and within these times Wheyant must've drawn the woman. She appears young, mid-twenties, same age as Wheyant. Percy himself is a rattletrap caravan camped on the edge of thirty, desperate to scare up some water before testing the badlands.

He appraises Wheyant's pencilwork and finds it decent enough to admire. Not that the artistic esteem of Percy Morrison is hard-won: to declare his own drawing style chicken-scratch would be to defame the chicken, and thus he is speedily impressed by any measure of talent. All the same,

he likes this portrait, even after donning his best objective goggles. The lines and curves have an expressive weight, a careful touch, from the tidy hinting of cheekbones to the dense curls of hair. These crafted strokes clash with the slipshod handwriting of the earlier pages, and Percy senses a priority issue at work. He balances the woman's sketched face with Wheyant's sleeping one. Is she a problem or a solution?

This leads Percy to think about a different lass: his sweetheart, his Isabelle, his belle of Cleveland. Though it must be said that, apropos or otherwise, Percy's trains of thought are uniformly Isabelle-bound. If right this second Wheyant magically turned into a briny mound of sauerkraut, Percy would note this development and end up thinking about Isabelle.

He wants to see her, yes he does—and guess what! Oh-so-soon, stunningly soon, he *will*. She is close now, a hop, skip, and jump away. Granted, a hundred-mile hop, skip, and jump, but at daybreak the chasm was quadruple that. Fine progress for a Trailhound bus on a curvy course through the Alleghenies. Hey Isabelle! I'm comin' round the mountain, go ahead and kill that old red rooster!

Percy smiles, allows himself a pleasant thrill. After it subsides he returns to Wheyant's notebook, hoping for more nifty sketches. Page after page he turns, fingers delicate with caution and care,

but past the woman's face there is only blankness. Changing tack, he cycles backward and finds a number of early pages tattered by formless gabble. *First will and testament...Hollander...blood on shirt, mixed, pushed together...Melvin \$...woman/alarm/gun/fight/then?*

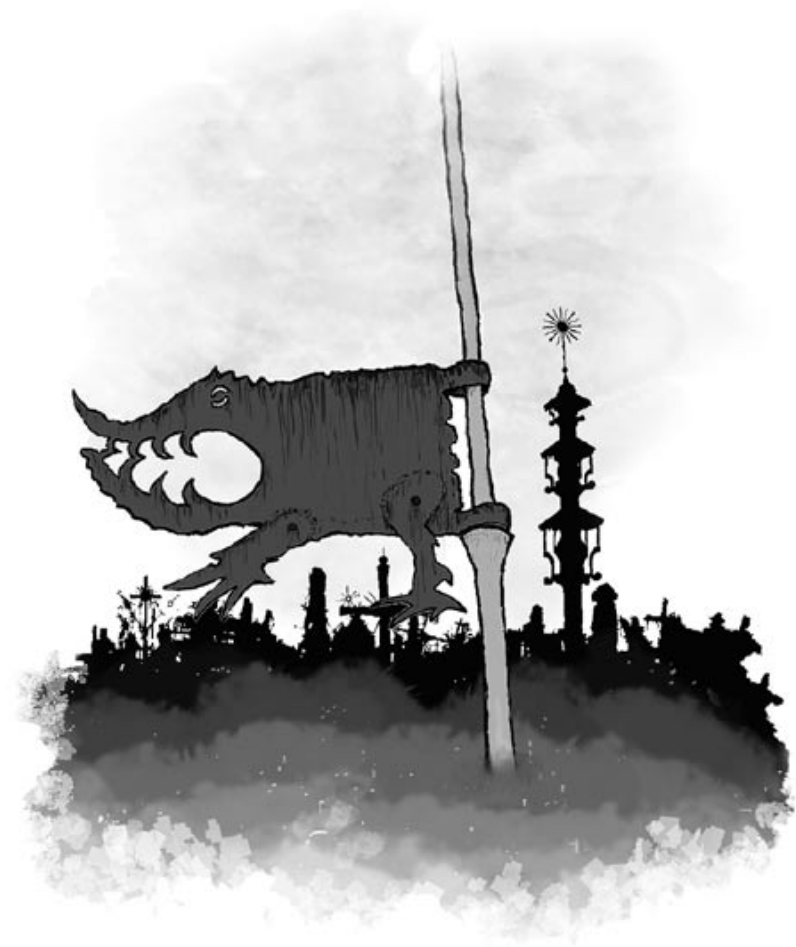
Gun. Blood. Fight. Testament. Strong words, rank with drama, feeding a yen to poke and pry. When Wheyant awakens, Percy might fetch that chisel and get to tapping. Right now he's primed to fetch something else: Wheyant's imprisoned pencil, locked in a spiral sheath, dreaming of release, dreaming of crosswords.

The pencil's tail pokes out from the notebook's binding, and with stealth Percy moves a hand into position, fingers shivering just above the rubber nub. With his other hand, he pinches the pencil's clip and gingerly lifts it over the wire hoops. Then the first hand dips, grabs, and pulls, and just like that the bird is free. Into the emptied spine goes Percy's similar-but-barren pencil. So goes the swap, swift and smooth and deft as can be.

Percy settles back and exhales. He shakes his prize and hears the delightful chatter of auxiliary graphite. After a summary double-check on Wheyant—at present, oblivion personified—he stares down his crossword, virile tool in hand, verbal game afoot. Where was he? There: twenty-five across, an eleven-boxer.

Clue, *Plucky telegram?* Answer, *chicken wire*. Percy pencils it in and feels the relish of congruity. Contented again, he forgets his neighborly urge to toss Wheyant a sweater.

While Percy happily puzzles, Wayne, alias Wheyant, fumbles in his sleep for something not there, and the movement jars the notebook off his lap and onto the floor. His breathing quickens and he begins to dream of recent days, of Philadelphia, his mind speeding toward where the bus speeds from.



PART I.



Chapter One



icing on the cake

ONE WEEK AGO, NO HIGHWAY SIGNS IN WAYNE'S DREAMS, no prescient twinges or cramps, no phantom drifts of bus exhaust to foretell a diesel-fueled disappearance. Nothing psychic or somatic in the least. Just Wayne, propped on a maroon stool at Philly's Bad Art Diner, drinking black coffee and making sprightly conversation with a dark-haired waitress who was his fondest wish. "The bass," he said, leaning into the counter and clasping his hands. "The bass is the rock'n'roll equivalent of a Klingon cloaking device—"

“Ground rules!” Juliette tipped him a look of reproach.

“Oh, but it’s a perfect analogy! People strap on that axe and—*poof!*—they outright vanish. Just like a Bird of Prey!”

“Dammit, Wayne, ground rules! Must I endure these Star Trek references? Do I look like the kind of girl you’d take to a convention? I’m a groove honey—” she flipped her hands to her shoulders, then pointed at him “—you’re a dork muffin.”

Wayne rubbed his brow. “Dork muffin? I can be that.”

“And *you* may think the bass is unimportant, but—”

“No, I can’t deny the power of a good bottom end.” He smiled thinly. “Least of all yours.”

Juliette snorted. “How saucy.” With a frown, she inspected her left hand and presented it to him: the nails were cut short, the fingertips inflamed. “I bet my strings are set too high. One week of practice and I’m *completely* irritated. It gets better, doesn’t it?”

“Only after it gets worse,” Wayne said. “But keep it up! A year from now you’ll be burnin’ down barns.” He pointed to the pastry carousel behind the counter. “Hey, that top slice looks good. Chocolate cream?”

Juliette laughed. “Yeah. Want it?” Wayne nodded and she laughed again. Then she went to the carousel, retrieved the dessert, and hovered it before him. “Move your mess.”

Mess? Please! The inky heap lying before Wayne’s plunked elbows deserved garlands, not slander: the *Philadelphia Keynote* was a big-city daily with grit, heart, and class. To Wayne the publication surpassed mere newsprint—it was a reliable, redoubtable friend, a shield against the press-gangs of ignorance. Before entering the diner he’d bought the paper from the corner box, a necessary step in his routine. As Julie rightfully spent more time working tables than fussing with him, quality journalism hastened the gaps in her episodic presence.

The Bad Art had been busy over the past hour, which had given Wayne liberty to read the entire of today’s *Keynote*, starting at the op-ed page and ending with the sports section. Ruffled and fluffy from a careless refolding, the newspaper did form a fat pile—but still, it was nobody’s mess.

Hiding under the *Keynote* was a letter-size art portfolio. A small folio as folios go, but one befitting Wayne’s downscale style. Since morning he’d been carrying it around, fitfully setting on benches and touching up the drawings inside. Here at the diner, he had reason to keep it buried beneath the newspaper—if Julie saw it, she’d push for a look-see. Normally this wouldn’t cause concern, but today Wayne had neglected to excise certain work from the folio, work that emphasized a severe fixation. Fifty-fifty chance of intentional oversight. Subconscious, how do you plead?

He swept aside the paper and underlying folio, and Juliette slapped down the slice of cake, saying, “For you, pal, on the house.”

“Much obliged.” Wayne lifted his fork and poked it at the frothy lump rising from the plate. Ten feet back and behind carousel glass, this dessert had discharged an appetizing gleam. Point blank, it resembled swill-drenched cow pie. Not wishing to appear squeamish, he took a big, bold bite and learned a lesson in regret. “Urk.” He swallowed the mouthful of pulpy, vulcanized cream and chased it with two swigs of coffee. “Guh.”

This cake was immeasurably offensive. It was a pastry travesty. It was utter crap and tasted accordingly. While this other thing, this *longing* thing, was utter crap but as usual tasted sweetly opposite. Wayne came to the Bad Art Diner several times each week, his visits neatly dovetailing with Juliette’s work schedule. After a year of this curious coincidence, even the short-order guys favored him with wry looks and cocked eyebrows whenever spotting him through the kitchen door’s porthole.

Wayne adored many things about Juliette: a smile to stun a raging rhino, a rich and mordant wit, a sizzling short fuse, and a natural tilt towards justice. There wasn’t much he disliked about the girl, save her boyfriend, Clark.

Not that Wayne had ever met the guy, and not that he ever would. Clark lived up in Harrisburg, a

couple hours northwest, where he clerked for a representative in the state government. Clark the clerk had met Juliette three years back, when he’d been attending college in Philly. Though Julie’s pupils didn’t contort themselves into precious little hearts at his mention, she seemed happy enough, and she wasn’t the type to sleaze around on the side. Wayne wouldn’t want that anyway—he held a torch for integrity, even when the wind blew sparks in his face.

Juliette rounded the counter and took the stool beside him. “C’mon, kid, don’t be slack. Eat your treat, eat it *up*.”

“The repulsive flavor kinda puts me off. But I’m guessing you made it, so I love it anyway.” Wayne pushed her the plate of cake. “Though you lied to me—chocolate cream this ain’t. Y’care to tell me what I’m ingesting?”

She deflected the plate with the back of her hand and announced grandly, “Cocoa, condensed milk, almond paste, creme de menthe, and creme de cheese, raspberry flavor.”

“Julie, your talents are wasted here.” Wayne nudged his shoulder against hers. “Quit this dump, get yourself down to Le Bec-Fin, help Georges regain his fifth star.”

“On my list.” She eyed her motley creation. “Look at that *color*. Came out like the Mississippi Delta. I could nail it to the wall beside Tommy’s Rococo Gaia.”

“Rococo who?”

Juliette motioned to a painting above the cashier’s desk. “Gaia. Tommy’s latest. Mother Earth never had it so good.”

Wayne looked over, agreed, and raised his fork to salute the Rococo Gaia, the newest example of the Bad Art Diner’s *raison d’être*. The Bad Art was no ordinary greasy spoon, although Tommy, the joint’s owner, mightn’t scorn the term *la cuillère graisseuse*, a translation Wayne had once memorized to impress Juliette. For this diner’s cachet was not culinary, but visionary—however stale its cooking varieties, the Bad Art showcased perhaps the freshest decorative oils in the foodservice industry.

Adorning the eatery were dozens of primal paintings, most of them sublimely awful yet so ineffably magnetic that, were the walls metal, they could hang *sans* hooks. Mostly they’d been contributed by patrons whose talent lay outside the narrow gamut of aestheticism; furthermore, Juliette had informed Wayne that owner Tommy was the anonymous genius behind no less than a third of the maladroit masterworks. A tiny white card, gold-penned with title and price, was taped under each canvas in the hopes that anyone who fancied a dollar-fifty fried egg sandwich might also swap a hundred bucks for, say, an impressionistic chutney of Columbus’s *Santa Maria* battling Tennyson’s mossy kraken under a roiling chartreuse sky. Or, for patrons of a more classical taste, perhaps

a teal-toned arboreal scene of a horny satyr fellating the shapely tail fin of a peeved-looking mermaid?

Wayne had long admired the Bad Art’s conceptual élan. When he got rich, this would be his first stop. He’d saunter through the door, beefy billfold in hand, and buy every grotesquerie in the place. He wasn’t sure how or when this richness would be attained, but he hoped it came before his hair went. Profligate men with sleazy pompadours were suave and sexy, but profligate men with pasty, clammy noggins were just compensating.

He returned his attention to Juliette’s cake experiment, which epitomized pasty and clammy better than any noggin could. After steeling himself he took another gloppy bite. Then he noticed Juliette nosing through his pushed-aside newspaper, her hands working into the ruffle. Her fingers paused at the pile’s bottom, and she reached in and snuck out his art folio.

“Hey hey,” she said, “look what I found.”

“Wait—” Wayne blurted, mouth full. He swallowed quickly and said, “My comics. Tonight I got—no, lemme show y—” He grabbed at his folio but Juliette had already flipped it open.

She bit her lip. “Oh.”

“Th-that’s not a comic,” Wayne said, skin flushing. “The comics are under that.”

“Oh,” Juliette repeated, eyes still fixed to the sketch of her own face. “This...isn’t bad.”

Wayne looked away. “Yeah?” Then he dared turning back to her. “Thanks.” Lord let this be a fortunate day...

“Wayne.” Juliette dipped her head. “You know—no, you don’t. I’ve been meaning to say. Clark’s moving here. Back here.”

A fist to the gut. Wayne struggled to maintain a casual tone: “He finally got the sense to quit the statehouse mob? Got tired of hunting interns?” He took the folio from Juliette’s hands, closed it, slid it to the side.

“He *works* there, he ain’t *of* there,” Juliette said. “After next month’s elections, he’s gonna come back here, do his master’s.”

“Master’s.” Wayne gripped the counter’s edge. “Ah.” He was twenty-four, a year older than Clark, and the owner of an inglorious five-year academic career that had culminated in an associate’s degree. Of art. “Good to hear.”

A twist in his voice, an emotion too quick to stanch. Julie swiveled her stool away, folded her arms, and said quietly, “Won’t be able to see you as much. He wants us to live together. And you know my apartment, two more months ’til I’m set to move, so...” Her voice faded.

Wayne took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He flicked it open, pulled one out. He could feel her gaze. “Hmph. You’ll still be working here, right?”

“Yes. Yes. But that’s not—”

“We’re just friends anyway. We got a right to talk if we want.” Wayne popped the cigarette into his mouth and combed his pockets for matches, but had no expectation of finding any—he’d struck his last one on the walk to the diner. He pulled the smoke from his lips and twirled it between his fingers. Juliette tapped something against his shoulder. He turned and saw a brass lighter in her hand, the lighter she carried as a charm although she’d quit smoking last spring. She even kept its fluid fresh. He took it, lit his cigarette, and flicked the aperture lever to the maximum width. The flame, still on, swelled to a fat gout.

“Wayne—” Juliette stood and stepped back, eyes scanning the restaurant. “I gotta work. I’ll call you, okay?”

She escaped to the kitchen before Wayne could reply. He snapped her lighter shut and appraised the empty stool, the maroon vinyl depressed where she’d been sitting. He drew on his cigarette and awaited her return.

A minute passed. Two minutes passed. Wayne stopped concentrating on the kitchen door’s porthole and used the tip of his cigarette to scorch errant finger-hairs. If only he had silkier digits, Julie would love him. After finishing his smoke and sipping dry the lukewarm puddle in his coffee cup, he took four dollars from his wallet and slid them beside the plate of half-eaten cake. Then he squeezed Juliette’s

lighter, touched it to his cheek, and placed it atop the money. Balance paid.

He pushed off the stool, slung on his jacket, and stretched his muscles. Rejecting the inclination to scrape and shuffle, he picked up his feet and strolled to the bathroom.



After gracing the urinal with an appropriate greeting, he went to wash his hands. He avoided looking up while rinsing, for above the sink hung the Mirror of Ego Deflation, and blazing overtop were its symbiotic cohorts, the Fluorescent Tubes of Blemishment. Wayne was pallid in winter and putty in summer, but in the Bad Art Diner's high-contrast bathroom, his year-round hue was a weave of wet pink and cadaverous white. He closed the tap and ducked from his piebald reflection.

He was in love. Screw the moral strictures of decency and probity, screw the humble acceptance of a larger pattern—his bird of fucking happiness was about to flap away, but not before crapping on his head. *Caw! Caw! Splat.*

He wanted a girl he could not have, and he'd go to his grave decades hence with unspoken regrets, and he'd forsake the key to Paradise for a dozen earthly kisses from her lips, so on and so forth, ad nauseam hominem sanatorium.

These feelings were delicious. He would not

repent of his gluttonous woe-mongering. That's what sentience was for.

After drying his hands on his shirt, he returned to the dining room. Juliette had emerged from the kitchen and was scrubbing a table in the far corner, her back turned. Wayne saw that his place at the counter had been cleaned up: the money, lighter, and half-eaten cake were gone, and the *Philadelphia Keynote's* unruly shag had been coaxed into a tidy stack. His art folio was nicely squared beside the newspaper.

He went over and retrieved the folio. He crooked open the cover and eyed his portrait of Juliette. Then he closed the folio and eyed the real thing. Though his presence was obvious, Juliette didn't turn around or look up from the table she was scrubbing. What a lucky table, to receive such lavish janitorial attention! No question, she'd be scrubbing that table until the stubborn dirt went away—the stubborn dirt that was lingering by the counter and gazing oafishly at her. The stubborn dirt that was slow to take a hint and a hike.

Yes, he would leave, it was the courtly thing to do. Engrave it on his tombstone: *here lies Wayne of courtly air, croak he did without fanfare.* He pushed through the chime-draped exit and stepped into the street. Orchestral strings chose not to swell as Julie chose not to fling aside her rag and spray bottle, dash crying after him, and leap into his arms. Lovelorn

he was, and standing on the sidewalk he looked back through the windowed door, and verily! No sad face was pressed to the pane, no pretty nose oiled the glass.

He walked a few blocks to the nearest Toby-Mart. These convenience stores were a Philly fixture, and to stand before their doors was to feel the tug of the region's lowest tobacco prices. Wayne purchased a beef stick entitled "Laramie Trail," its logo a gleaming sheriff's star with beaded points, this brand of Old West mythopoetics outgunning those of the eight competitors stocked beside. True to form, he also bought cigarettes—while not even halfway into his current pack, he anticipated the need. Also he wanted the complementary matches.

Flame-enabled, he knocked off a couple smokes before reaching home, a third-floor unit at Conifer Street Arms boasting two tiny bedrooms, a kitchenette, and a combined foyer/living room that his apartment-mate Doogie insisted on calling "the den."

"Ciao bella!" Doogie said when Wayne jerked open door 3B and clumped inside.

The den was torrid with artless song, and Wayne closed the door and glowered at Doogie's boom box. "What, Italian techno?" he asked with contempt.

"Surly *and* ignorant. It's Belgian basement opera."

Conifer Street Arms—a building shaggy, not shabby—was tucked inside Philly's queer quarter, where fortunes and tenants ran the gamut. Down the street lay "Noh Man's Land," a nightspot celebrated

for its savagely spiked guava punch and avant-garde dinner theatre, and the surrounding blocks were thick with busy gyms and buzzy cafés, and the indie bookstore up the row was bedizened like an embassy, rainbow flags flying from crenel and crown. Fittingly then, Doogie was gay. Not fancy or fantabulous, no plummy showtunes or adamantine abs or waxed treasure-trail. Just pure unvarnished gay. Despite their different circles and strokes, he and Wayne kept an easy friendship.

After a few moments of Wayne standing there with a disjointed scowl on his face, Doogie killed the music and asked, "Back from the Bad Art? How's your girl?"

Wayne tossed his art folio across the room—a toss more gentle lob than violent pitch, but executed with showy distress. Then he dropped to the floor and pressed his head to the hardwood. "Argh. Fuck." Dust and lint scooted away from his breath. He twisted sideways, wiped his mouth, and saw Doogie standing over him.

"Argh-fuck what, man?" Doogie said, his face marked by a concerned curiosity.

Wayne bared his teeth. "Clark, that's what."

"Clark?" Doogie hunched closer. "Clark the clerk?"

"From the hinterland he comes," Wayne said flatly, working to mask a ratcheting whine. "He comes to cohabitare."

Doogie stepped back and dropped into a mound of non-matching throw pillows. The den held no chairs, but within its disarray were plenty of these pillows and a few blankets of questionable provenance. “Not here, I hope.”

“No, with Juliette, you wastoid.”

“Choo.” Doogie spun his hands. “Which changes what?”

“*Think* about it for a second, okay? Him around, she can’t be spending time with me. Pretty obvious, you know?”

“Dude, don’t load your crap on me,” Doogie said with a sniff. “All you’ve ever done is moon and pine anyway. Face it, cowpoke, you ain’t got the balls to tear her from her man.”

Wayne sat upright and groped for a weapon. Doogie’s navy oxfords were tumbled by the door and within reach, left shoe flipped over the right, blue-stained socks curled beside. A shoe being too harsh a torpedo, Wayne grabbed and launched one of the socks. It hit Doogie and clung to his shirt, the soiled toe flopping over his left shoulder.

“So what should I do?” Wayne said, arm extended from his dramatic throw. “What would *you* have me do?”

Doogie plucked the sock from his shoulder and regarded it with a sedate gravity. “No idea.” He balled up the dirty scrap, went to his bedroom, and came back cradling a whole dirty heap. “Maybe

laundry?” He dropped the clothes and pointed to a denuded coffee can atop a wall shelf. “Coffer’s full of quarters, you got some hours before work, time’s ripe, smell is too.”

Wayne pondered Doogie’s washables. Then he pictured his own significant amount, lumped and stinky behind his bed.

“Sure,” he said. “May as well brood usefully.”

It might soothe him, a couple hours’ fluffing and folding. Besides, the laundromat had an ancient Ms. Pac-Man videogame, sit-down cocktail style, that he could exploit for cheap therapy. Add the tonic aroma of powdered detergent and the balmy sloshing of wet machinery, and he’d be all right for now.



At the laundromat, Wayne’s Theory of Game-Catalyzed Gloom Sublimation was efficiently routed by the incipient return of Clark the Clerk. The bastard was coming to take his girl away! Did Clark visit Juliette at work, several times each week, surveying her joys and laments? Nah, ’course not. Did Clark, flip politico that he was, solicit Julie’s views on the news of the world? Wayne thought not. What a putz, that Clark. What an assbag, that Clark. To top it off, he was upwardly mobile. The nerve.

Against this many-pronged wound, Ms. Pac-Man was a lame salve. White-knuckled and severe, Wayne jammed that red-knobbed joystick for all its

worth, but the bright sprites and merry *bleeps* of classic arcadia tendered a hollow relief. Sure, in the binary heat of dot-chomping, Wayne's attentions and affections were abysmally vested in his ravenous ribbon-headed avatar, and dodging the not-so-Deep Blue gambits of his ghostly adversaries did effectively divert his mind from Juliette and Clark. But *Game Over* came, it came with speed and sad sound effects, and then he paced before a chugging row of washer/dryers, his eyes gone moist despite tenacious blinking and the anodyne cloud of linty fragrance.

Moist eyes, dewy gaze, misty haze. Sorrow amongst the suds, not a salutary indicator. When the cycles were done, he and Doogie stood side by side, sorting and folding in silence. After packing their clean laundry into the same bags that had previously suffered their dirty laundry, they returned home and took their respective fashions to their respective rooms. Wayne dropped his clothes on the drawer, fell to his bed, and spent the next half-hour flipping through a mangy paperback of famous quotations.

“Only one man ever understood me,” he said, reading aloud the supposed last words of the German philosopher Georg Hegel, “and even he didn't understand me.”

He threw the quotation book at the wall, sat up, and reached for Craig Thompson's *Blankets*. Several minutes later he shelved the novel, taken by its beauty and annoyed at its author's monstrous talent.

He got to his feet, cracked his knuckles, and stepped into the den. Doogie's bedroom door was shut, electro-burps leaking from behind, so alone he stood, casting a loutish glare at the den's digital clock. The blocky red diodes claimed 7:27, but as the clock face's rightmost crystal was broken, the true figure could be 7:27, 7:23, or 7:29. Whichever, his shift started at eight. Quicken up!

Wayne worked in the production department of *Jiff*, a free commuter daily. A slender tabloid fusing abbreviated news articles with sugary infotainment, *Jiff* was a rainbow-inked antidote to the broadsheet heft of the *Philadelphia Keynote*. At *Jiff*, no story, whether world, national, or local, was permitted to surpass 300 words, except in the case of catastrophe or celebrity wedding, whereupon the limit was tripled to 900.

Brevity was the soul of *Jiff*, and that was why Wayne broke ranks and read the *Keynote* for his daily fix. The *Keynote*'s editorial orbit encompassed hundreds of reporters, dozens of columnists, several international bureaus, and satellite desks in every major American city; the editorial department of *Jiff* comprised a hatchet-wielding chimp locked in a dark closet with a quart of corn liquor and the Associated Press newswire.

Being a production staffer, Wayne didn't care what manner of journalistic hash *Jiff* slung up—his loyalties lay with the presentation of it, the garnish-

ing of it, daresay the beautification of it. Five nights a week he perched before a gloriously crisp 27" color-corrected computer monitor, and his optical mouse would chart a constellation across the desktop as he sorted and molded a shoddy jigsaw of ads, articles, photos, and graphics into a marvel of fine layout subconsciously admired by tens of thousands of people.

His job title was "night composer," which had a romantic mystique oft dispersed by elaboration:

"Night composer? Sounds cool! What do you compose?"

"Jiff."

"You compose...what?"

"See that green-and-white box on the corner? Says 'All the News that's *Jiff* to Print'?"

"You compose a newspaper?"

"What, you think those headlines and pictures and ads march *themselves* into such logical and cogent formations? You think those intricate graphic elements pen their own pretty curves? Look at this front page! Examine its intuitive presentation! You think such elegant eye-flow can be achieved by drunken collage or abstract abandon?"

"I don't give a shit, honestly."

"Fie upon you blinkered legions! You blaspheme the devoted artisans that stride the lonesome moonlit road and illuminate the scriptures of the Fourth Estate!"

The digital clock advanced to 7:30, the broken crystal mauling the zero into a Greek letter Wayne couldn't identify. Fie upon this malingering mood! If he didn't hurry out the door, he'd be sprinting, not striding, that lonesome moonlit road. He jammed his feet into flopsy boots and laced them up as best he could. On a wall peg hung his jacket, and he grabbed it, donned it, and poked through its zippered pockets. Wallet, check. Keys, check. Cigarettes and matches, check. Wayne traveled light, his doodads few. He had no car or cell phone, and his wallet was thin, pared of temptations; he carried a single credit card, and over its magnetic strip was a piece of masking tape bearing the word, "crisis?"

The clock jumped to 7:31, one of the fortunate figures it could display properly. Wayne wanted to stomp the junky timepiece into crispy fragments, he wanted to revel in its destruction. Why did he choose to depend on this failed machine, why did this chronic incompetent roil his affections? The cost of a new clock was ten bucks—or less!—thanks to foreign toil and free-trade voodoo, and he'd long needed one for his bedroom. Maybe he'd go shopping tomorrow. For too long he'd been a benchwarmer in that most patriotic of sports.

His art folio was in the corner, lying where he'd tossed it upon returning from the Bad Art Diner. Quietly it requested retrieval, and to fetch it Wayne navigated a clutter of pillows, papers, cassettes,

CDs, and a few on-the-loose recyclables, the latter being debris from Doogie's ginger-beer and sports-drink diet. He picked up the folio, aligned a few drawings that had skewed out, and flipped through the contents.

On top, that troublesome sketch of Juliette. Beneath it, a three-quarter perspective of a running horse he'd done just to prove he could. Good galloping grief, everyone knew what a horse looked like but they were a bitch to capture on paper. Massive bulging muscles, long reedy legs: Wayne's early attempts had resembled fox-nosed, steroid-buffed dalmations. After the horse came eight single-panel comics, exactingly inked. Brow forked, Wayne scrutinized each busy frame. He was at once proud of his work and pained by the limits of his talent.

His production manager, Reika, had tipped him to an upcoming development at *Jiff*. Keen to excite the 18-to-34 demographic, the tabloid would soon be test-marketing a new weekly section: a two-page spread showcasing local writers and humorists. Comics, poems, short essays, really short stories. A mosaic of creative ornament! Could it be that *Jiff*, a traf-ficker of regurgitated newslets and tinseltown trivia, yearned for a loftier aesthetic? As did Wayne himself?

Fond of Wayne's artistic pretensions, Reika was willing to vouch for them. Most graciously, she'd persuaded Phil Firth, *Jiff*'s features editor, to evaluate Wayne's comics. Would they be allowed into this new

section, might greenhorn Wayne earn a recurring spot? As a notably indispensable employee, Reika had pull with Phil Firth, and Wayne's hopes were jousting through the azure and up towards the sun, wisdom displaced by wishes. He wanted the gig, wanted it bad. Instead of being Wayne, milquetoast loser, he'd be Waiñe, funkified uhr-teest of culty encomium, feted at the flyest hobnobberies in town. No deskbound Harrisburg stamp-jockey could surmount *that* rep, eh, Mister clerky Clark?

"No politics," Reika had advised, priming him on the editorial mien. "No religion. No violence. No angry disillusionment. Yes, amusing anecdotes about twenty-something life that revolve around entertainment products or cutesy relationship foibles. Yes, grumpy-but-lovable animals. No, *Unabomber Manifesto*."

So tonight was the night, and Wayne's doodles were all right. They had verve, they had insouciant brio, they had carefully engineered wackiness. They did not, however, have engorged genitalia, explosives schematics, or impassioned illustrations exhorting bloody sedition. These omissions were soul-killing, but Wayne had managed somehow. He'd long wanted this chance, was deeply invested in this chance, and while his outer wimp anticipated failure, the shrill arrogant piper at his core knew, just *knew*, that his shit was good and damn deserved a proper audience. Hopefully such sentiments were contagious.

Doogie cracked open his bedroom door and popped out his head. “You still here, man? You’re gonna be late!”

Wayne snorted. “Hello, my little gay cuckoo clock.”

Doogie bowed. “Quack.” He opened his door wider, then gestured to Wayne’s folio. “Hot luck with the comics tonight.”

Wayne closed the folio and tucked it under his arm. “Needed and appreciated, Doog.”

“Hey—” Doogie clasped his hands “—if your bonny Julie calls, you want me to, um, give her a message or something?”

Wayne shook his head. “She won’t call. And besides, she knows I work tonight, she knows I won’t be in.”

“Best time to call.” Doogie looked at his feet. “It’s tough, I know it is. Months going by, or years, with this, I dunno, this perfect world living in your head, a world that’d turn real if just one thing were to happen or one person were to come around...”

Wayne bit and released his bottom lip. “Yeah...”

Doogie snapped up his head. “Iditarod or NASCAR?”

“Huh?”

“Kevin’s coming over and I promised him role-play.”

Wayne squinted an eye. “Please be done before I get back?” Because Doogie found his private quarters

oppressively cramped, such roleplay often burst into the den, a violation of zoning if Wayne was around and discomfiting even if he wasn’t. Returning early from work one night, Wayne had swung open the apartment door to encounter a strange and gallant sea captain gripping a ship’s wheel remarkably evocative of a paisley pillow sham: this was not Doug “Doogie” Royko but Horatio Hornblower in nature’s roseate glory, young humors surging and lusty cry rending the salty air. *Avast, ye fiery pantaloons! Rally ’round the mizzenmast and hoist high the spanker! Swing to aft and discharge all cannons!* Concerning the location of the first mate, the less said the better.

“Yessir,” Doogie said, jutting his chin, “I’ll be extra sure to watch the clock. I know how fragile you are.”

Wayne smiled. “Thank you.”

“Eh. By the time you bumble home, I’ll prolly be sleeping like a lamb chop. Fantasy takes a lot of juice, and I’ve only so much to give.” Doogie diddled his fingertips together. “So what’s your vote? Mushin’ malamutes or wrenchin’ in the hot pit?”

“Neither exactly stirs my shorts,” Wayne said, turning to go. “But I admire your commitment to novelty.”

A *ding!* came from behind Doogie: his Puffet, a handheld wireless PDA gizmo, was announcing an incoming text message. Doogie reached into his room, grabbed the little computer, and read

the screen. “Kevin wants to be a sound artist. Any advice?”

“Power tools and toddler toys.” Wayne cocked his thumb at the broken clock. “I gotta go.”

“Yes.” Doogie swiped a hand through the air. “Be off.”

Wayne left the apartment, walked to the building’s narrow stairwell, and descended three flights to Conifer Street. He stepped outside, tightened the grip on his folio, and struck towards the production office of *Jiff*, trotting faster than he cared to.



Eight hours later, he exited that office with his head down and shoulders tight. When his feet hit the pavement, his hand came up with a smoke. He lit it, took a drag, and reflected on the defeat that had soured his night—a hapless end to a day already curdled by Juliette’s Clarky revelation.

Phil Firth, *Jiff*’s mighty and doughy features editor, hadn’t liked Wayne’s comics, and had summarily dismissed them.

Phil Firth’s middle name was Enis and he was the Deputy Treasurer of the North American Man/Boy Love Association.

He fancied himself *El Bandillero* on porno-chat websites.

He had the taste and discernment of a shit-eating dog.

He should die a thousand deaths and guzzle Satan’s semen for eternity.

But Wayne hadn’t told Phil Firth any of these glaring truths. He’d responded to Firth’s aloof turn-down with a mumbled “okay, no problem really.” Curses! Wayne would slay a newt and conjure chthonic magicks of Firthian comeuppance.

He stood outside the *Jiff* office building, his folio of shamed sketches hidden in his jacket. A car crept down Arch Street, slowed at an intersection, and turned left on red. The vehicle’s tires made a raspy chorus and its engine chattered loudly; these noises were amplified by the absence of any competing sound.

When Wayne stepped forward, his folio fell to the ground, sneaking past the jacket’s elastic waistband and blunting its corner on the concrete. It flopped open and several pages slipped out to rustle on asphalt. Failed comics, crude and unloved, lie on the ground as well you should! But Wayne wasn’t one for child abuse. He bent down and collected the spilled drawings, repacking them in the folio and then repacking the folio in his jacket.

Half past three in the morning. He wasn’t tired, he didn’t want to go home, his stomach gently burbled for attention. Food, bring on the food. *Jiff*’s offices were close to Chinatown, where a fragrant mop of curry noodles could be procured most anytime. The trusty favorite was Chen’s Palace, serving

digestible fare up until five in the morning. Wayne's sodium intake reflected this convenience, and were he airlifted atop a steppe, ruminants would come from miles around to lick his skin.

The Bad Art Diner was open twenty-four hours and had less salt, and finer coffee, than any joint in Chinatown, but Wayne rarely trekked there after punching out. It was a few miles from *Jiff*, all the way home and a dozen blocks past. And Juliette hadn't worked the overnight shift for a while now, so there was no allure to offset that long walk. Furthermore, Juliette didn't yearn for him, she yearned for Clark the clerk.

Never having witnessed him in the flesh, Wayne had until today regarded Clark not as a real person but as an irritating, disembodied symbol of Julie's unavailability. The return of Clark incarnate had always seemed like one of those far-off eventualities looking forever distant until the day it erupts a fat black cloud to shroud the sun for miserable eternity.

Wayne Milton, he thought, you are a maudlin sop.

Juliette, Juliette. Change the subject. Chinatown, let's go to Chinatown. Sit down, get some food, drink some tea. Tea! Steamy and bitter and hot. That would fix him, a pot of tea would go down easy. Flush those pipes, purge his slovenly soul. And tea was full of antioxidants! So was dirt.

He went to Chinatown and took shelter in a booth at Chen's Palace, where he ordered two deep-

fried egg rolls and a sautéed scallion pancake to complement his healthy pot of tea. He ate the food slowly, sucking the grease from each bite, washing out his oily mouth with the scalding black brew.

His mind, as expected, rebounded to Juliette. She'd promised to call him, that's what she'd said right after dropping her Clark-bomb. But Wayne wasn't stupid, nor was he expecting any dulcet telephony. Not to be, never to be, sunk was he in a blubbery bathysphere.

He wasn't asking for much, just love. Sex? Unimportant. Pointless tomfoolery. A slimy impassionata of tick-tock convulsions and hardly worth the brain cells killed. He was above sex. He didn't need sex. In fact, he hadn't had sex for months. Years. Aeons. The last time he'd had sex, the wooly mammoth and saber-toothed tiger roamed the glacial veldt; blue-faced Aleuts were chasing caribou across the land bridge.

Crikes, stow the violin, he had his moments, however chary: last spring he'd "hooked up," as th' kiddies said, with this slightly sweet, mostly tranquilized roadie-girl for one of the grayest sadcore bands on God's bleak earth, a band that for encores—however rarely it earned them—would slog through Irish jigs at one-quarter tempo to "draw out the fragile sorrow."

Crystalia. That was the name of the girl, not the name of the band. The band's name was a spiritual cousin: Pastella Twinkle. By spring's end,

Crystalia and Pastella Twinkle had finished their Philly residency, loaded up their van, and pattered off to other ashen pastures. The boys in the band, and Crystalia herself, were all so reliably morose that Wayne wondered how they'd even change a flat, should the need arise. He could see them stranded on the roadside, huddled beside their van in various despairing poses, regarding the blown tire:

“Oh...that tire, it's flat...so flat.”

“Look at how the heaviness of the van pushes it down.”

“Grinding it down.”

“Look how the weight crushes the rubber, because—”

“Because of the absence of air, because the air has gone out.”

“The rubber looks torn.”

“Once it's torn, you can't put the air back in.”

“Like people.”

“Like people.”

“Once you're torn, you can't put the air back in.”

“Woah, that's a nice line. Anyone have a pen?”

“I did, once, but the ink ran out.”

The beautiful despair of Pastella Twinkle always brought a smile to Wayne's face. He'd spent a couple days pacing around the band's rehearsal space, listening to their creative juices slough and ooze, Crystalia grabbing his hand and occasionally misplacing his name. Nice guys, Pastella Twinkle. Committed to

their art. And Crystalia'd been nice enough, too, though the whole experience had taught Wayne to avoid flings with those better suited to flinging themselves from windows.

Head full of memory, stomach full of oil and oolong, he downed the last of his tea and left Chen's Palace. His repast was finished, as was his vacillation. He would leave Julie alone. He'd not badger her about what was essentially his problem. *She* had Clark, *she* had no problem.

Twenty minutes' walk took him home, and he entered the apartment to find a peaceful, silent, roleplay-free den. Doogie was asleep, his bedroom door a few inches ajar, and through the opening Wayne could see him hugging a pillow in isolation. Boyfriend Kevin hadn't chosen to stay the night? Unusual. Perhaps he hadn't liked being a malamute. Wayne could smell an airborne tang of pot, though no physical evidence remained. Doogie was tidy about that, if not much else.

Doogie made his money the classical way, by supplying a demand. He was a tinpot marijuana tout with the best of intentions—he believed weed to be nothing less than sacred seed from the firmamental farm. As such, any lawmen who menaced its proselytizers were daft, blasphemous ogres.

Wayne didn't trust the War on Drugs, but he was leery of pot legalization in a society so relentlessly motorized. Truly a disastrous scenario: sidewalks,

streets, and intersections rife with state-sanctioned, mush-brained, guffawing jaywalkers who weeble and wobble, heedless of crossing signals and the steel hammer of traffic. An ill thought. Another ill thought: mush-brained, guffawing, weeble-wobbling motorists. Already plenty of them, why court more?

At Wayne's insistence, Doogie stored his commercial weed stock off-site from the apartment and kept only a personal allowance somewhere in his bedroom. This wasn't a moral issue on Wayne's part, but purely a legality and domain one, and Doogie had accommodated without complaint. Now the complaint was Wayne's—if he could pry up a secret floorboard and dip into a fat cache of herb, he eagerly might. Too bad, no cache to be had, and he wasn't about to slap Doogie awake and demand a hit from the pusherman's privy-patch. Uncivil.

Arr! Bugger civility! Doogie wouldn't hold a grudge, and a lungful of devil grass might give Wayne the courage to weeble-wobble the nineteen blocks to Juliette's apartment and spill out his heart. Certainly she already knew his heart, and would be quick with disinfectant and paper towels.

Forget it. He was too tired and his brain was a three-day spittoon. Bed, not Julie's place, was his destiny. But first, he slipped into Doogie's room and pulled a fortune from his pocket. Upon finishing his meal at Chen's Palace, Wayne had split the stale cookie to reveal a bold aphorism: *When joined together*

many farmers trowels are mighty enough to break the gate of the kings castle. Wayne had cracked hundreds of fortune cookies in his time, and the ritual was hackneyed, sullied by biscuitary ennui—yet this mutinous, red-inked proverb had cheered him, so he'd tucked it into his pocket before leaving the restaurant. And since one good turn deserved another, the fortune would be given a second life, the opportunity to enlighten Doogie. Even inanimate objects had a certain soul that deserved respect.

After dropping the fortune next to Doogie's head, Wayne backed out of the room, eased the door shut, and went to his own room to have a last cigarette before brushing his teeth and going to bed. But at seeing his mattress he fell right atop it, and his surroundings grew remote and bleary, and both tobacco and toothpaste were postponed until awakening.

Chapter Two



LATE IN THE LUNCH HOUR, Frank Hollander of Oceania Imports Corp. walked into the company break room, a beige-walled den twelve floors up an arid-skinned office tower, and immediately silenced the sonic vomiting of the room's compact disc player.

Kiddie shit, how Haga always ate lunch and returned to his office without shutting off his miserable “free jazz.” Either Haga was marking his hipness like a dog marks territory, or he was trying to acclimate his fellow workers to the unholy crap. Would Frank acclimate? Would his inner beatnik snap and clap and jive alive? Hell no. Free jazz wasn't a taste to acquire, it was a disease to contract. Wailing and bleating like the soundtrack to a stockyard's death chute, and people call it art? Children could get nightmares. Haga's CD case still had the price sticker on it, thirty-two bucks for some double-album Sun Ra shit more interrogation tool than music. Frank couldn't play any instrument, could barely toot a kazoo, but he'd bet that, given a sax and a chance, even he could improve upon Mr. Ra's vicious racket.

He yanked a styrofoam cup from a dispenser chute and pushed it under the nozzle of the break room's coffee thermos. When he thumbed the tap, black ink drizzled out—but not for long, the cup filling only halfway. Frank jiggled the red lever with intolerant force, he tilted the canister and drummed on its echoing hull. A lonely drop fell from the tap, struck the edge of Frank's cup, and dotted the table.

Frank gave up on the thermos and returned it level with the counter. Squatting nearby was a Val-u-Tub of powdered non-dairy creamer, and he reached over and peeled off its sturdy lid. Within, a caked-up ladle rested on white dunes of chemistry. Like a

fuckin' sandbox, why not play a little? He grabbed the ladle, dug in, and thickened his coffee up to the brim. After brushing off the sandy table—the ladle wasn't a delicate tool—he took a fearless swig of the starchy latte. Pudding-like and rottingly sweet, it left a sticky milk moustache under his nose.

Or, according to the small print on the Val-u-Tub, a soy powder, dipotassium phosphate moustache. As Frank was licking it off his lips, Avery Kaddison entered the room. Avery was higher in position but different in department, and although he collaborated with Frank on several fronts, he lacked the authority of a direct superior. Therefore Frank could field his presence without reflexively resenting it.

“Thanks, Frank, that was *just* what I needed.” A ring of keys, Frank's set, dangled and jangled from Avery's finger. Avery skated them across the wood-stickered table and went to the fridge at the far wall. “I'd have popped a few more sillies, but Haga beeped me back. Super-urgent as usual, some legal problem with the longshores. Sketchy manifest, no manifest, dog ate my homework.”

“Glad you had fun,” Frank said, privately scoffing at Avery's jokey shorthand. Popped a few more *sillies*? Must mean *silhouettes*. He snagged his keys off the table and held up his Bronco's alarm remote. “You remember to put the alarm on?”

Avery tipped his head back. “Mmm...no. But I locked it.”

“You *did* case the gun and stick it back under the seat—”

“Naw, I got it in my pocket,” Avery said. “Gonna make me some headlines.” He chuckled. “*Sure* I put it back, 'zactly like it was, nice and tidy in your secret lunchbox. Felt generous, so I had the counter guy refill your caddy.” He began rooting through the fridge, pushing aside tin-foil moon rocks and murky plastic barges. Then he paused and looked over his shoulder at Frank. “You're *certain* that's legal to keep in a vehicle?”

“Legal enough, if you can prove you're a range member. It's a target shot anyway, any cop'd know that.”

Avery closed the refrigerator and turned around, a grease-spotted paper bag in his hands. “Yeah, that's true.”

Frank frowned into his coffee, then took a slug. “You packed it up clear and empty like I told you? Dropped the clip, checked the chamber and barrel, safety's on? I know you said—”

“Huh?” Avery pulled a Chinese-food carton and a plastic fork from the paper bag. “Oh—of course, of course. It's fine, Frank. I'm no Nuge, but I've cocked a few bangers in my time. Two-twos, Desert Eagles, Perazzis...”

“Mm-hm.”

“I'd just never figured the range as a stress-buster before, but you were talking about it last week, and

hey, you're right. Most therapeutic lunch break I've had in a while. Missing inventory, *blam!* Border hassles, *blam!*" Avery motioned to the CD player and the discs banked beside it. "Free jazz, *blam!*"

Frank laughed. "Damn right on that."

"I used to have a gun, a carbine." Carton and fork in hand, Avery dropped into a roller chair and kicked over to the table. "Sold it when I got hitched, the wife hates guns. Fair enough, with her history and all." He sucked in his breath and peered crosswise at Frank. "Say, say. I'd like talk to you about something. You got a minute?"

"Depends on the something," Frank said.

"Well, how do I put this. Maybe you're ready for a change, Frank. A—an *opportunity*. Know what I mean?" Avery pried open the flap of his Chinese-food carton and sniffed inside. "No more of this isolated Franklin shit. You're no island. Not even an *ay-toll*. And you're not so young anymore...but that's all right."

Frank rocked his cup, the phosphate scum forming circles. Annoying, halfway infuriating, how Avery spoke like they'd been chums for decades. "Screw off, Avery. Please."

"C'mon, you vulgar bastard. You gotta admit, it worked for me, best thing I ever did. I got dinner at home, I got a great kid, and I got some appreciation."

"*It* worked for you. Great. Is *it* what I think it is?"

"Hey *hey*," Avery said. "Keep an open mind. You know you'll never get a white girl to fry your eggs. Not a pretty one, anyway." He scooped fried rice into his mouth and continued talking. "What I mean is, look, here and now I'm eating this greasy cold shit, but all is fair—I got a hot plate in the morning and a tasty meal waiting for me t'night."

"Yes, sahib, all for your pleasure."

"Dag, Frank, you hurt my feelings. Take a worldly view. Cooking a couple daily meals is better than ducking bullets in the jungle."

Skin growing hot, Frank grimaced and downed the last of his coffee. The inside of the cup glistened with half-dissolved creamer. "You do what you want, Avery, that's fine. But don't peddle *me* your gospel, 'cause that's what it is, what it is—"

"Simmer down, man, I don't get you," Avery scolded through stuffed cheeks, then swallowed. "You want some friendly advice from a happy man, or what? I do have to work with you. I do have your best interests at heart. Being alone is no great shakes, I know. Don't you deny me that."

"I manage to get by."

Avery smirked. "Even supposing a top-shelf video collection, it's gotta get old *sometime*."

"Hey—" Frank stopped. No point implicating himself.

"All I'm saying is I got this idea, and I think you should check it out. There's these folks in Japan I know, they—"

Frank cut him off. “Avery, Oceania buys boat-loads of product from Japan. Sure you know people there, so do I. So what? None of the people *I* know got girls for rent. What is it, some Filipino import ring, or some poor—”

“Listen to me! Am I your friend?”

Frank rolled his eyes. Was he? Why not. “Yeah.”

“Then hold off and hear me out. You’ve got no kids. You’ve got an ex-wife who’s two thousand miles away. You’ve got a job. An okay crib. A car—sort of, anyway. At least it runs. Mostly.”

“So I can drive around and find my own damn woman.”

“Well, sport, you haven’t. And you won’t, if the last few years’re any indication. Eve *was* a bitch, t’ put it kindly, so I don’t totally blame you for passing on the fairer sex.”

“No.” Frank crushed his empty cup and tossed it into the trash pail. Smart, now his hands were sticky. “Don’t go there.”

Avery curled his mouth into a smile. “C’mon, Frankie. Let’s find your Johnnie. Let me call my friends.”

Frank chuffed and looked away.

“Nothing’s definite, of course,” Avery said, “but there’s a girl. A woman. Akiko. Aki.”

“A girl,” Frank said. “I don’t need a girl.”

“Use her name, Frank. Aki. She’s cute. *And* she knows English.”

“Christ, Avery, you’re a first-world pimp, too. Fine. Aki. I don’t need an Aki.”

Avery creased his brow, lowered his head, poked absently at his rice. Then he looked up and said, “Few nights ago, I had a stomachache, couldn’t sleep too well. So I went downstairs, mixed a drink, flipped channels for a while.” He mimed using a remote. “I’m flipping, flipping—and suddenly I run across this absolutely wacky home-shopping show, broadcasting totally live at three in the morning. Two fat ol’ boys from backwater Alabamy or the like, hawking these psycho-killer swords and foot-long knives, everything done up in huge odd-lot bundles.” Avery spread his arms and laughed. “Forty bowie blades for two hundred bucks, five ninja katanas for one-fifty, stuff like that! These roly-poly hayseeds are do declarin’ about this shit—slicing ropes, cutting paper, stabbing logs, talking like auctioneers, goin’ like *fhrweends, these arn’t scratch’n dent and look how fayne they cut everthin’! An’ for you we got nashnal cawst-ta-cawst best bobcat deeawls awl nite, ever week in week out fer the guaranteed fainest value.*”

Frank didn’t see the hilarity. “Alabamans by way of Sweden, how you sound.”

“Mm, but here’s the thing,” Avery said. “This show, I figure you’ve seen it too. Late night, can’t sleep, flick on the tube, so *out* you can’t help but watch and wonder.”

Frank knew the show. “Yeah, seen it a few times,

here and there.” It didn’t seem so *out* to him. People liked knives, people liked swords, fact of life.

“A few times, ha!” Avery rebounded. “Those two Bufords, I bet you know their names. I bet you know the names of the freaking knives they sell.”

“What is it with you?”

Avery spiked his fork into his fried rice and let it stand straight up. “The one guy’s name was Teddy or Timmy, right?”

Why fight, Frank thought. “Timmy Breaux and Danny Henshaw. Happy? I don’t buy the shit, if that’s your problem.”

“See, I was right!” Avery ripped his fork from the rice. “You need another sign of acute depression, my man? Night after night, red-veined orbs stuck to the insomniac knife shillers ’cause you can’t sleep. You even—know—their—names!”

“Yeah, I do,” Frank said. “And as for the knives—four-forty surgical steel, cryo-hardened edge, full-tang construction, textured grips, blood grooves, lifetime warranty. Want more, huh? I could go on.”

Chuckles overcame Avery for too long a time. “Man, you’re makin’ me hot.” Then he clasped his hands and bowed his head. “Lord almighty, please deliver my bitter buddy Franklin from a dreary diet of pornographic videotapes, pizza delivery, and midnight broadswords. By your grace protect him, heathen though he be, and in your infinite wisdom, convince him to better appreciate his resourceful and

unfairly scorned comrade Avery, who can bring him happiness from across the great Pacific. This I ask you, Lord. Amen.”

Throughout Avery’s prayer, Frank attempted to ignore him by staring blankly at the wall. But a blank stare required a blank wall, and this wall was dressed with inspirational posters gushing an obsolete boom-time optimism that, even in the boom-time, Frank had found cloying and childish. A corporatized, recontextualized Hello Kitty sort of feel. Some birdbrain scaling the underside of a rocky outcropping high above a bottomless gorge. An overriding bonehead punching a catamaran through a tidal wave. Dare To Soar. Challenge Your Self. Eat Shit And Die.

After Avery delivered his *amen*, Frank dipped his head and muttered, “Asshole.”

Avery glowered. “Look.” His voice turned flat and financial. “You like your job, right?”

“I’ve had worse, so—yeah.”

“If you had a girl to spend time and money on, you’d have less of both for your fuckin’ drink. Something to consider. Fine, you’ve stopped hiding your state-store variety pack behind the fridge, but don’t think you’ve fooled the world.”

Frank ground his teeth and made a fist in his pocket.

“No,” Avery continued, “you’ve fooled nobody. And that goes higher up than me, if you get my

drift. You're late, you're surly, you're a pain in the ass. I'm just trying to help you out before you help yourself out the door." Avery leveled a hard stare. "People like you shouldn't be alone."


"What I do with myself is my business, Avery."

"Oh? Then consider a different aspect of your heart." Avery began tapping his fingertips together in a counting gesture. "There's your Lipidar, right, and Coresta. Fully covered. Your Sodelin. Fully covered. Everything, fully covered. Nice. And necessary, I know."

As Avery tabulated the pills, Frank's ticker seemed to grind and shudder. All in his head, had to be. He went to a chair and sat down. "I *need* that stuff, Avery. Don't be so low to—"

"I swear, Frank." Avery tossed his fried rice in the trash and stood up. Then he walked to the break room's exit, gripped his fingers to the doorjamb, and looked back, his eyes searching Frank's face. "Can't you see you're on the short list for *sayonara*, next time the yen rises? Depression don't give you a right to expect applause whenever you make it in on time." He turned away and left the room.

Frank bent his head and sat there unmoving. Then he banged his fist on the table hard enough to rattle its legs, but not hard enough to spur the notice of anyone past the doorway. He left the break room and went to hide in the building's emergency stairwell, where, barring a power failure, he'd go undiscovered.



Two nights of choppy slumber, of headaches immune to handfuls of aspirin, of dreams wrenching and keeping him awake, dreams rude and angry, dark and heavy, a lacy sweetness underneath. These afflictions owed many thanks to Avery, whose seamy Aki-snacky proposal was doubtless their seed. Not even the droning knife guys could lull Frank to sleep, not even their chants of cutlery had given him rest.

And now this morning's new message from Avery, confirming that this thing was real and to be dealt with. Haggard and grumpy, Frank rapped on the open door of Avery's office and stepped inside. Avery, ear to the telephone, turned and waved a finger in the air.

"Right," Avery said into the receiver, "November tenth, five containers. Fax the log. Two-one-five, four—oh, you got it? Perfect. Take care." He smacked down the phone with exaggerated panache and then, as one motion, hopped from his chair, swept past Frank, and shut the door. "So, Frank, you got the message."

"Her name's Takayanagi."

"Yes." Avery walked back to his desk and extracted a manila folder from a heap of papers. He waved it before Frank. "Old man Shige's kid."

Frank hissed through his teeth. "You have to say *kid*?"

“Look, I can call it off anytime.” Avery gestured to the phone. “Say the word, no more Aki.”

“What’s in the file?”

Avery sat down and flipped open the folder. “Itinerary, photos, stuff. Assuming a go, that is.”

“I never knew Shige.” Frank came beside Avery and scanned the open folder’s contents. “He died a few months before I was hired, if I remember right.”

“The Kobe quake,” Avery said with a small nod.

“Tell me, Avery.” Frank left the file and went to the window. Twelve floors down and miles out, multiple highways hooked and split around themselves, radio towers, brown trees. “What kind of woman would do this, would want to do this?”

Avery made no answer. Frank watched the traffic panorama and waited. Avery cleared his throat and said, “Uh, Frank, you’ve never hit anyone, right?”

Frank turned and glared at him.

“Women, I mean,” Avery clarified, rubbing his chin.

Angry and hurt—and the hurt went deeper than the anger, why should that be?—Frank said, “Avery, I’m not a fucking abuser. Eve didn’t leave because of that.”

“This girl, Aki, she’s in a bad spot. Should’ve told you before. Sit down, man, let’s have a talk.”

Frank’s contempt wanted blood, but he detached himself and complied with Avery’s instruction.

Thirteen minutes later, he stood up and returned to the window. Shrunken diesels pattered across distant roadways, slow and methodical.

“Sleeping pills and bad boyfriends, huh? And someone like me is the answer to her prayers?” Frank spun from the window and looked at Avery. “You’re just one surprise after another, Avery. First you talk like I won the lottery and now you’re asking me to keep a suicide watch? Or is it she’s fucked up and y’think I’m fucked up and that means we belong together?”

“Frank.” Avery swiveled his chair around, Aki’s file open atop his lap. “There’s no ulterior here. This whole plan, this idea, it’s a brainstorm I had a week ago, and on the crapper no less! People meet all sorts of ways in this crazy world. All sorts of ways.”

Far outside the window, tiny cars drifted between truck convoys, skated circular entrance ramps, merged unsafely. With sharp eyes Frank watched them, without purpose he followed their movements.

“I can tell you’re not completely opposed to this,” Avery said. “You’re still in my office. You haven’t walked out.”

Frank laughed through closed jaws. “I got a threat to sugar the deal, remember? Gloomy geisha or goodbye.”

“Oh, Frank, you help her, she helps you. C’mon, what’s the downshot? You two don’t gel, just shrug

and hug and return to sender. But trust me, it's worth a try. God forbid there's a spark, Frank! Then we'd double-date and have ourselves a time."

"You, me, and the concubines."

Avery frowned. "Frank, cut the cheap shots. When's the last time you had dinner and a movie anyway?"

Frank sensed a speech brewing in Avery's throat. He waited for it, vitriol champing at the bit, but Avery didn't proclaim further or start genuflecting. Instead, he touched a finger to a photograph sticking out of the folder's pocket. "But really, she is pretty."

Frank shrugged. "If you're into that Asian thing."

"Plus," Avery said mildly, "like someone else I know, she is in need of, shall we say, compassion."

Frank responded with silence. His urge was to disagree, to snap, to batter Avery's contentions into a sordid muck. But he didn't, and he wouldn't, surrender to that compulsion. The girl *was* pretty, and she was thin, and she was younger by a thrilling amount. When the hell would he have this chance again? Not until the next life. And with his luck, he'd be reincarnated as a fruit bat or something equally worthless.

"Frank," Avery said. "She's searching for a friend, and you're needing a lady. Smack my momma, it's looking like simple algebra to me." He put aside Aki's file, stood up, and walked alongside his desk, drumming his knuckles on the mahogany. Then he

left the desk and came beside Frank, who was still at the window. Avery turned his shoulder to the thick glass and leaned against it. "Can you promise you'll do the right thing by her?"

Frank sighed and cleared his throat.

"Frank, Frank," Avery said, "if you're embarrassed, nobody knows about this but me. If people come up to me saying, 'Hey, Avery, how'd Frank meet Aki?' I'd say, 'Beats me, but I've never seen him happier.'"

Avery's phone began to chime. He went over and tapped a button that muted the ringer. "See, Frank," he said, patting the phone, "business can wait. If you're in, one hundred percent, seeing the light, getting excited, then, Frank, don't say anything. Clap your hands, clap 'em twice. Do that, and Avery's in motion—and so could *you* be, like real soon. I know the big dog wants to play!" He dipped his head. "So to speak."

Frank placed a hand over his eyes, projecting offense but thinking even nitwits could score a ringer. It *had* been a while, and the big dog—the adequately big dog—was weary of licking its own balls.

Woof woof, it shamelessly begged, salivating for a moist treat, *feed me gloomy geisha girl. Woof woof woof.*

"Thing is," Avery said, holding up a finger, "probably best to decide quick. Tomorrow or day after, I'd say...oh, whenever, Frank. Just that Aki, dear as she is, is a tad flighty."

“I got it,” Frank said, beating down his horny Fido by force of will, “I-I’ll get back to you soon enough.”

He left the room before Avery could spy the woofy wagging in his pants. Simply disgraceful, how poontang, Pavlov, and pathetic began with the same letter. Yet it was comforting to find that his deeper fears were baseless, that the sloppy mutt wasn’t euthanized after all.

Chapter Three



convergence

DAY FOLLOWED DAY, AND THEN AGAIN, AND THEN A FEW MORE TIMES, and Juliette did not call. He wouldn’t visit the diner. What for? Wayne *was* too proud to beg. How long had it been since they’d spoken, how long since that terminal tête-à-tête about Clark? A week? No, to be exact, it had been six days. He didn’t care though, six days was time enough to adjust. Six days and nine hours was time enough to absorb the loss of a friend he used to see almost daily.

He was fine. Heart beating, mouth eating, body in decent health. Cigarette intake up, oxygen intake down. Copacetic. Never mind that he was suffused with ambivalence about even the smallest things: standing up, washing up, waking up. The need for money, and thus the need to attend work, could breach this stupor, but barely. His funk was so entrenched that Doogie had made a game effort to medicate it, a gesture that warmed Wayne's cockles if not his scruples. A lost cause, anyhow—Doogie's brand of therapy was more apt to induce than reduce inertia. A serving of Doogie's finest did little for Wayne, his daydreams of kissing Juliette replaced by daydreams of challenging her in mini-golf.

Six days and nine hours since seeing Juliette or hearing her voice, and here he was at the *Jiff* production office, pulling on his jacket to take a smoke break at a quarter to midnight. His personal rule permitted two smoke breaks per shift, and this would be the first. "Reika," he told his boss, "I'll make it quick."

Reika spun her chair around and dismissed his promise. "Don't you rush on my account. Layout's easy tonight and the machines are acting strangely civil. Gremlins must be preppin' for Halloween and too busy to slag us."

"Some comfort," Wayne said. "But thank you." He went to the door, pushed through it, and stepped into the night.

Cold! Windy! Cold and windy! He closed his jacket and zipped it to his neck. The breeze pinched his ears and fingers; he drew breath through his nose and exhaled an impressively opaque cloud. While his jacket had a plump corduroy shell and a lining of flannel, beneath it was only a thin gray t-shirt. For cold alone, or wind alone, he was comfortably suited, but this union of both demanded layers, a scarf, even a dreaded wool cap. He was outmatched by the weather, and surprised by it also—the day had been sunny, the evening mild, and he'd even broken a sweat on the walk to work. In the time between then and now, the mercury had snowballed downhill.

Between shivers, he chided himself for lacking the foresight of a squirrel. He knew he'd acclimate in a minute or so, but his body yearned for that warm office at his back. He unzipped a pocket and withdrew his pack of Mitterrands, from which he pulled out a cigarette and matches. In the lively air the tobacco took three matches to light, and with each strike he enjoyed the momentary, tactile warmth of flame near his skin, a counterpoint to the cold and one of those small pleasures that brought absolute horror when amplified. Funny, what the mind considers. Like sleeping in a bus or train or airplane, seated there with your head tipped back, your throat exposed, defenseless—

"Wayne."

He started, gagged on smoke, swung towards the voice. Juliette? Yes. Several yards away, features shadowed, body hugged to the corner of the *Jiff* building.

“Shit, Julie, you scared me.” And in truth he remained scared. Why was she here? Since being dismissed from her life, he’d been convalescing quite nicely, thanks. Instead of relishing the Bad Art Diner’s leisurely coffees, the black brew sugared by banter and desire, now he sucked commonplace joe from Toby-Mart takeout cups, his lips pursed around the plastic cap’s funny little nipple, a nipple from which he would periodically detach to croak a pitiful and vacuous dirge. Yes, he was—or he’d *been*—convalescing quite nicely. Six days and nine hours and hello again, square one.

Juliette pushed off the wall and approached. A halogen lamp was fixed above the building’s doorway, its beam pouring through Wayne’s hair and along the facing ground. Juliette stepped into this beam and the hard light touched her cheekbones like candle-glow. “Why are y—” Wayne began to ask, but caught himself. “How long have you been here?”

“A few minutes,” she said, and he suddenly realized she was very cold, her voice shaking and arms jammed to her chest. “Or maybe a little longer.”

“Jesus, Julie, you should’ve come inside!”

“I-I was thinking about it,” she said with a shiver. “But then you came out.”

Her lips gave a hint of that smile he loved so well. And her voice—Wayne had never *heard* that tone of voice before. He’d never heard it before and now questioned how he’d ever done without it. He began trembling hard, his chill replaced by a sweat. Usually, Juliette allowed no sign of these feelings. Usually she was strong with her shields. He didn’t know how to act when they were down. He wasn’t sure they were down. She leaned towards him, and he towards her. He placed a foot forward. She placed a foot forward. Something holy was raving through his body and gathering at his fingertips. One step back would dash the miracle, a retreat he knew would come, it had to come, she must avert her eyes, she must avert her body, *she cannot be doing this*.

She was. They were. Closer he came, and closer she came, and between them the distance withered, until close they stood with faces open; and the only sound remaining was the sound of their breathing, which for Wayne was sweetened by the sight of her breathing, her nose twitching to inhale, her lips parting to exhale. Mist rose from her mouth and Wayne moved into it, he dropped his cigarette and brought his hands to her face—

“Don’t!” She jerked away, the sudden loss staggering Wayne, his hands confused, his hands collapsing. The cold night breached his excited shivers, aggravated them and stole their warmth. His fallen cigarette smoldered on the ground and sent fragile curls up his legs, curls dashed by a breeze every second moment.

“Julie...”

“Give me a smoke,” she commanded.

Wayne complied. He knocked a cigarette from his pack and brought it to her hands, resisting a greater wish to claim those hands with his own.

Juliette took the cigarette, clenched her teeth around it, backed further away. She pulled out her brass lighter, struck it aflame, and watched the fire struggle in the wind before touching it to the cigarette. Then she closed the lighter and tested a puff. She took a deeper hit and coughed.

“Ach, tastes like shit,” she said, grimacing through gray clouds. After a measured pause she added, “Been a while.”

Wayne gave a feeble shrug. “For me, too.”

Juliette drew in smoke, held it, looked at him. She breathed out and clicked her tongue. “My fault this time.”

He took a step towards her. She tipped back on her heels.

“I feel like such a fucking teenager,” she said without anger.

Again Wayne stepped closer.

“Get any nearer and I’ll slap you,” she warned, jabbing the cigarette at him.

He hesitated. “Slap me and I’ll kiss you.”

Juliette whirled around, jogged to the curb, and turned to face him.

“Wayne, I’ll...I’ll call you,” she said, then ran off.

Wayne picked up his dying cigarette, mostly ash now. He dusted off its tip and dragged until the taste of burnt filter sickened his mouth.



Juliette finished Wayne’s nasty smoke, not so nasty that she’d snub a second one, were anyone to offer. She palmed her lighter and squeezed her fingers to its metal body, which retained a trace of warmth from holding a flame.

Even though she’d quit last spring, she continued to carry this lighter. Partly because of her job at the Bad Art Diner, where matchless or flirtatious customers often requested a light, but also because she’d packed a lighter for a decade and it just suited her. And it came in handy sometimes. And so.


Not bright, sneaking up on Wayne like that. A little devilish, a little of her old self, a slapdash girl impatient and wanting. Mischievous, troublesome, sharp. That was then. And always?

She thought of Clark, whom she’d been content to visit every third weekend in Harrisburg. Clark was kind, decent, a touch cocksure, undeserving of deceit. And he was excited to return to Philly, an excitement she’d parroted on the phone but scarcely felt. Now she was ashamed for her lie and for this fresh betrayal.

She could disown these betrayals and stash them in a distant barrow, never to be broken open. Wayne

would fade out, if she asked him to. No other choice. No toying with casualty. Yet she'd come here tonight not to cut but to bind—a wrong action, done in the wrong fashion, hurting a dear friend who simply wanted too much. As did she.

To want is human, Juliette decided, and to repress is, well, also human.



After stamping out the filter and blazing through another cigarette, Wayne went back inside the *Jiff* production office. He hung up his jacket, sat before his computer, deactivated the screen saver.

“What we got left?” he asked Reika. “I can do the back two pages, the color adjustments are already set. Not much content on ’em anyway.”

Reika turned from her monitor and looked at him with uncommon attention. “Hmm.”

“No?” Wayne sucked in his lips and released them with a pop. “I’ll do the front page, then.”

“Hmm.” Reika stood up, walked over to the window, and peered through the half-tilted blinds.

“Reika,” Wayne said, his face and voice becoming peevish, “you weren’t spying on me, were you?”

Reika turned and shook her head. “*Spying* on you? I just heard voices and went to look, ’cause it’s almost midnight and who would you be talkin’ to out there? Don’t get red, I couldn’t make out what you were saying.” A smile played along her face and she tapped

the corner of her eye. “Not that I needed to.”

Wayne bent his head and clawed at his scalp.

“She’s the girl you like to draw,” Reika said. Having seen much of Wayne’s artwork, she knew its recurring themes.

“Yeah...” Wayne kept his head down.

Reika cleared her throat. She left the window and returned to her workspace. “Go ahead, take the back two pages.”

Wayne grabbed his mouse and nodded. “Done.”

Autopilot took him through the mechanics of building and polishing the pages, of clicking and dragging and placing files. His higher functions were detached from this and unresponsive to discipline—too dizzy for labor, they were recreating and embellishing the tender moments of his smoke break.

Juliette had been so close. Her breath had touched his lips. An exultant instant in his petty life. A momentary apotheosis! Sure, as Juliette herself had implied, such disproportion was a teenaged notion, but was that a crime? Wayne had been a lousy teenager, nervous and grim, and he saw nothing wrong with stealing some belated indulgence. What should he dwell upon instead? Impoverished family farmers? Melting ice caps? Ravenous greenhouse-effected beetles munching Alaskan forests to utter ruination? Mass graves ringed by collapsing/flailing/ululating souls halfway around the world? Wayne didn’t care about the people halfway down the block.

But he *was* a humanist; humanist was a pretty term he'd spent years mouthing. He belonged to Amnesty International, and he tossed a monthly twenty to the secular soldiers of UNICEF, and last Christmas he spent a hundred bucks to ship a nanny goat to a Malawian single mom. He was also a registered Democrat in a time of Republican dominance, and this mixture of dispensation and donkeyism had stamped his name to a mailing list of unrelieved agony. Every week the letter carrier would deliver new reasons for suicide: grim yet hopeful solicitations lamenting the tenuous life or impending demise of sonar-deafened whales, Burmese dissidents, a third of sub-Saharan Africa, Wayne's civil liberties, *Roe v. Wade*.

Dear Mr. Wayne Milton,

As a compassionate supporter of human rights, you know that it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness, and we share your belief. For years the Uighur people of northwest China have been suffering under a state-sponsored pogrom...

How could one say no to the word *pogrom*? A check and a prayer, comin' right up. If Wayne took a long vacation and had the post office hold his mail, he'd return to find half the world dead, the other half jailed, and a Dear Leader on the dollar bill. Financially and logistically, despite guilt and good intentions, Wayne couldn't fulfill a tenth or even a hundredth of the earnest pleas sent his way.

But trashing them seemed too cruel an abnegation, so they got dumped into a cardboard box he kept in the closet. Five letters, ten letters, twenty, fifty, the red-inked *urgents!* of a malignant species. The heavier this box became, the more Wayne considered the sweet hereafter. Each desperate appeal ripped at his heart, and the more it ripped, the less it bled.

"Wayne?" Reika shook his seatback and poked his shoulder. "You've faded on me."

"No, no..." Wayne straightened up. His vision was wet and unfocused. He rubbed his eyes and saw his computer running the screen saver. He canceled the flowing starfield and gestured to the display. "See, I finished the pages."

Reika pinched the bridge of her nose. "Yes. Yes you did. You also saved the page file as a retroactive template and destroyed the style sheet for the whole paper."

"I did *what*?"

"I fixed it. Took forty-five minutes, but I fixed it."

"Forty-five minutes? But I just saved the file!"

Reika patted Wayne's head. "Ssh." She whistled a lullaby.

"Fuck!" Wayne's lungs fell to his gut. "I'm sorry, Reika."

"Maybe you should go home. I can handle the rest."

"No." Wayne emphatically shook his head, awakening a twinge in his neck. "I won't screw up again."

“Wayne, if tonight’s workload wasn’t easy, I wouldn’t be offering. You’re a good sort, it’s not like I’m gonna kick you out and write you up. I don’t do penny demerits.”

“But...” Pride compelled him to resist. “Reika...”

“Didn’t I very recently mention how it took me nearly an hour to fix a mistake you didn’t even know you made?”

Pride died. “Yeah.”

“Go home, get some sleep, wipe clean that head of yours, come in tomorrow. You’re never out sick, you’re almost always on time, you’re downright stable for a night-boy. But right now you’re half-dead goin’ on whole.”

Wayne kicked back his chair and got up. “Okay.” He put on his jacket and dropped his chin. “I’ll go.”

“Not like that you won’t.” Reika grabbed the lapels of his jacket. “Raise your head.”

He did.

“Fix your posture. Lift your shoulders.”

He did.

She released his jacket, stepped back, and appraised his condition. “There, *now* you can go.”

“Red light, red light, you’re so mean,” the large blond-haired man sang to the tune of Twinkle Little Star. “Go away and change to green.” Aki knew the melody, probably half the world knew the melody.

Alone on a mountaintop, a sherpa was whistling it. Workers hummed it while crawling over Three Gorges Dam to paste up cracks. Cell phones from Shanghai to Bangalore sounded the happy refrain.

From peripheral vision, from reflections along mirrors and windows, Aki watched the man. He was stout enough to overwhelm the tall driver’s seat; she was a minimal presence in the equally tall passenger’s seat. His wrists appeared thicker than her upper arms, and his neck was a broad planter for his head.

He looked at her and smiled with half his mouth. Wary of connotations, Aki kept her own face blank. When he returned his focus to the road, she tucked her hands inside her knees and swallowed quietly. She felt very small in this truck, very small but sadly unable to disappear. *To be a ghost—*

She wondered if the man, Franklin, Frank in short form, could sense her unease. It was almost a comfort that her thoughts were hidden behind a wall of language. Even if the man could read minds, he’d not decode hers—back at the airport’s baggage claim, he’d admitted to knowing little Japanese beyond simple business pleasantries. Aki chided herself: now she was worried about telepathy, *ne?* Next thing coming, she’d be bleaching her bathrobe and joining the Pana Wave Laboratory.

The lights of a departing jet slipped up and over the glass of her window. Where could it be going? Any of a hundred cities, of a thousand cities. Maybe

Osaka? Maybe Tokyo? This late at night, it must be a cargo flight. A cargo flight to Osaka? The muscles around her eyes tingled. But she had few reasons to return home and less money than reasons.

“I set you up a room,” Franklin said, and her hands clenched, a reflex triggered by his voice. She unbent her fingers and settled them on her lap. “Small,” Franklin continued, “but American small, so I’m sure you’ll fit fine.” A glance to her. “Something wrong? We’ll be home soon. Airport’s pretty close to downtown, a dash on the highway, that’s all—”

The car behind them honked, a long loud bray. Green signal. “Yeah, yeah,” Franklin said under his breath, then stomped the gas pedal. The truck gave a show of noise and acceleration, noise dominating the ratio. Aki peered at the instrument panel and expected to see the fuel needle falling towards empty.

Loud, ugly vehicle. Its name was an unfamiliar word, *Bronco*, written in strong silver letters with an angry-looking horse leaping overtop. This animal was the bronco? In Japanese, a same-sounding word meant *playground swing*, and Franklin’s driving reinforced the relationship. Bronco. Horsepower. Americans drove cars but dreamed of horses? As a kid she’d liked toy Mustangs, Mach 1, Taiyo tin, the ones made before her birth. Her brother Kazu had preferred the airport bus that doubled as a coin

bank. She’d read that the word “mustang,” for all its spirited legend, originally meant nothing more than “stray animal.”

Tires skittering, the Bronco leaned towards an ascending on-ramp. Aki listened to the truck’s engine straining up the incline and nudged her gaze from the fuel gauge to the speedometer. MPH. Miles per hour. Miles, feet, pounds, pints. Funny units, stubborn stains of feudal decree, unfettered by reason or science. They merged onto an elevated highway, the glowing tip of the speedometer’s needle climbing to sixty, seventy, seventy-five. Again Franklin spoke. “All that flying, jet lag, getting in so late—I guess you’re real tired. Understandable.”

A voice in Aki’s head, brother Kazu, words from over a year ago: *These empty men of yours won’t ever fix your life.*

I’m not so weak to need fixing, she’d replied.

You’re not that strong, either, Kazu said, and looked sad.

But Kazu had married and moved to the Tokyo suburbs, and during Aki’s last visit she’d been little but dead weight. Her family was Kazu, him alone, and for him there’d been only her. Not anymore. Now he had a wife to please, and Aki was an intrusion. Kazu’s wife, this *wife*—the label didn’t fit. A stupid girl of hot air and wasted space, a useless creature beguiled by her own willowy poise. A stupid girl with a hateful stare, her flat face making

a collage of pity and distaste whenever it turned towards her husband's broken sister.

As the truck rode the highway, driven by a man she'd known for six e-mails and forty-two minutes, Aki watched the window and fought her doubts. Her choice might prove foolish. Still, wrong or not, it was her choice and hers alone. She wouldn't go back to where she was invariably seen as foolish, without even the liberty to decide why and what for.

The whole affair was stressing Frank out. She wouldn't talk, why wouldn't she *talk*. He was a grown man knotted up like a gawky kid on a first date, unswervingly intent on saying the stupidest things possible, or goddamn *singing*, anything to help the mood. Avery had suggested that he not mention her dead parents or her goodnight pills—*think, Frank, why cast a funereal pall over your first meeting?* That's it, a funereal pall. With Avery, a smirk always accompanied the fancy words.

Frank had been okay at the airport, nervous but excited. Now that this was all going down for real, his resolve was cracking. Fuck. Why'd he let himself be talked into this?

In some respects, Avery was right. Frank was lonely. He'd been lonely for years, the years since Eve left. At first her absence had brought relief and freedom, but these feelings expired within months,

and he would dwell on the end, their end: Eve baiting him as she backed out the door and down the steps, a suitcase in each hand. Two of his good suitcases, and later returning for the rest of the set, but he hadn't cared, he'd dared her to go—however you want, honey, you go, honey, you do that!

Eve had called him a complacent, small-minded asshole with a mean streak. Told him she hadn't signed up to scrape by in some dirty cut-rate hovel. She loved to say that. *Hovel*. You want a kid, Frank? You want her to grow up in this *hovel, hovel, hovel?* Think about the schools, Frank! They're not even fit for humans. Subhumans! But we don't deserve any better, do we?

Frank missed her voice. Eve had believed his promises, had waited for him to make good. After nine years of subsistence living, she'd left. To prove her right—to prove her ghost right—he went back to drinking. No, not just back, he'd gone further on. And he hadn't tried to keep in touch, and now she was gone to Texas, married up some big-dick car dealer with a Greco-Roman McMansion on some mega-irrigated dustbowl golf course. Not a *hovel*.

Here's the substitute, this Aki, sitting there with her hands on her lap, her limbs symmetrical, her eyes to the window. Avery's photo told no lies—she was pretty enough—but her reluctance to speak made Frank wonder if her English traveled beyond the phrases of a guidebook.

A month. He would give it a month, really try for a month. A month until he shoved Avery's glib beak against the wall, thirty darkening days until he took the self-righteous prick and jammed a bottle of rotgut down his craw.

He looked at Aki. There would be no need for revenge, or for useless visions of revenge, because he'd do this right. "Aki," he said, "are you feeling okay? Are you all right?" The soft tone he wanted was stuck in his throat, too long since its last use. He hoped it came through, it would help her relax, maybe even make her more receptive. And that was part of the deal, it had to be. Not right off but certainly up on deck. A man could go nuts if he didn't get a little something now and then.

Aki made a smile and held it for a second. She sat taller in her seat and separated her folded hands. Frank could read nothing from this. Her smile, her pose, these things only emboldened her blankness. This wasn't a girl, this was a Pet Rock.

Franklin was asking if she felt all right. She didn't know the answer, but forced appreciation to her face and untucked her posture. *Sit up. Open up. Stop acting as if you're borrowing his space.* She placed her left arm on the center rest and her right hand to the door-grip. She straightened her spine and took a deep breath. "Yes, I am okay."

"That's good," Franklin said. He reached to the climate control and poked at the dials. "That's pretty good."

Aki saw him glance to the center rest; she saw him consider the new presence of her arm atop it. His hand slipped off the climate control and landed beside hers. Her muscles tensed in a slight but obvious movement. Franklin patted her tight fingers, retracted his hand, and started talking in a manner that, even in this foreign language, felt like the speech of a weary teacher.

"Look, Aki, you know what the deal is. All I'm asking for is a little company. We can take it as slow as you want—and you're young, I know, younger than me, and I'm not gonna keep you locked up. You can do what you want." He was hitting his fingers on the steering wheel, drumming and talking, and Aki was struggling to comprehend, but his words were building speed and running together. "It's...it's not a bad deal, it isn't. I know it isn't. I've been through a lot, too. And I don't want to play the games, can't take the strain anymore—"

She nodded, not in agreement but as a sign of listening, and he started shaking his hands: "—but this, I thought about this. I want to do this. I heard about your, what's that, your situation. You want out, you're not wanted, you're all lost. Okay, I say, I'll help. You can have a new life, and I'll help you get one."

He reached back to adjust his headrest and looked

sidelong at her. “Yeah, I think I know what it’s about. You’re missing home.” His voice softened. “You’ll make friends, you’ll be fine. You just need some time to get used to things.”

“Yes,” she said, “some time.”

Her English was far from fluent, this she knew, but also she knew her talent for memory and guesswork. Missed words, mixed meanings, and the fuzzy logic of comprehension: language was labyrinth and laboratory, and context a hive of strangers and halfwits. An inexact, imperfect science, defined by patterns that no computer could parse. In school she’d been quick at languages, proud of it too, naturally earning resentment from many classmates and from brother Kazu, who’d much preferred flashy comics and swimsuit girls to grammar texts and conjugation maps.

“You’re too smart,” her father had said many years past, looking worried and amused, eyeglasses on the table. “You’re so much smarter than I am.” Aki remembered pressing him for advice and being surprised by his answer.

“Aki-chan,” he replied with a pensive smile, a pleased smile, “my dear Aki. Every night after work, I sit in a bar with drunk men on either side of me. The drunker I get, the drunker they get. Hours pass as we moan about our lives and sing karaoke. The bar closes and we crawl into taxis, which carry us home to our wives, who don’t look any better to drunk

eyes than to sober ones. Your mother excepted, of course.”

He’d chuckled softly, his face warm and tired. “You want advice from me? Travel. Go somewhere. We’re isolated and we don’t have to be. Don’t break down and marry some joy-starved office dog, you’ll break my heart. See what you can while you can, and then come back and tell me what I’ve been missing.”

Her eyes were wet. Scientists allowed an earthquake no malice, but she knew otherwise. She remembered the awful hours of waiting for news, any news, remembered jumpsuited men swarming about the rubble, their faces blank with shock: this can’t happen here, we were prepared for it! But happen it did, despite the celebrated innovations of seismologists and architects, and thousands were lost when Kobe came down.

Eight years ago, her world was confused but secure—how different she was then! And now to think she was following her father’s wish in the strangest way imaginable. Or was it the worst way instead, this untested pairing of convenience, this emotionless partnership? Father wouldn’t have approved.

But Father was dead and Mother was dead. No help there. Yet they’d understood partnerships; theirs had been an arranged marriage. Over time they’d built a sturdy affection but nothing more. Aki and

her brother had grown up happy and warm, gathering the obsessive love of two lonely adults.

Kazu? Never, never would he approve. He'd eagerly condemn and complain, he'd prize the chance to set her straight. But after choosing that shrew of a bride, her brother had no right to speak. Premeditated innocence and secret venom, that was Kazu's wife, that and nothing more. How could Kazu love the girl? Did her plaster mask of deportment excite him, did her fakery make him sweat? Hard to take, but Aki supposed it was possible.

Soon—right now even, banded together with his office mail—Kazu would be getting a letter. A brief note from his sister. No mention of a man, no number to contact, no way for him to call and pound her with harsh words. *Another man*, he'd shout. *A stranger, and in America! What is wrong with you?*

Maybe that which was emotionless could flower in time. Chasing her strongest feelings had never brought her blessings, and obeying heated impulses had only broken her dignity. She wouldn't trade sex for shelter, Franklin knew that, he'd been told. If it happened that she wanted to give sex, if he was deserving and she found solace in offering it, then...

She left that thought—that dreary, nervy thought—as the Bronco descended the highway exit ramp and merged into an uneven gray cityscape. Franklin pumped the brakes and she pitched against the seat belt. The truck came to a stop before a

bleary red light, the top bulb of a three-tiered vertical array hung from a metal boom. The red persisted for several seconds, then dropped to a vibrant green at the signal's bottom level.

Movie lights. At home, in Japan, the signals were horizontal, their colors cooler. Home.

No. Home was here now. For a time.

Franklin accelerated hard through the intersection; then, with a slight bow, he lessened their speed as if apologizing for it. But when the signal of the next intersection turned yellow, he rushed to make it, slipping through as the light jumped to red. Aki tried to stay calm, the strange city passing by her window. It was so dark. Deserted. She checked the dashboard clock: 1:32 a.m., America-time. Too late for the day people and too early for the night people? She wanted brightness, she wanted life. Her imagination had built a metropolis wholly different than what she saw through the glass. Her imagination was indifferent to reality.

Red light: stop. On the corner a couple was hugging against the cold. Aki watched them. Young man, young woman. They noticed her attention and watched back. The woman gave a whoop of laughter and Aki looked away. The signal changed, Franklin hit the gas, the couple was left behind.

Two blocks later, red light again, Franklin on the brake late and strong. He looked at her as she looked out the window. "Weekday nights, this area's pretty

dead,” he said, “but you should see the weekends, especially when the weather’s nice. Started picking up a few years ago, kids moving in, changing the pace. “See that old warehouse down there?” He pointed to a large concrete building behind a barbed fence. “Weekends it becomes a dance club and these streets get all parked up, and a few blocks down you got the motorcycle clubs, where they meet. Speed freaks, Japanese bikes, I’m sure they’d look familiar...”

While he talked, a gust shook the traffic signal and the red light bounced across Aki’s retina. Then she sensed a change in the truck’s vibrations, or thought she did. Like the idle chugging of the motor had grown heavier, like a shudder had entered the revolutions. From her viewing angle, the Bronco’s tachometer was partly obscured by the projecting frame of the dash, but a shallow tilt of her head allowed her to see the needle chattering around the thousand mark. Jumpy, but maybe that was normal?

A small orange indicator blinked to life on a different sector of the dashboard. A thermometer-like icon, flashing a few times and then changing to hold the illumination. Did Franklin see it? He gave no sign of noticing. She raised a hand and wet her throat and started saying his name, but then the traffic signal turned green and he pressed his foot to the gas pedal.

The engine stumbled, picked back up, released a guttural rupture. The truck heaved across the inter-

section and several meters into the next block before a flurry of stutters overtook it. These stutters quickly became stumbles, stumbles that rattled the cabin until a loud *snap* came from the motor. Combustion done, the vehicle ground forward on momentum which was spent in seconds: the sound of tires rolling, slowing, creeping to a stop.

“What the fuck!” Franklin barked, his fist punching the steering wheel, the temperature gauge at the upper extreme. “They said this shit would stop!” He twisted the key, the starter whinnied, nothing caught. He rolled down the window and stuck his head outside. Smoke leaked from the seams of the hood, and he glowered as if to scare these vapors back into the engine. The sweet-sour stink of charred rubber leached through the cabin.

Franklin pulled his head back inside the window and turned to Aki, a smile twitching his face. “This was already fixed twice over, s’cuse the temper, okay?”

Weakly, Aki returned the smile, cautious of this man she could barely call an acquaintance. A friend of a friend of a friend, if that. She wondered if many Americans were like this one, this man who seemed a simmering pool of anxious energy, bristling at a lapse of control. Or was she being unkind?

Franklin looked down, his jaw muscled out, tension exposed in the hunch of his neck. Then he rolled up his window, pulled the hood release, thrust open his door. “Hold on.”

He swung himself out of the cab, closed the door, and stomped to the truck's grille. When he flung up the hood, gray clouds plumed from the engine compartment; angry noises rose from him in response. For a time he stood there, lit up by the truck's still-burning headlights. Then he returned to the cabin and pulled his keys from the ignition. The dashboard released a high sour note that persisted until he cut the headlights.

"You don't need that," he said, patting a hand to his ear. He held up his keys by what looked like a tiny flashlight on a chain. It was no bigger than an eraser, but when he squeezed it, a respectable beam brightened his face. "Handy, eh?" He left the cabin, again closing the door, and went back to the engine.

Aki dug her fingers into the faded blue canvas of her purse. Franklin was talking to the engine, but with the Bronco's doors and windows shut, she couldn't discern the words. She rolled her window halfway down and found that he was spitting curses. "Same shit they said they fixed, same damn shit. Nice fuckin' timing, huh, could I *ask* for better timing?"

Just sitting there made Aki feel stupid, too much like somebody's child, and she wasn't, not anymore, so she undid her seat belt and opened her door. She anchored a hand to the Bronco's side pillar and set her feet to the asphalt. But for a streetlamp at the block's far end and a half-dead nest of bulbs on a nearby wall, she was in darkness. Cold darkness.

She sought light, more light, the sparkle of metropolis—and found it a few kilometers away, rising above a plateau of closer, lower buildings: a cluster of towers, their black ribbon walls salted by window-glow, their crowns wrought with backlit openwork. These glimmering skyscrapers were of the same city but felt so distant, and she wanted to go there and be in their fold. She remembered seeing them from the airplane as it banked on approach. They had seemed the city's peak, with all other buildings stepping downward. An illuminated eye, around which diminishing ripples spread. Not like Osaka, a glowing lake at night, nor Tokyo, a glowing ocean.

It was a smaller city, this Philadelphia, a smaller city in a much larger country. She'd get used to the scale of things. She couldn't go home. Franklin was yelling at his engine, the streets and signs and people were strange, nobody spoke her language, each day was as pointless as the last. She shut her eyes until the pressure passed and her lashes stopped quivering.



The lace on Wayne's right boot was loose. He stopped, knelt down, tied it. As he bent low, an icy draft stole under his jacket and along his back. He shuddered, straightened up, and resumed his idle rove. His tear glands were petitioning to sprinkle but he wouldn't allow it. Where was he going on this mopey walkabout?

Home? Yes, that was Reika's intent on charitably kicking him out of the office. He wondered what his roommate was up to tonight. Perhaps it involved nude men cavorting around the apartment. Only a guess, yet it might be unwise to bust in a couple hours sooner than usual. It was around one in the morning, not *too* late, and he could call home and inquire about the scene, should Doogie even be there to answer. That would require a pay phone. Nowadays they were threatened but not yet extinct, the ill-tended survivors clutching at, and giving up, their ghosts, post by post.

Eh, forget calling—in his present humor Wayne didn't relish the presumed conversation: "Hey, Doog, I was wondering—you fuckin' tonight? Yeah? Loudly? Oh, wow, the legendary roar. Me? I'm fine, I'm fine. Nah, I won't interfere, I know you hate to keep it down. I know your bedroom is too tiny for a grand jeté. Two grand jetés. Just pick up afterwards, okay? You'll be done by four? Please? Mm, what's that? Your orgy's getting cold? Get back to it, then. See ya in a few." Fanciful imagination. If Wayne went home right now, he'd likely find Doogie self-tucked and pillow-drooling, snoring his way through sugarplum dreams. Sure, Doogie had a healthy appetite and the means to feed it, but he wasn't some howling blister-dicked bonobo.

Move or freeze, nose running, keep marching. Along the next block was a luminous storefront,

the friendly neighborhood Zing-It CopyShop, a 24-hour business-services outpost. Qualification: not too friendly at the moment, as Zing-It discouraged nocturnal knaves and drifters by locking its entrance between eleven p.m. and five a.m. To gain access, one had to ring the doorbell, activate the intercom, and explain to the night clerk your necessity for visiting Zing-It CopyShop in the witching hours. "Because I have nowhere else to go," wouldn't earn you a buzz-in, and neither would "I crave the smell of toner."

Inside the Zing-It, a man in sweats and ball cap was collating and stapling a tall stack of papers. Hands in pockets, nose gone numb, Wayne watched him through the window. The man was unaware of an audience and performed his duties with zero grace, fingers creeping into ear and nostril. Wayne abandoned him and continued down the sidewalk. It was unwise to be aimless. He had to go home or he had to go somewhere.

Chinatown, that faithful retreat? Not in the mood. Juliette's place? A commendable notion. She'd come to him—yes, she really had!—and didn't that give him license to go to her? Possibly it did. Risky, though. He would plod in the direction of her apartment and deliberate throughout. He lit another cigarette and crunched his teeth into the filter. Something there is that loves a cigarette. Besides the bereavement industry.

Down at the corner lay a banded heap of cardboard and fabric. From a distance it was trash by the curb, nothing human. As Wayne drew closer he could see scabrous feet protruding from the rumple. Rolled over the metal slats of a vent, tinsel vapors piping through spouts of scrappy blanket, the man appeared a grubby sausage fixed for barbecuing. Wayne tapped by, head bowed, cigarette hanging from his lips.

“Smoke?” the man croaked, not asleep at all. He propped up his head with an elbow against the grate. “Got a smoke?”

Wayne took out his pack, tapped out a cigarette, offered it. “Need a light?”

The man accepted the cigarette. “Nah, I got it.” He dragged his battered feet under the blankets. “Winter coming.” He mashed the cigarette between his lips, struck a match from somewhere, and brought the flame to the tobacco.

Wayne stood there, dulled, head listing sideways, until a gloomy imperative took hold and sent his hands hunting through his jacket: first he returned the cigarette pack to its usual pocket, and then he unzipped another pocket, the one with his wallet. His fingers dove down, parted the wallet, came up with two dollar bills. Call him naive, sentimental, enabler. Call it drug money, booze fund. No matter, he’d heard it before and it was likely true. But such convictions played better to a warm audience.

“Here,” he said, holding out the bills. “It’s not much, but maybe you can get a coffee or something hot.”

The man took the money and buried it inside his grimy pile. “God bless,” he huffed through his cigarette.

“Hey.” Wayne zipped his pockets, nodded a farewell, and walked on. He traveled several blocks and leaned against a signal post. After a moment, he slid down the post and into a crouch. He sucked on his blue lips and hummed a melody, restive steam dribbling from his nostrils. *He’s got the whole world in His hands.*



Frank scowled. “This is no good.”

He’d managed to wrestle down his temper even though this was the third time in three months that the junker had overheated, and nobody could figure out just why. The mechanics were morons, the truck was built by morons, and he was a moron himself for a full suite of reasons. There’d been a gunshot-like crack from the engine right as it quit—he’d never heard *that* before and it sure wasn’t a promising sound.

Also a new thing, the engine stark dying like this. The previous overheatings had played out differently: driving along, Frank had seen the dashboard indicator light up, he’d seen the temperature needle rising high, and immediately he’d pulled to the curb and

cut the ignition before anything more could happen. This time he'd burned along, preoccupied, completely missing whatever warning signs, if any, had foretold the breakdown.

He stood before the open hood, the sizzled engine warming the front of his shirt. Seven—eight?—years ago he and Eve had bought this Bronco, bought it used off her deadbeat brother, more as a favor than anything. They'd overpaid and never gotten a thank-you note. In the divorce Eve had staked no claim to the thing, and Frank had by default become its sole owner.

Aki was out of the truck and standing a step behind him. Saying nothing, no surprise, though he was certainly making an impression. Stupid blabber, stupid truck, stupid Franklin-san. Lord knows how many different Japanese words for *loser* were crossing her mind.

Calm, stay calm. Pissed, embarrassed, calm. Find a phone and call for roadside assistance, that's what he'd done both times before. Of course, then it was anywhere from a half-hour to a half-day of waiting for the service guy to show—wasn't there a night differential too? And both times before, when the guy finally paid a visit, he'd done nothing but take a reading, uncap the radiator, and dump in a gallon of lime-green coolant. Then he'd started the truck, scribbled on a pad, and advised Frank to get it checked out ASAP. Two different guys, same exact process.

Frank didn't know or care overmuch about engines, he'd never been a hot rodder—but if that's the game, hell, he could pour green shit into a hole too. The second service guy had left a jug of coolant in the Bronco's cargo hold—you gotta *carry it, man*—and hopefully it wasn't too late for a little preventative maintenance. Fresh green shit down the hatch plus a few moments for the motor to soak it up, and maybe the beast would fire up and run long enough to get him and Aki home.

The engine compartment was a riddle of heat and grease. Frank rolled up his sleeves and bent in, squinting his eyes from the radiant waves. The night was dark and the street was also, the only illumination provided by a distant lamp, some scattered wall fixtures, and his pocket flashlight. Again Frank played the flashlight's beam along the truck's power plant, dipping it into black crannies as if secret instructions could be found there. The rubber tubes around the radiator were charred and pungent, and though the engine was motionless it released soft thirsty noises. He could handle this, right? Open the radiator and let it vent, let in the cold air. Then grab the coolant jug and dump it in.

He glanced over his shoulder to Aki, who was watching him and running her fingers along the strap of her handbag. The girl looked frozen, she was skinny and shaking in forty-degree weather, her sweatshirt useless in the breeze. Frank had his leather

jacket in the truck's back seat. He'd have the radiator cap off in a second, then he'd grab the jacket and toss it to her. *He* didn't need it—with this motor sweating up his face and shame buzzing up his body, he was just fine.

Here, stuck atop the radiator fins, the same cap the service guys had manfully unscrewed. It was corroded, dirt-spotted, too hot to grip with his bare skin. Frank pocketed his flashlight and keys, unrolled the right sleeve of his flannel shirt, and stretched the cuff's fabric over his hand to improvise a mitten.

"Be careful," Aki said quietly.

Frank looked at her and smiled. *Be careful*. He liked that. He *really* liked that. Any situation, a woman's concern was always a comfort. He turned back to the radiator. Though realizing his limited knowledge, he wasn't greatly or even halfway worried about a propulsive burst hiding beneath the cap, he didn't think a fountain would spout. Maybe, at most, a shot of steam or a hissing sprinkle. Didn't make sense to be more than that—the kind of leak this motor seemed to have, probably wasn't any liquid left to explode. "Bone-dry," the service guy had said while inspecting the last overheating, shaking his head while sloshing quarts of green shit into the hole.

Frank clenched his swathed hand around the radiator cap and tried to twist it, but it held fast. So

he clamped his left hand over his right and jerked with the force of both arms. The cap blew off and a pent-up burst of boiling wetness surged from the opening, vapors whistling as they whipped upwards and out.

Frank's posture had been casual but cautious, arms stretching into the engine and body set off at what he'd considered a prudent distance. But not distant enough, not nearly, and against the ravaging cloud his dodge was a hopeless reflex. A scream tore up his flesh, his bare left arm and neck burning his mind to a blank. Losing balance, his attention conquered by blistering skin, he tumbled back hard.

A yelp in his ears, something giving way behind him—then a crash along his spine and he was down, pain blurring his eyes and fogging his senses. *You stupid bastard*, an inner voice chanted, *you stupid bastard!*

He blinked and squinted and tried to clear his vision. When his focus returned he could see his Bronco's broad grille towering over and beyond him, he could see pockets of oxidation pitting the metal. He struggled to sit up, swooning as his coursing red forearm siphoned the blood from everywhere else in his body. Clear thoughts were few, but some began bubbling past a scum of thickening heat, one most of all.

Aki?

There, on the ground, on her back, unmoving,

purse trapped under her body. Rillets running from her head and branching through cracks of pavement.

“No no no,” Frank huffed, “wake up damn it!” He crawled beside her, biting back a holler as his damaged arm scraped the asphalt. He grabbed her limp hand and squeezed. “Damn you, wake up!” He gave her cheek a light slap. No movement. He tried again, harder. The blow made her head loll to one side and he could see a swampy gash along the base of her skull.

Fear seized his clattering heart: the blood was leaking dark and fast. Not slowing, not slowing, shouldn't the flow be slowing down, not speeding up? He shouldn't have slapped her. Her skull might be cracked, brain vessels could pop, she needed medical help, she needed it now. Frank planted his hands to the ground and—scalded skin stretching and howling—pushed to his feet.

Cell phone, he could hear Avery chiding. Everybody's got one, Frank. Get modernized already. Land-lines, they're dyin' like the dodo.

Not my style, Avery. Just another bill I don't need. Six hundred minutes a month? What'll I do with that, order pizza ten times a day?

Frank exhaled bitterly and looked at Aki. Poor girl, knocked out and bleeding on the ground thousands of miles from anyone she ever knew. Not his style. Whatever was he thinking, doing this? Who was he?

He turned from her fallen body. No time for empty regret, he had to find aid. He spun in a circle.

There, down the street, deep into the next block: was that the blue glow of a pay-phone lightbox? Look hard, force the eyes to work, they were good eyes, shooter's eyes. Bury the pain and just *focus*—the color, the shape, it *had* to be a pay phone.

He dug a hand into his pocket, found his keychain remote, jammed a finger to the alarm button. The truck's hazards flashed twice as the aftermarket system switched on and the door locks engaged. At least the battery was still working. He'd be back in only a moment, but still it was wise to arm the truck, he always armed the truck and now would be no exception. Aki's luggage in back gave him even more reason.

He ran towards the pay phone, his burned arm held out to catch the wind.



Sitting on his haunches, back against a signal post, Wayne tried to figure out what time it was. He wore no watch, a salute to his feckless side, but he was good at spying clocks through store windows, clocks embedded in bank signs, clocks mounted atop buildings and towers. When peering into the Zing-It CopyShop, he'd automatically noted the wall clock at twenty past one. Now it was probably twenty minutes past that.

He stood up, walked a few blocks, stopped at an intersection. The wind rose behind him, flicked at his ears, and skated through his hair. A traffic signal rocked on its steel cable, the red light painting a ghostly arc over a concrete backdrop. Wayne huddled in his jacket and watched the signal jog and wave.

What's that?

Something strange in the air, voices on the fringe of his hearing. Pinpricks draped his neck, and his back tensed upwards from tailbone to shoulders.

He stopped breathing and strained to listen.

A stammer of light tapped the corner of his left eye. It came from the cross-street and he turned but already it was gone. He stepped off the curb and bent his vision towards the departed flash.

Halfway up a dark block he saw a truck with its hood up. And something else also, something on the ground, indistinct. The back of Wayne's neck amplified its buzzing and prickling. Maybe not something, but someone?

Danger was peppering his senses and forcing the world into vivid contrasts, chain fences shimmering like mirrored links and road tar revealing musty, honeyed odors never before tasted. Everything more tactile, and less, and at the same time.

His instincts were whispering *(run) (run) (run)*

Instead he found himself drawing closer. And closer. Details emerged. A broken-down sport-utility, one of the older models, late-eighties Blazer or Wagoneer or Bronco.

Yes, a Bronco, thin cords of steam looping its grille. Near it, lying on the asphalt, a woman.

Wayne reached her and looked down. A moment's recoil. Blood, too much blood, fresh blood, with more coming. She was young but no teenager. Twenties or thirties. Asian. Alive.

He swallowed his reluctance and crouched beside her, careful to avoid the dark puddle that surrounded her head and spanned to her upper back. Little streams broke off this puddle and reached to the curb. Her head was tipped aside and he could see a gash at the base of her skull. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was open slightly; her breathing was slow and silent. Did her eyelids quiver, or did they only seem to? Was she waiting on the edge of consciousness, or was it a trick of the lonely, shaky streetlamp many yards behind?

The straps of her purse were looped over her arm, and the purse itself was partly under her body and buttoned shut. Not a robbery, then. And with that broken-down truck, not a carjacking either. Wayne threw glances in every direction.

His peripheral vision caught faint movement on a neighboring block, a lurching blot in the distance, and he snapped his head towards it. A figure, hunched over, loping away. Then it was gone, passing beyond the nighttime range of Wayne's eyes. Gone, dissolving into a faint blue trace. Wayne began to sweat and his nose started to run. He wiped it dry,

calmed himself, and returned his attention to the woman.

The gash on her head was wet and ragged, matted with sticky bundles of hair, but the hair formed no effective barrier and new blood flowed past it. Wayne tipped his weight forward, going from crouching to kneeling. He reached out, touched a hand to the woman's neck, and was surprised by the warmth of her skin. He slid his fingers up her face, across her cheek, along her ear. He paused at her earlobe and gave it a hard pinch. The skin blanched and flushed, but she didn't stir.

Acting on reflex, acting with haste, Wayne shed his jacket and rolled it into a pillow. Then he slipped a hand beneath the woman's head, tilted it up, and placed the pillow underneath. He centered her head so that the gash rested fully on fabric. Now in a t-shirt, he felt none of the cold which minutes before had shaken his bones. An electric charge had come to inhabit his skin.

His improvised cushion didn't entirely stanch the blood. The jacket's material was blended for mild water-repellence; it absorbed much of the flow but not all. Over the years the jacket had also absorbed a colony of dirt, dust, and crud. He'd never had it cleaned, and while it wasn't viciously filthy, it was nowhere near sterile. The wound needed something better, something more.

The woman's purse, right there, trapped under her

body. Didn't most purses have remedies for any contingency? Though small, this one might be no exception. Wayne was about to grab it, but froze at seeing his red-lined hands. Automatically he wiped them on his jeans—and then a panicked, gibbering concern seized him. He looked at his fingers, studied the bitten cuticles, eyed a thin-scabbed paper cut he'd gotten a few hours earlier while shuffling printouts at work. No, he was safe, his skin was whole enough. But still, a stranger's blood on his naked hands, a toxin in the crevices, under nails...

Again he wiped his hands on his jeans, scrubbing the skin front and back. Now his palms and fingers looked cleaner but he remained fog-headed. Then he felt a sensation, a command, an order from deeper within to drop his worry and tend to the woman. With a deep breath and a coat of adrenaline, he sidelined his jitters; with a yank he freed the woman's purse and dumped its contents on the ground.

Cosmetics, pens, minidisc player. Two packs of "Kiss Mint," which looked to be chewing gum. A Japanese passport. Nothing useful, no cotton swabs or pocket sanitizer to clean the wound, no winged maxipads or napkins to dress it.

What else, where else, was anything in the broken-down truck? He sprang towards it. The doors were locked but the passenger-side window was halfway down. Wayne crooked his arm into the cabin, yanked up the lock post, wrenched on the door handle. The door swung open and the Bronco

snapped alive, honking and flashing and sending him leaping backwards.

“Fucking alarm!” he cursed, barely able to hear himself, but immediately reconsidered. Attracting attention was surely a good thing, given that his medical know-how began with *band* and ended with *aid*. As the alarm pumped noise and light throughout the street, he leaned into the Bronco’s cabin, flicked on the overhead dome lamp, scanned the front seats. Nothing. Rear seats? Scattered papers and a man’s leather jacket.

Looking towards the back, he could see a pile of luggage in the truck’s cargo bay. He was about to go for it—but when he searched the front controls for a button or lever to pop the tailgate, something else caught his eye, something he’d missed a second ago: a rectangular case shoved under the driver’s seat, partly visible but mostly concealed by the seat-bottom’s skirt.

The case had no markings that he could see, but it looked the right size and shape for a simple first-aid kit. Angels on high, could it be something so perfect? He ducked below the steering wheel and grabbed the case. Some adhesive or clamp held it to the cabin floor but not with any great strength; he tore it free with little struggle and rushed back to the woman.

The case had a formidable heft and Wayne felt it weighed a good deal more than a plastic lunchbox of

gauze should. Maybe there were liquids in it, anti-bacterials. His fingers could feel prickly velcro hooks taped along the bottom, which explained its grip on the cabin floor.

He knelt beside the woman and gave her a hopeful smile despite her inability to see it. The make-do dressing of his jacket was serving well, her head nesting in the bundle—but even with the bleeding down to a trickle, her face kept losing color, losing health. The gash was big, the street was all kinds of dirty, and his jacket wasn’t much cleaner. How fast could a wound get infected? How long had she been here like this?

He’d do what he could to clean the wound and patch it up. With luck, the truck’s surging alarm would snag a passing cop who could radio for an ambulance. Until then, Wayne would try his best to emulate qualified personnel.

Antiseptics, analgesics, here we come! Wayne turned the case to face him and flipped a thumb at the clasp. It lifted a hair then snapped back into place, refusing to give so easy. He tried again, harder. His hands were eager and clumsy, this movement too strong: the lid popped up fast, the balance tilting, the case slipping from his fingers. He tried to catch it but it tumbled and spilled.

A pistol dove from the case and knocked to the asphalt. Bullets scattered and spun around it, their brass bodies a spangled orange in the truck’s alarm-

frenzied hazard lights. One of the shells came to rest against the woman's neck, first circling through a bloody slick that only deepened its shine.

The pistol, stark and silver, lay beside the upset case and before Wayne's bended knee. Wayne reached down and touched a finger to its barrel. The metal felt solid and cold, impervious and unnatural. Contemporary firearms were arcane to Wayne—he'd spent a nerdy adolescence tracing pictures of arabesque swords and baroque cannons, not modern handguns—but he could sense that this weapon was a wicked thing. A thing of precision, too, elegant and attractive.

His hand went to the pistol's grip and closed around it. The soft skin of his palm embraced the textured surface. He lifted the weapon. Heavy for its size. He tilted it, studied its angles, watched the truck alarm's avid sparkle seek out its grooves and channels. Then the spell broke and he remembered the injured woman, remembered his fear. Fear for her and for himself, fear of the unknown. He looked from the gun to the woman.

Was this her weapon? Her truck? Possible, but he wouldn't suppose it. Another person was in play, handguns hiding in gray boxes. Wayne recalled the leather jacket in the Bronco's back seat. He recalled the loping shadow-man he'd seen earlier. Connection, no connection? City streets held random souls.

What *had* happened here? An attack, an accident,

a fight, or something else, something unfinished, an ongoing motion? Peril was building fast, warping the air, shrilling above the angry backbeat of the truck's horn.

Wayne could feel this peril grow. His fear grew with it.

Leave, he should leave. *Must* leave. Call the cops from far away, fast as he could, direct an ambulance to the woman. But leave here. Leave here now.

He moved to put the gun down, but a sudden scrabbling rasp—physically immediate over the truck alarm's ambient din—made him turn just enough to avoid a boot in the back of his head. A rush of air and grime trailed the kick, and on instinct Wayne fell sideways and twisted crab-like to confront his attacker.

“You!” A man, wild and powerful, his voice battering Wayne into a submissive rag. “You get the fuck away from her!”

On the ground, on his back, fixed between this raging animal and the unconscious woman, Wayne propped himself up with his elbows, the gun absently hooked in his right hand.

Who was this? *Get the fuck away from her?* Wayne was trying to help the woman, wasn't that clear? He glanced towards her body, his focus leaving the man for an instant; then, needing air to speak over the clamoring alarm, he opened his mouth to inhale but found himself abruptly and painfully gagged.

The man had cut off Wayne's breath with a hand to the throat. Another hand spiked to Wayne's right wrist, pinning it and the gun to the asphalt. Then the man squatted over Wayne's torso and dug a knee into his shoulder. Wayne fought the assault with confused, misspent force, not knowing how or in which direction to writhe. He'd been made helpless in less than three seconds, flattened to the chill ground by this daunting application of weight and muscle.

"Break into my truck, huh!" the man declared over the honking Bronco, his red glare seething and severe. "Look at you, asshole, going through my shit, found y'self a free piece?"

Wayne couldn't draw breath. He couldn't respond. He could hardly shake his head with the man's hand jammed to his throat. How was he supposed to answer while being choked? There was no time to think, no luxury of debate, not as the man slid his clutch up Wayne's wrist and towards the gun pegged in those limp fingers.

There was only time to act. With desperate strength, Wayne arched his back and thrust a knee into the man's lower spine. The man jerked forward, his grip on Wayne's neck loosening, and with this new freedom Wayne flung himself backwards and whipped his other knee between the man's legs.

It connected like a bludgeon. The man's eyes became chalk circles and his shoulders curled downward. He clutched his groin and rocked from side to

side. Wayne skidded away and swung into a crouch. Sweating, shaking, he felt a tingle in his right hand, an accelerating heat. His fingers were squeezing the pistol's grip and pulsing against it. His heartbeat rattled his knuckles and fluttered his thumb.

Down on one knee and breathing hard, the man spit on the ground and raised his left arm, the skin of it looking plum and waxy. Jaws clenched and brow crabbed, he flexed the arm straight, then bent it, then straightened it again, hissing and heaving through the motions. He lowered the arm and drew himself up, shoulders broadening. He looked hurt, and savage, and much stronger and larger than Wayne.

The truck alarm's audio program switched from honking to howling, and over these howls the man pushed a threat: "Fucker. You picked the wrong target." His stare was bleeding and rabid. His hands closed to fists.

Wayne was in a panic. This was a mistake, a mistake! Under the woman's head, under her wound, there, his jacket there, a pillow, folded like a pillow, couldn't the man see it, couldn't he see? There was no need for malice or aggression. Wayne was desperate to explain, but he saw such fury in the man's eyes.

It terrified him.

Also in those eyes, the start of a new attack—

In a single quick motion, automatic muscle memory faking an act he'd never known, Wayne

swept up the pistol and fixed his thumb on the hammer. He wouldn't shoot, no, but he had to make this man freeze, had to stop him, had to force him to listen. Wayne was younger but far weaker. If the fight kept going, he could be killed. Killed. At that thought, a massive wave of survival instinct, primal but weirdly casual—*dear god I'm so not ready for my reckoning*—tempted him to pull the trigger. He resisted by concentrating on the man's face. How could you shoot someone's face.

The man did not attack. He looked at the gun and hesitated. Wayne struggled to find a masterful voice, a compelling voice, but could only manage a thin, pinched tone. "S-stay back, stay there. What're you, what're you thinking, just ba-back off a minute—" He heard himself babble, heard the undying alarm absorb his efforts.

The man's snarl deepened, and Wayne's limbs felt calcified, insensate, his arms locked in a shooter's cradle; it felt like his nerves had disconnected from his brain.

Now the man was panting and shaking and his eyes were loose red orbs, jangling, jangling—but when he spoke, his words chopped through the alarm with a clarity unachieved by Wayne, and what he said was this: "Gun ain't loaded, you stupid kid. You gonna throw it at me?"

Something bad was happening.

Frank couldn't stop huffing, his lungs flapped like torn bellows, his gulping heart jolted his whole body. That kick in the balls had jarred the detail from his vision, and his burns roared with heat, and his brain was squeezing the shit out of his skull, vessels rashing and bone defusing. And the alarm on his Bronco was clashing, screaming, free jazz times a thousand.

Gun ain't loaded, you stupid kid, that's what he just told this little shit, and it was true. The gun wasn't loaded. Couldn't be. Frank had been at the pay phone, on the line, giving the operator Aki's location, then he'd heard the Bronco's alarm and come racing back. Nearing Aki and the truck, he'd been close enough to see the kid kneel down, split the case, grab the gun. The kid hadn't had the time to collect and load the scattered bullets, and Frank had aimed to rush him before he could.

Of course the gun had been unloaded in the case. Frank only loaded it at the range, kept it empty in the car, common sense. Easy enough to load quick if he ever had to.

Avery. Frank hadn't checked the gun since Avery'd borrowed it last Tuesday. Frank remembered the day because that was when this Aki business all began, the day Avery had so casually strolled into the break room with a hot project to sell. Frank hadn't hit the range or even thought about the gun since then. Too busy trying to decide yes or no, and



then when it was yes, too busy cleaning up his place, making up a bedroom, trying like hell to prepare his physical and mental landscape for this cracked-up chance at something good. Hal at the range was probably thinking, *Where's Frank gone to? He get himself a woman?*

The gun. Avery said he'd packed it up empty. Assured Frank of such. Frank should've taken a look but hadn't. Not the first thing on his mind the last several days, Akiko Takayanagi having taken that number one spot, Aki who was lying there, helpless, bloody. Was difficult to see her, to see anything, with the stress of this fight and the pain of his burns beating at his face, the pressure in his veins worsening, his eyeballs shaken and bursting. Let him think, he needed to think, but his ribs were lead bars, his chest was wet plaster. Although claws drilled his head, he strained to focus at the kid holding his gun.

What was he here for? Like he'd been waiting for the truck to break down, how fast he'd set the alarm off, got the gun, dumped Aki's purse—Frank had only been gone a few minutes.

The gun was unloaded. Had to be. Frank had offered to show Avery how the gun worked, inside and out, but Avery had claimed to know already, *ah, Frank, I'm no babe in the woods*. Full of horseshit, that one, but Frank didn't think he'd pack up a live pistol. Man wasn't stupid, just bratty.

And now look at this. Look at this fucking kid. Who'd he think he was? Pointing Frank's own gun at him. Skinny, too. One good whack would do it.



Loaded or not, the gun had interrupted the violence, and Wayne meant to use the opportunity. He dipped the barrel downwards and motioned with his chin to the unconscious woman, trying to point out his good deed, his rolled-up jacket under her bloody head. Look, man, look!

The man didn't look. Wayne had to tell him, he tried to tell him, he tried to speak—speak now!—but language was distant, his throat was a piston, and he couldn't force a sentence together or surmount the truck's whooping siren: “—please—I—her head—look under—”

The man lunged, fist out. Wayne dodged the punch but not the tackle, and he collapsed beneath it, his shoulders grinding on asphalt, the wind escaping his body. He wriggled and kicked, trying to resist, trying to break free, but again the man's superior weight and strength pinned him to the ground.

Wayne was being crushed, he couldn't breathe, he was trapped, his lungs could only shudder, not pull.

The gun, this sharp thing, was jammed between them, Wayne's hand snagged around its grip. The barrel drove into the man's stomach and the angular stock crushed hard against Wayne's chest. The mad-

dening power of this compaction tore at Wayne's nerves and whirled through his head. He strove to yell, but with no air for vehemence his protest was only a gasp: "...stop!"

The man doubled the force of his suffocating bear-hug, tendons welting skin and groans welting breath.

Wayne gave a clenched cry as the butt of the pistol pierced into his rib cage. He rocked his body, he squirmed against the vise, he felt the weapon twist and scrape across his sternum. His forefinger, caught in the trigger guard, flexed sideways against ligaments and joints. Turning, tearing—

Pressure bent his ears and fire swept his chest. The sawtoothed wail of the truck alarm faded to a muted drone as the man jittered overtop him and then became very still.

Without conscious thought, with gun in hand, Wayne pushed away and got to his feet. A shell casing tumbled down his chest and fell to the ground. The center of his t-shirt was spotted with a pattern of burns that led to an open slash in the gray cotton. Skin, red skin, winked from underneath. A bitterness coated Wayne's nostrils and clung to his throat, the unrivaled flavor of cordite.

The girl, lying on her back. The berserker, slumped on his stomach. Wayne, risen to a stance and staring at the bodies before him. Hazard signals chop on and off, on and off, framing the scene in orange

and black. Running alongside the truck alarm's empty buzz is a strange new sound: a thin hissing noise like escaping air, piping from an uncertain direction.

Wayne shivers, a wordless urge corroding a hot path through nerves and muscles, the urge to flee.

What has he done?

Several blocks away but streaking vibrantly, red and blue lights skim and dance across walls and windows. They race towards Wayne in a shimmery cluster, closing in fast, faster.

Wayne's gaze drifts from the two bodies to the approaching strobes. Stupid and shaken, he watches with dissolving senses as the colors close in. Leave, he must leave, the lights will expose him, the lights will lash him to the nightmare. He will not be caged. He will not be caged.

Run, please, run, please, will you run?

So run he does, and faster than ever before—breaking across the street, skidding down a concrete embankment, dashing under a trash-strewn overpass. He sprints through the shadows, his breath escaping in great heaves.



After several minutes' flight, Wayne falls to a crouch and throws up on the sidewalk. He moves to wipe his mouth with his right hand, but the pistol interferes, and he uses his left instead. He rises and stumbles on for a few more blocks, emerging from

an alleyway to see the Ben Franklin Bridge, a big bridge for a big man. As he moves towards it, a cold wind confronts him but makes little impression. His skin is warm from running, his senses muffled by fever, and breathing has become an effort. When he inhales, a sheen of bile ripples down his windpipe; when he exhales, sour needles spin up his throat.

The Ben Franklin Bridge, Wayne knows it well. Once he'd walked its span to fulfill a "because it's there" notion. The crossing had taken longer than expected, the sky growing dark before he'd reached the Camden riverbank. Not wishing to bunk in New Jersey's unknown climes, he'd sped back to the familiar territory of Philly, hoping the footpath gates wouldn't shut for the night and trap him between shores. Taken on a winter evening's rush hour, this urban constitutional had rocked with the disruptive drumbeat of fifty thousand wheels, a whiplashed gout of rattle and exhaust. Clunkers, racers, drifters, haulers—all as one and altogether spearing by, swiping for a faster lane, slamming brakes at the teeming tollbooth bottleneck. The swarming of fish in a farm, he'd thought.

Now it is not rush hour but the opposite, and the Ben Franklin Bridge carries no traffic, shakes with no sound. The entire length is misted with color and light. Alone, empty, it is epic and somber. Set before these immense steel beams, Wayne feels puny and crushable. The bridge is a bold masterwork, a labor

of brilliance, ambition, and risk, while he is a fragile castabout, a labor of two horny parents.

He creeps along the bridge's stern western foundation and drops to the concrete, propping his back against a stone turret that boosts a million pounds of steel. The bricks of this turret share nothing with the red clay tablets of a mason's wheelbarrow—instead they are rough-cut cubes of cold, unresonant rock, each taller than a man and a hundredfold harder. The gray lines of mortar make shallow culverts, and Wayne is an insect hunched within. He places the pistol on the ground and looks to the east.

The Ben Franklin's suspension towers are blue cobalt on black sky, ramming up and over the river's film like Earth's own tuning forks. An amber glint strokes each tower's latticed cap to reveal the garrets where workers can squat, and from Wayne's distance, a person up there would look no bigger than a newborn's toenail. Wayne cowers, and gulps, and thinks that this bridge of great size, and all things of such size, are massive enough to earn a special distinction when beheld from a bug-eyed underside: to be part of geology, not humanity, to be temples of a monumental realm.

The omnipresent cynic invades. Less omnipresent than usual, its cheap shots boggled by shell-shock, still it struggles to Wayne's frontal lobe and sloshes ammonia on his wonder. *Today so tall and tomorrow gone*, it says. *Nothing you build will be preserved.*

A tough job, stating the obvious, Wayne replies. But some things are forever enough, some glories will and must persist. It's not like the seas could be drained or the Rockies flattened, and consider the stars, too far off to fuck up.

The pistol lies inside the V of Wayne's splayed legs, barrel pointed outwards, muzzle still fragrant. Also a cynic, but one of sharper angles, it hijacks the debate and drags it farther from Wayne's hopes. *Oceans, mountains, the pistol says, you could kill all of that and more besides, you could carbonate the seas and choke the verdance from every peak. And you can't reach the stars, not yet, but you can snuff them from your sovereign sky. Human ingenuity takes sacrifices but always wins in the end.*

A bead of blue light drips like sweat down the silver barrel. *Ex animo nihil fit, boy. From the heart comes nothing. But ex mens, from the mind—ex mens came me.*

When Wayne slides a fingertip down the pistol's spine, it shuts up. He knows it hasn't really been talking, and certainly not in Latin. Any pistol that could speak would sound more like Yosemite Sam than some piddling Nostradamus. Wayne hovers his palm above the weapon's steely bore and thinks of Charlton Heston leaving the apes to find Lady Liberty waist-deep in sand. Then he takes hold of the pistol and lifts it, forever and again impressed by its dense heaviness.

He moves slowly, almost gracefully, in motions that are not planned or actively considered. Fingers slip down the textured grip, curl against its base, and find there a slim tab which gives, but slightly, under pressure. When he brings force to this tab, a rack falls from the grip and hits his palm.

A clip. No bullets inside. Wayne pokes a finger at the spring-loaded feeder and it sinks under his push. He retracts his finger and the feeder leaps back up with a quiet *shrak*. He lays the clip on his lap. Before the man got shot, he'd faced the gun and claimed it unloaded. *Ain't loaded, you stupid kid.*

Wayne looks at the empty clip. Then he takes the pistol and tries to point it at himself. He wrist shakes and he cannot. He does not understand the weapon, or the black pitch of the barrel-hole. He fears phantom bullets and secret triggers.

Phantom bullets. Wayne's shirt is torn and grimy, the front stained with red. A wound behind the stain but no pain. A painless, warm tenderness. Phantom wound.

Wayne aims the pistol at a faraway patch of asphalt. He lines up the sights and gently gives the trigger a push, not strong enough to move it, but enough to feel the potential of that movement. Directly above the trigger housing, a small lever is set parallel with the barrel. Wayne takes this lever between his fingers and finds that it can turn leftwards. He moves it in that direction until it clicks exactly

perpendicular to the barrel's length. Now the tip of the lever touches an "S" stamped into the gunmetal. Wayne can guess what this means.

Once more he aims at the distant ground and tests force against the trigger. It does not give, nor threaten to. The safety is on, engaged by that tiny lever, and the trigger will not move. Wayne lifts the empty clip from his lap and carefully returns it to the pistol. It clicks into its snug seat, an unfriendly click, and for the last time Wayne points the gun outward and tests the trigger. Immovable, locked, frozen in place.

He draws his legs inward and stands up. His injured chest prickles at the sudden movement. He drops the gun into his jeans pocket but the grip pokes over the hem. Although his t-shirt hangs low enough to cover this excess, the gun cannot claim to be hidden; it makes a distinct outdent in his clothes.

Wayne lingers his eyes on the Ben Franklin Bridge. The Delaware River nods softly underneath, the illuminated deck mirrored in the ripples. These ripples play with the light, scintillate it, crystallize it into something richer than reflection. Wayne watches the movement and senses a presence. Across the street, past a fence, and lapping onto concrete quays, the river calls to him. There, the gun in his pocket might find a better home.

Wayne holds a palm to his chest, to the half-dried blood on his ripped shirt, to the wet blood behind the rip.

He could kneel at the river's edge, cup his hands in the current, and wash off the blood. The river is polluted, but not badly. The waters would accept the gun and then absolve him. And if he trips and founders down the fathoms, he will learn if phantoms can swim.

Chapter four



the shanty of Melvin (and Jimmy)

WITH ARMS FOLDED, FACE GRIM, AND A RAGGEDY DUFFEL at his feet, Melvin straddled the corner's concrete miter and spun his head like an organetic radar beacon. Scope the leftward street, *bleep bleep!* Scope the rightward street, *bloop bloop!* All clear, Sir Admiral Chief Sir! Three-six-zero perimeter shows no sign of friendlies or foeys!

Wait! Down the street and creeping near—was that a pigly drone on the prowl? Affirmative! Move, move! Melvin hauled up his raggedy duffel, wheeled around, and galloped away from his nemesis. A panel truck was parked along the next block, and he ran up and crouched behind it. Bent low, peeping with neither eyes nor voice, he listened to the cherry-top's tires grate towards his position. Pass. Pass. Pass! He clenched the strap of his duffel and suspended his breathing. The cruiser drew even with the panel truck, seemed to hesitate, and continued down the street. Going, and going, and finally gone.

Melvin unlocked his lungs and stood up. He cracked his knuckles and popped his joints and overpowered his palpitations with circular breathing. Then he looked down at his raggedy duffel, a ten-cent castoff from the Marlboro Ranch. The famous logo repeated along the bag's every side, but the trademark red was weathered a dusky pink, and many crucial seams were actively unraveling. At one end was a small scruffy hole, a frayed puncture trailing loose threads. Melvin eyed this hole and smiled. With strength and style he slung the duffel over his shoulder, flinching when its weighty cargo thumped against his back. Careful!

He returned to the corner, replanted his feet, and resumed lookout duty. Supreme caution was mandatory. He wasn't gonna let some stray swine run his shit, boot him up, deny him his hero's quest. Nothing

could stop him, not tonight, for he most definitely had the sky-high skills to ace this gig.

Hadn't he already performed Plan D to smashing success? The booty from that victory hung fat from his shoulder, loading him down with the weight of accomplishment, so damn skippy he had the skills. But Plan D was just a preparatory prelude to the grand payback of Plan P. And the intersection of Plan D and Plan P would ignite a shockwave radical enough to mentally castrate those who persisted in vexing him.

Melvin would have his revenge, Melvin would right the wrongs, Melvin was twistin' throttle on an unstoppable juggernaut of moral recompensation. But right now Melvin's nerves were still cramped from that cop's passing. He hated close calls. They made him sweat all over, and that got his boxers clammy, and clammy boxers rode up and rashed his crack. Very aggravating. Like the ancient Vikings, Melvin wasn't to be tangled with, especially not when his jams were damp. And tonight was blowy and cold, which would accentuate the ramifications of the dampness.

A *Jiff* newspaper box stood on Melvin's corner, sharing his space, and he drew in a snort and hit it with snot. Mm, feeling better, now let's have a seat. He circled to the undefiled side of the box and rested a cheek on it. Then he crossed his arms and made an

angry face, which felt good too. His fear was fading, displaced by impatience, that being another trait he shared with the ancient Vikings. Cool it, ice it, keep it professional. These engulfing emotions would corrode his watchfulness.

But *c'mon!* What was keeping his trusty lieutenant? How many lawmen would Melvin have to dodge before the bongo-boy surfaced? Jimmy should've been here by now, should've completely been here ten minutes ago. The worse the delay, the riskier Plan P got! Each ticking minute cranked the window of success a nick lower. Or a nick higher. It depended on the kind of window. Inward? Narrower? Please, Jimmy, show yer *re-tardy* face!

Annoyed as he was, Melvin knew better than to be surprised. Running behind schedule was plain endemic for Jimmy. Damn that Jimmy, that untimely Jimmy. He'd sworn to be punctual. Promised it. *Oathed* it.

Fazoo, fazoo, like any oath could stop the goofy twizzler from spewing limp-dick excuses to justify his slow ass. No joke, Melvin needed to show that OodyNoody-scarfing punk some upright discipline. OodyNoody, holy-moly! Jimmy chugged those saltified noodle cups like Unicron chugged planets, difference was that Unicron was hugely fat and Jimmy stayed whip-thin. The boy was *finicky* about his OodyNoodles, too, more finicky than that

fucking Morris cat, rest in peace. Wouldn't touch Beef, Chicken, or Shrimp Flavor, no, for Jimmy it always had to be Oriental Flavor, zero variation. The rate he sucked 'em down, Melvin was shocked there were any Orientals left.

A last-minute OodyNoody to boost his stamina, that might be the cause of Jimmy's lateness. But lateness was irregardlessly instinctive to Jimmy's chemistry, so maybe it was a genetic profusion, some lardy trait Jimmy got from his immense momma, her chromosomes sloggin' him down even though he outwardly actualized an optimal skinniness. Melvin chanted a little rap:

*Jimmy's late cuz his momma immense,
Jimmy's skinny but he got no sense!
Momma genes be impedatory,
Lard-ass momma release your quarry!
Your genes be sloggin' Jimmy down—*

Melvin became disgusted with himself. Who was he, talking about genes and genetics like that? He was sounding like his shithead Pappy. And Melvin hated Pappy. Pappy was gonna pay tonight. Plan P was underway tonight.

Shithead Pappy loved to talk genetics until Melvin's ear got red. Had himself a holy bible for it, too, *The Stepladder Parabola*. Melvin had never seen him flip past page *ix* of the foreword, but that didn't stop the old cuss from, when the spitty spirit moved him, shaking the huge jet-black book in the air and

declaring himself the "ooberman" of mental supremacy over the "jiggy-boos." After Pappy dropped his *Parabola* into the bathtub during an attempt to "soak in knowledge," the book had bloated so fat that it couldn't anymore fit into its wicker basket atop the toilet tank. Some ooberman.

Melvin was a deep guy, deep as the Earth's melted core, and ignorance pissed him off surpassingly, and his stupid ignorant Pappy pissed him off barbariously. The fucker loved his soapbox, loved to proclaimate his shitty ideas, or someone *else's* shitty ideas—man had himself this whole trunk of blotchy, gray, crookedly stapled newsletters, all smudged and blurry like they'd been xeroxed through a layer of lard, xeroxed upside-down as much as not. Which was just another thing—or in Parabola-talk, a "correlating theorem"—that fucked up the whole ooberman theory, if the Blitzkrieg Aryanite Ragnarok Kaiser Rolls couldn't for Samhain figure how to use a copy machine right.

Stupid ignorant Pappy loved his Kaisers anyway. Three days ago, the latest issue of the *White Voice* had been sitting on the kitchen table, and Melvin had flipped through it during his breakfast of Nachongos and a Krunchie Rice Treat. Total trash, front to back, full of bitchy whining, retro attitude, skunked minds. Most rancid was the last page, the "YourVoices" page, where loyal troopies could send in testimonials, shout-outs, even poems:

"2050" by Brother TrueBlood Ezekiel

O HOLY JEHOVAH!

the Media says by "2050" America will Be all "Brown"
-- that our Purity shall be Mixed as two rivers run'd together
One Clean, honoring your Ble's'd Covenant
-- and one "Polluted" with the blood of Curs'd Ham

O HEAVENLY FATHER!

You hath created the Earth and brought forth the Fruit
You hath created the great Whales and winged Fowels
You hath created the Creeping things and the Jews
who slay'd Thy only-begotten-Son and now control the Media
-- the "Shadow" o're every throne, The Cabals Of Zion!

O MY CKUSAD—

O shut up already. Why people always said the Jews got control of everything? The Jewish section at the supermarket was like two feet wide, half the claim of the Chinese shit and totally outdone by the Spanish shit, which stretched for a whole *pasillo* and had all these funky-colored sodas either droolingly sweet or tearfully spicy or both in one. If Jews really ruled the world, wouldn't they have more shelf space? Reading that *Voice* puke had made Melvin feel kinda naughty, so naughty he'd gone outside and set the thing on fire. And that's what did it: when Pappy waddled home from his overnight shift to find his "real news" nothing but ashes, he'd seized Melvin and smacked him hard in the face.

This momentous smack had impacted at exactly 10:17 in the a.m. of that fated three-day-ago morn. Melvin wasn't numerically anal, but he had that figure, 10:17 a.m., branded to eternal memory.

Because 10:17 was the point of awakening, 10:17 was the primary rivet. Because if he ever wrote an autobiography, he'd title it Ten-Dot-Dot-Seventeen. Because, with that 10:17 smack, clarity bespoke him, and the seeds of Plans D and P entered his mind and thusly sprouted. Because Plans D and P marked the end of reaction and the start of proaction.

So to hell with his kin, Melvin was better than them all! He wasn't and wasn't never gonna be a turd like Pappy, whose greatest lifetime achievement was morning stiffness. And he'd never be like *Dagget*. Melvin wouldn't even speak that repugnified name—but at least he had no blood-link with the dick. Bad enough to be half a spurt from Pappy's scrote.

What would Melvin be like, then, what was Melvin about? Grace under pressure. Wisdom and respect. Pride and valor. A word there was, a word his errant mind had unearthed, a lost and ancient word that by sound and scope seemed to cradle his wishful soul: *Quintessence*. Melvin was all about quintessence.

But right this moment, he was all about waiting, waiting, waiting. Jimmy had some trouble coming, big trou—

Motion detected! Melvin hopped off the *Jiff* box and zeroed his pupils on skinny Jimmy burnin' up the sidewalk, a block away and closing fast. Melvin grudgingly conceded that, late as Jimmy was, he was somewhat less late than usual, a feat deserving special mention on any night but this one.

When Jimmy reached half a block's distance, Melvin could see that he'd been charging hard throughout and not just for show—his pullover was knotted around his waist and a big sweaty U covered his shirt, the soakage not clammy like Melvin's jams but really and fully sogged. That's it, Jimsy, nice! Raw deal, though, that heavy drench was gonna freeze up the moment his sprint was over.

When Jimmy reached a quarter block's distance, the heaving of his lungs prickled Melvin's ear hairs. Work it, push it, crank those legs! Melvin was pleased but damned if he'd show it. Come, Jimmy, come! Ride your wings of clumsy!



Jimmy ran and hacked and wheezed and ran. Melvin was late too, sometimes. Did Jimmy beat on Melvin when that happened? No. Did he pelt Melvin with curses? No. Did he piss on Melvin's prized Shaq-fu shirt? Never, nohow, forget it.

Sad. For too long now, Jimmy had lived in mortal fear of his friend. Didn't used to be, but this was the present malfunction—and Melvin kept getting worse, souring like ever-meaner milk. Sure, Jimmy felt for Melvin's tribulation: a few years ago Melvin's parents split up like everybody's do, but his mom had gone about it all wrong, this surprise abandonment from outta nowhere, and during the holiday season, too! Melvin's dad, mean-man Pappy, hadn't acted overly

put out by her leaving, but who could tell with a guy put out by nature.

Melvin had once explained it like this, "Jimmy, 'magine you had this plate, and on one-half the plate you got a pile of shit, and on the other half you got jello. Now jello's all jiggly, but shit ain't jiggly at all, so when you hit a bump the jello, like, jiggles off. Now, see, now you got nothin' but a plate of shit."

Jimmy had sympathy, deep and honest, but this sympathy earned him no love, and always he tip-toed around Melvin's booby-trapped bad side. But sometimes the old Melvin bubbled up, the Melvin of cheerful youth, and because it happened less and less Jimmy valued it all the more.

This afternoon, Jimmy had picked up the phone to hear Melvin's voice, angry and cold, saying that the time hath come to enact some Plan D or P or DeePee, the time hath come *tonight*. And this Plan would brand Melvin's enemies with eternal shame and pain. "See, Jims, Plan D I can take solo," Melvin had said, "but I need backup on the P side, 'cause that shit's gonna be *delicate*. Two a.m. and you better be there! Wear some funny clothes you don't ever wear, 'cause we're going incognito."

And now it couldn't be later than, what, 2:15 at the *most*, and here Jimmy was, making the rendezvous. But Melvin didn't look pleased—and the closer Jimmy got, the clearer that angry pose became. Hoping to dampen his friend's fury, Jimmy

accelerated to the height of his powers. Let Melvin see the effort. Let Melvin *appreciate*. Twenty or so feet before reaching Melvin's corner, he suddenly felt the flopsy toe of his left sneaker hook into a sewer grate he'd neglected to anticipate. He managed to throw Melvin a sorrowful glance before swinging to the pavement as if on a hinge. His chin smacked the ground and he thanked Providence for giving him a short tongue.

"Melvin, come help me up," he moaned, clutching at his ankle and jaw. He knew he'd pay for this. Hopefully Melvin didn't know where he'd hidden his four other Shaq-fu shirts. They were vintage, they were mint-in-bag and *appreciating*.

As Melvin hurried over, Jimmy noticed that he'd taken his own advice and was sporting funny clothes Jimmy'd never seen before. Purple sweatpants. A sweater with barfy stripes. Dirty old shoes. A cruddy, hefty Marlboro duffel. Everything incognito, yep, and ratty to boot. Where'd Melvin get this stuff?

Melvin pulled Jimmy standing, his anger obvious but nicely below Jimmy's expectations. "Jimmy," he said, "you're always late. Why don'tcha get a watch?"

Jimmy limped in a circle, testing his ankle. Then he peered down and sulked at his sneakers, two sizes larger than his feet. He hadn't worn them to be incognito or whatever, his mom just worshipped hand-me-downs a trip too far.

"Man, I *had* a watch," he said. "Stupid Rot ate

it."

Melvin's Pappy had a dog, a fang-filled bulldozer of a dog, a Cujo-cousin ball of rottweiler razor wire. Jimmy's watch had been ace, it had played *Moon Lander* and *Moon Invaders* and *Moon Patrol* and it showed the time in Chinese if you pressed a hidden button on the side. A few months ago they'd been hanging at Melvin's house and Melvin had wanted a shot at *Moon Invaders*, so Jimmy'd taken off the watch and held it out to him—and *pow!* Rot lunged off the couch and nearly digested Jimmy's left hand in a monster chomp at the bleeping gadget.

"Damn, that's right. Fucking Rot," Melvin said with a grimace. He exhaled and inspected Jimmy's wardrobe. "You ain't lookin' so incognito, Jims. I've seen you wear most that rag before."

Jimmy said nothing. Sweat hugged his chest like an icy bib, and he untied the pullover from his waist and put it on. The air was frosty, the heat he'd earned from running already lost.

Melvin hitched up his Marlboro duffel. "Ah, you'll be all right," he said. "Don't figure the old muff knows your clothes anyway, *you* don't live with him." He began rubbing his hands together, a special look entering his eyes.

No—not a special look. *The* special look. The special look Melvin would flash before committing such evil acts like belly-slithering into the diocese lot and slashing the bishop's tires, or hanging upside-down

from the choir loft's high balustrade to spray "666" in Smooth-Flo Ruby Red along St. Andy's galley wall. (The resulting "999" hadn't horrified the faithful the way Melvin had planned, especially as his heavy thumb on the nozzle had slathered the paint so thick and wet that it promptly slid in fat gouts down the wall, distorting the numerical figure into a crimson blob that had, at the next morning's service, reminded several parishioners of the Soviet Union.)

Melvin's special look meant heavy action. It was the look he'd worn before lifting a whole stack of CD videogames from the Sega display rack at Gadget Paradise. The same look he'd worn at home a half-hour later, when his rage at finding the inners of every CD case painfully empty sent him thrashing around the cellar for his "Super Chief 2000" archery set. And yes, it was the exact look delivered late that night, when he and Jimmy wrapped those empty CD cases in butane-soaked newspaper, nailed them to a dry, splintery fence along the Gadget Paradise parking lot, and shot flaming *Rambo* arrows into them (only a one-alarm incident, but enough to give Jimmy guilty nightmares about babies drowning in flames.)

Right now, sometime past two on this cold October morning of wind and wet noses, Melvin's special look radiated more juice, more unhealthy *sheen*, than any seen before. He grabbed Jimmy and gave him an insufficiently playful shove. Jimmy kissed the concrete and decided to stay down this time.

Melvin wouldn't have it. "C'mon, Jimsy, c'mon my bro," he said, his voice warped and giddy, "let's go whack Pappy up the fuckin' head! Plan P's on the move, and it's tight, but we gotta be smart and sleek."

Jimmy crawled to a stance. "Melvin, hey, if we're going to the Dandi Donuts, why'd I have to meet you like fifteen blocks from it? I ran by the fuckin' place on my way here."

"You can't put the rendezvous right close by the mark, pinhead. How conspicuous can you get?"

"Huh." Despite Melvin's talk of whacking heads, Jimmy prayed that this "Plan P" didn't involve actually hurting Pappy. Jimmy wouldn't weep for Pappy, wouldn't drop a tear on *that* man, but violence gave him the shakes. Or even the chance for violence, as he was a friendly creature of the pond and not a toothy beast of the sea. Mauling and bashing and death-dealing were not elements of the Jimmy personality, and while he knew how to shoot, he didn't own any gun, no sir, couldn't imagine blowing a *person* away. Jimmy's home armory, none of which he'd brought along, consisted of some old Jarts and a kick-ass slingshot.

But clear and true, he feared his friend's intentions. For years, Melvin had been wishing vengeance on Pappy one way or another for one reason or another. Jimmy looked at Melvin's fleabag duffel and wondered what manner of heavy kit lay within.

A gun? Melvin could be pretty tough when he got all moody, but not tough like *that*, please no. A claw hammer or rusty pipe or jumbo fireworks? A battery of stink bombs? Jimmy was working up the nerve to ask when Melvin twisted his wrist around the duffel's strap and said, "Alright, Jimsy, enough loitering—let's do this."

Without further notice Melvin ducked his head and drove hard into the wind. Jimmy strove to keep pace, but faster Melvin flew, a cheetah among men, a legend among cheetahs. The Chee-tos in Jimmy's gut were a cramp away from spurting free as he and Melvin sprinted down sidewalks and alleys, along shadows and walls, skirting streetlights and headlights.

Jimmy didn't wanna run no more. He'd run blocks and blocks to meet Melvin, and here they were running again, and for him it was partway backtrack-ing, how stupid was that. And he hadn't had any dinner besides snacking 'cuz he'd been clean out of Oody-Noodles, he wasn't gonna grow any taller but nevertheless he needed the sixteen vitamins filling up each and every steamy cup—

Melvin suddenly halted, his soles almost squealing. Jimmy plowed into Melvin's back and nearly knocked them both over. Melvin teetered from the impact, but caught his balance and next his duffel as it lurched off his shoulders. Up ahead was a police cruiser doing recon: crawling, stopping, crawling, crawling, turning


down a side street, moving out of sight. Melvin exhaled slowly—and then, his face plush with madness, he seized Jimmy and rattled him about.

"Jimmy, *try* not to be so fucking feeble!"

"O-okay!"

Melvin shook his head and continued down the sidewalk. Jimmy trailed in a glum shamble. Soon enough, too soon entirely, Jimmy saw the bright Dandi Donuts sign poking past the edge of a corner rowhome. They were here. They had reached the mark. Jimmy crossed his arms, lodging hands into pits.

"Showtime, cocksucker," Melvin said, regarding the Dandi Donuts with the opposite of mirth. He squeezed Jimmy on the shoulder. "Let's fuckin' circumnavigate."



"Can't sleep here, friend," the old cashier said, the word *friend* stricken of all solace. "Gotta get something."

Wayne lifted his head from folded arms. He opened his eyes and the pupils shrank before invading fluorescence. This was a Dandi Donuts, he was on a stool and slumped over the counter. He'd been sleeping. Against the rules. But it was so warm in here and he was so tired. When he'd first come in, the cashier had been asleep. Now the cashier was awake and denying Wayne the same privilege.

“Oh...” Wayne’s voice came out a rasp. “Tea. Medium.”

“Cream, sugar?”

“B-both—” Wayne coughed. “Eh, both.”

Wayne’s crossed arms and slouch covered the bloody rip along his shirt, covered it mostly. The cashier didn’t appear to notice or suspect anything amiss; without lingering he went to fill Wayne’s order. He lifted a styrofoam cup from a tall stack, and into it pumped cream, spooned sugar, added a tea bag. From a carafe he poured hot steamy water. He returned to Wayne and set down the beverage and a napkin. The scent was enchanting.

“Anything else?” the cashier asked, scratching his beard.

“Apple danish?”

“Ran out. Anything besides that?”

“Um—” Wayne looked towards the pastry rack
“—maybe.”

“How’s you call me when you figure it out,” the cashier said. He scuffed back to his milk-crate seat and shut his eyes.

Wayne drew the tea to his mouth and lapped it. Hot, very hot, it scalded the tip of his tongue and provoked salivation.

Why was he here. How did he get here. Questions. Maybe he too had died, only to be reborn and dumped into donut limbo. Limbo, that was it, a fuzzy fugue without boundaries or tethers. Flesh

and blood, spirits and myths. What was real? The tea was hot and real. The countertop was hard and real. The plate-glass windows and blaring bulbs and steel pastry racks were gleaming and real. The pistol in his pants was very real, growing bigger, a devilish erection. Wayne was unreal. Wayne was a funny specter. Wayne was rowing the black river.

His chest trembled. Injury. Go to the bathroom and examine. He tugged himself off the stool and along the counter’s edge. His muscles were distant and jelly-like. He reached the back of the room and came into a short corridor. Along this corridor were two doors, their placards reading “Men” and “omen.” He wanted neither but chose “Men.”

He entered the room, hit the light, closed and locked the door. Looked up at a weak yellow bulb. Much darker in here, no ceiling of striking white tubes like in the main room. Toilet, urinal, sink, hand-dryer. No mirror.

He stepped towards the sink and lost his balance. He thrust out his arms, struck an elbow to the wall. Funny bone hollered, arm jangled, his legs slipped from under him. He fell against the wall and dropped to the floor, smacking flat on his butt. The floor was hard and the impact shook his spine. The gun leered from his pocket, its grip tapping the tile. He pulled it free and laid it beside him, barrel aimed out.

His mind was trying to clear. Trying to sort. He could feel it wander and tumble. He bore down and chased whatever fragments cared to surface.

Odd that he still had the gun. The safety was on, he knew that much; he could see himself, surrounded by large cold stones, notching the tiny lever upwards. Yes, the safety, what stopped the trigger from moving. He looked down at the gun, at the lever pointing to the S.

Hadn't he also snuck out the clip, popped it from the handle? He recalled holding the clip, looking inside, finding it empty. He recalled a steel-blue bridge, lamps on the water.

Yes, remember, remember more. Go back to what happened before. Go back to the shooting.

But his memory would only stagger forward. He'd been moving towards the water, crossing the lanes to the river, getting closer. Then the picture sharpened:

— A police car parked by a river pier. Marker lights on, cabin light on. Cop inside, head tilted down, reading something? Wayne looks at cop. Cop looks up. Eyes glint.

— Reflex commands: Halt, turn, lunge, escape! Race south, far south, dash west across Water Street, but away from water and towards hard land.

— Sirens. Ahead, behind, surrounding him? A snare, constricting, tightening...and breaking up? Spreading out. Fading.

— Fly down residential streets, dark and quiet, porches and duplexes. Plunge between houses when cars approach, cringe at motion-triggered floodlights and curtainless windows.

— Again sirens approach, again sirens fade, sirens for whom? For Wayne or for others? For crimes, accidents, fires? Doesn't matter who or what, don't cut the pace. Keep moving.

— Dandi Donuts. Shining sign. Throbbing lungs. Gasping throat. Skin running hot and cold. Must rest.

From here on, the memories were more complete, more fluent. Walking into the donut shop, sliding onto a stool, falling asleep for a brief respite until being asked to order. Medium tea, cream and sugar. Danish ran out, he might get a donut. His injured chest quivered and he'd entered the bathroom.

Bathroom. Where he was. Sitting on the floor, legs outstretched to the base of the urinal. Lying next to him, the pistol. He looked down to his chest, to the torn t-shirt and wound underneath. He swallowed, massaged his neck, swallowed again. His throat still hurt, but less than before. No more feeling like he'd swallowed a cactus.

The urinal stood before him, tall and tarnished ivory. Beside it sat the toilet, short and hefty. Always nice to have options. Above the urinal, a metal-framed poster was bolted to the wall. Words ran along the frame's bottom edge: *The Fuse Agency Incorporated, the Leader In Media Placement*. Some clever sort had rubbed out the *d* in *Leader* and etched in a *k*.

The poster was aglow through a shield of plexiglass, it was colorful and alluring, a mirage in two

dimensions. A naked and beautiful black-tressed girl rode a dirty emu through dunes of glittering sand. Her braided mane spiraled behind her in bejeweled ringlets of wanton intrigue. The trunk of the dirty emu's neck barely obscured the girl's crotch, and her right nipple was hidden behind the bird's scowly head. The other nipple was blocked by her well-toned bicep, expertly placed.

No crime, Wayne didn't need to see rosebuds—exposure would spoil her goddess persuasion. She was lovely, much too lovely to be screwed to the wall above a pisser. Wayne wished to be her desert prince, high atop his own foul mount.

A six-pack of the malt drink Lymûn Spritz was collared to the emu's neck, conjuring a disjunctive alpine reminiscence of brave St. Bernards and life-saving rum barrels. "Fetchingly Exotic!" avowed the emu's thought-balloon, the words typeset in a calligraphic faux-Arabic font.

Wayne's gaze left the poster and resettled on the pistol lying beside him. The wound on his chest resumed aching. The wound, inspect the wound. But first, a cigarette. The acid had drained from his windpipe, and his breathing had steadied, and tobacco would part the fatigue and funnel his straggled thoughts. Already the sour air of the bathroom was perking his senses, and a cigarette would bring him further along—

A wretched clarity beset him and he tunneled

through the pockets of his jeans. Dust and lint and a couple of coins.

His smokes, his keys, his *wallet*—all these were zipped into the pockets of his jacket, the jacket he'd rolled into a pillow and placed under a woman's bloody head.

The jacket he'd *left* under a woman's bloody head. The jacket he'd forgotten in the churning of sirens and the thumping of chest and feet. Wayne's vision flickered and a swelling closed his ears. The police would remove the jacket and drape it out and see it wasn't hers; they'd riffle the pockets and find his wallet and keys, his name and address.

Implications swarmed and hovered, stingers flicking. No escape now. No chance to ditch the gun, go home, take a long shower, and pray for the cops to miss his trail. No going back to his former life, no return to Eden.

The cops would make assumptions, some benign but others not. *A gunshot death but no gun present? The shooter has the gun. The shooter must have run. The shooter might be that ID in the jacket? Check it out, check it fast.* They'd crash his place, and not finding him they'd grow suspicious, and they'd hunt the streets...

But his jacket had been under the woman's head. It had helped her. Would that prove his peaceful intentions, his good character? Would that alone discount a killing?

What had the dead man said? The words were broken and scattered, but the voice lived, too strong to choke: *Break into my truck Got a piece now Get away from her!*

The man had believed Wayne meant harm to the woman. The man had mistaken Wayne for some nocturnal scamp. The man's poor judgement had left him dead. Wayne wanted to vomit but gulped it back. In slow movements he worked to a stance and approached the sink, and this time he didn't fall. He pulled off his torn t-shirt and tucked it into his waistband.

Crossing the left side of his chest was a skewed lesion buffered by contusions. It had been torn from the sternum outward, that was plain from the broken skin's bias. The deepest part of the wound led off from the sternum, the ragged cut rimmed with clotting blood and glazed by clear pus. As the wound continued it became shallower, ending in a purple blush below the left armpit. When Wayne flexed his arms or bent his torso, the pain grew insistent but never great.

The pistol's barrel had been guttered sideways against his chest; this he remembered. Also remembered was the noise of the gunshot and the rush of heat, but these were sensations absent a framework, absent chronology, reason, state of mind. Here Wayne's command was void, here his memory lost

both verb and vision. Without these girders he turned to guesswork, and focused on the evidence cut into his skin, where the bullet must have grazed him before punching into his attacker's body.

Wayne looked at his grooved chest and tried to reconstruct the bullet's path. Within his fragmented recall he could feel the steel pistol bending his ribs, he could see himself rocking and jerking to fight the man's hold. From these actions and angles, he scraped up a theory: Struggling to escape, he'd twisted rightward in a hard desperate pitch. By accident the gun fired, the shot slicing across his chest, past his side, and into his enemy.

Wayne reached for the soap dispenser hanging by the sink and squirted a pink blob into his hand. He spread it along the wound, then opened the hot water tap and waited for the steam to build. When it did, he unspooled a long ribbon of toilet paper, wadded it up, and soaked it. Then he pressed this scalding mop to his chest and circled it along the damage. The soap formed nettlesome bubbles as he massaged, and he continued, abrading harder, his teeth tight against the heat and the sting, a tolerable sting, a fine sting. He gathered more toilet paper, again drenched it, and rinsed the pink bubbles from his skin. He blotted himself dry with the final spins left on the roll.

He yanked the t-shirt from his waistband and held it out. Street grime was rubbed along the back, darkening the medium gray, but the obvious soil was

on the shirt's ripped front. During the last hour's mindless run, this fabric must have been rubbing over his wound, agitating it. The bloodstains were mostly contained to the shirt's chest area, along and around the rip—and as Wayne studied them, he felt his revulsion leap from subtle to severe. The blood couldn't be his alone, for he had shot a man, their bodies ground tight, and his blood and the man's blood must be caked together on this guilty cotton, on Wayne's guilty skin. Wayne's blood was swarming, it was alive, and the man's blood was dead, dispossessed—and diseased?

Disease, that's an unknown, dispose of it. Worry about the known. Facing both would consume him.

The hot water was hissing, spitting, angry at being left on and ignored. Wayne gripped the mangled face of his t-shirt and stuck it under the spout, scrubbing the dark blotches between his fingers until his skin threatened to blister from the heat. Nothing cleaned. He pumped soap onto the fabric and tried harder. The bloodstains grew lighter but wouldn't leave.

He worked a lather throughout the t-shirt and rinsed it thoroughly, clearing off a fair amount of grime. Then he shut the tap, wrung the shirt, and held it under the hand dryer. After three cycles of hot air, the shirt was damp but wearable. Wayne slipped it on backwards so that the frontal rip crossed his spine instead of his chest. The shirt's

cotton first slid over his cleaned-up wound, then stuck to it like a bandage. Now he could face the world, though he couldn't safely turn his back on it.

Rational thought. Believe in rational thought. Should he go to the police and try to make sense? Breathe deeply, tell his tale, hope for the best? Such honesty might reflect well on him, and in the long run could be his salvation. He could contend that the firing of the gun was a terrible accident and not an intentional act.

Contend? He could only contend it was an accident? Fuck *yes* it was an accident, beyond doubt. He hadn't meant to pull the trigger. The gun had just gone off. Happens all the time. He would never shoot anybody, never choose to. He could explain this, but would he be believed?

Mr. Milton, did you point a gun at an unarmed man?

— Well, yeah. [mumbles, shakes]

But you say you had no intention to shoot, none at all?

— Nope, none at all. [looks pained]

Then why point it in the first place, Mr. Milton?

— I was scared. He was crazed. [fidgets]

He thought you were robbing him and the woman. He was defending her. He was defending himself.

— *I was defending myself!* [angled brow, angry tone]

So you shot him in self-defense.

— [grinds teeth] I didn't shoot. The gun just went off.

It just “went off” with your finger on the trigger.

— I don’t remember. I don’t remember. [closes eyes]

If it had been an accident, why had he fled? His lack of recall didn’t mean lack of guilt. Maybe he *had* squeezed the trigger, maybe his self-defense was mixed with malice. A good lawyer could make a rickety trap just stable enough to snag him. And a complete fiction would be more credible than an incomplete fact. More satisfying as well, especially to any horrified kin—

A hollow despair sucked up Wayne’s spine, and he could see the man’s family, their tears and fingers pointing him out; he saw himself captured and cowering in a paralyzing courtroom or question room or sweat-locker, faced with interrogation, a deposition, a row of the stricken bereaved—no kids, *please* no kids—and what could he say? *Sorry about your son, your brother, your cousin, but I didn’t do anything wrong! He attacked me. He attacked me, get it?*

The dead man’s family would want blood, pay-back, some among them would want their balance in flesh. Closure, that was the term, everyone wanted closure, and who could blame them? And if Wayne’s luck was good and his act ruled a manslaughter, he’d still be locked up. Wouldn’t he be, shouldn’t he be?

He could lie. Create doubt. He was the only witness. They had him at the scene, but if the gun went missing, how could they stick him with the man’s

death? The blood. His blood was on the man’s shirt. Had to be. How much? A smear, a streak, or a drop? Any amount would ruin his lie. He was an awful liar.

He wanted to live by the truth, but only the *right* truth, the truth reinforced by a clear mind. He couldn’t surrender, not yet, not with his judgement withered by fear and confusion. He was weak, could break under force or trickery, could fall for a gentle voice. First he needed—he wanted!—a faultless recall, clear and chronological. Until that happened, he would hide, evade, run.

Run? Run where? With no wallet, no warm clothes, no security? He’d barely the strength to endure one hour of flight, and it was ludicrous to believe he could survive any time on the lam. He was Wayne Milton, palpitating night composer, not Wayne Milton, hard-bitten mercenary survivalist.

The toilet hissed loudly and started dribbling water into the bowl. The dribble evolved to a trickle and then achieved a babble, heavy streams twirling unabated. An aquatic *clunk* sounded from the tank and the water stopped. After a pause, the toilet started hissing anew. Wayne eyed the pistol on the floor, toyed with the idea of wiping it down and dropping it into the toilet tank.

Brainless. Ditching the gun wouldn’t help him, not with other evidence sticking him to the dead man. But holding on to it, keeping it close—it was agonizing. Touching the weapon chilled him, and its

intimate presence decayed his remaining measure of wit. He hated the weapon. He hated its disinterest. The machine had created evil from good, and he would pay for its alchemy.



“No cars in the lot, that’s good,” Melvin said. “Don’t see no customers either. Fuckin’ steam on the windows and the stupid donut posters, it’s hard to tell for sure—hah, I can just make out Pappy’s head, looks like he’s sleeping. No, he’s moving. Betcha he’s rubbin’ it up. Place’s gotta be empty if he’s doing that. Ya see?”

They were still a few dozen yards away from the Dandi Donuts, and Jimmy’s vision was poor compared to Melvin’s. Though Jimmy could easily see the empty lot, he couldn’t make out much past the shop’s windows. “Not really.”

“No problem,” Melvin said. “I got eyes for the both of us.”

They closed on the Dandi Donuts, avoiding the glow of its front floodlights. Melvin pointed out and then crept toward a black-shadowed pair of trash bins along the building’s left side. Jimmy puckered up and followed him into the rancid cranny formed by these trash bins and the donut shop’s pebble-spangled wall.

After they settled their backs to the wall, Melvin gave Jimmy a conspirator’s squint. He tapped his

finger to his lips and said, “Now we gotta keep it down. If you wanna talk, talk low.”

Jimmy nodded. Then he lifted his eyes over the trash bin’s slimy rim and scanned the facing street, a queasy tickle running through his gut. This wasn’t the busiest of avenues, even less so this late, but Jimmy thought revenging Pappy at his workplace might be unwise. The city slept but cops were forever awake, roving the grid and craving pastry.

Maybe, unlikely, pleadingly, Melvin was here to talk and not here to maim. But then why the hiding? And why Melvin’s weighty duffel bag? Jimmy looked up but saw no lucky stars. He sank down, the donut shop’s pebbled wall scratching his spine. Though fully concealed by dumpsters and darkness, he felt as incognito as a bugle-blowing rodeo clown. He pushed harder against the wall and discovered that grinding his back on the stones was like using one of those handheld shiatsu machines. Ooh, it felt good. The rugged surface dug into Jimmy’s muscles, it dug so nice, and he closed his eyes and took a deep, soothing, repulsively flavorful breath that made him visualize mutant creatures both human and animal splattering urine along this very same wall. He stopped grinding and spat out the taste.

Beside him Melvin was balanced on haunches, his respiration slow and controlled. When Jimmy ventured a questioning look, Melvin smiled and patted him on the shoulder. Then Melvin unslung the Marl-

boro duffel and gently lowered it to the ground, the shifting load almost toppling his crouch. He drew a hand over the bag's top, feeling the object within.

Jimmy watched Melvin's hand trace lines of an unwholesome nature. "Melvin, man, what's in the bag?"

From deep inside Melvin's eyes, a juicy twinkle. "One crazy-ass surprise."

This juicy twinkle boosted Jimmy's fears. "Not," he said, "not something from Dagget's cabinet, is it?"

Melvin's smile confirmed the fears. "Plan D."

Plan D. *D* being *Dagget*. *Dagget*, of course, being the no-account piker who Melvin's mom had cozied to and married after dumping Pappy, the lady choosing another royal jackass to further demonstrate her love of abuse. Melvin had no claim or place in this ugly union, because *Dagget* ("don't call *me* no flippin' stepdad") had his own monster kids, and he'd made it known that his flippin' house was his flippin' castle, and guess who was the flippin' king? So Melvin saw his mother on visiting hours only. Occasionally Jimmy came along to share Melvin's headache, what fun! Melvin's mother was always worth a laugh, anyhow her moo-cow implants were, but *Dagget* wasn't ever to be seen without one or both hands down his pants, front or back or double-duty, pickin' and strummin' his filth like a banjo.

Melvin despised *Dagget*, Melvin craved *Dagget*'s downfall. And woe be to *Dagget*, for he possessed

in his castle something treasured and destroyable: a pride-and-joy gun cabinet. Eight feet tall and near as wide, the oaken monstrosity dominated *Dagget*'s "hobby room," towering over scattered coins, three rotten ping-pong paddles, and a broken tackle box. Behind the cabinet's fortified glass, an armory of fancy noisemakers heckled and shone.

For security, *Dagget* had tinkered up a jumbled podge of bar locks, combi locks, cable locks, U-locks, a motion sensor or two. *Dagget* wasn't the trusting type, not even of his own kin—and of his stepkin or that stepkin's pals, ha! Hanging from a heavyweight chain was a placard on a hook, displaying a warning for Melvin, Jimmy, and *Dagget*'s own little goblins: "aLL bRat'S!" it said in randomly capitalized block letters, "KeeP oUt!—DAG."

If Plan *D* meant *Dagget*, Plan *P* must mean Pappy. Obvious, fine, but Jimmy could be excused for being a little slow when stressed. And stressed he was. Very. Plan *P*. Plan *D*. Dee-Pee.

"Whatever's in there," he said, pointing to Melvin's duffel, "y-you ain't gonna *use* it, are you? This Plan *P*, it's not...n-not...it's not shooting, right?"

Melvin exhaled crossly. "Yeah, Jimmy, I'm gonna shoot my father. What you think this is, fuckin' *Star Wars*?"

"Oh." Jimmy scowled and focused on his surroundings. Reeking bins of goo-slopped steel, muddy puddles thick with things not mud, piss-painted wall

at his back. Then his gaze returned to his friend, who was now standing boldly and scheming deeply, a fist on each hip and that special look simmering his face. When Melvin squatted back down, drove this look at Jimmy, and motioned him close, Jimmy had to fight a swoon that nearly knocked him to a fetal position. Next to the imminent reckoning, nesting in a wet belly of trash was comfort itself.

Melvin visualized the operation in silent concentration. All those hours playing solo Risk had rewarded him with a truly spiced mind—he knew about logistics, he was overstuffed with tacticality, he was the jut-jawed iron-clad field general. He brought his lips close to Jimmy’s ear and revealed Plan P.

Jimmy responded not with respect but with a cowardly sob. Typical. “We’re gonna rob him, Melvin? What for?”

“Because he’s a shithead, Jimmy!” Melvin began yelling but quickly dropped to a stormy whisper. “Your momma run you down day-in day-out for nothin’ but kicks? She smack you up? No she doesn’t and *no* she don’t. But Pappy does t’ me, and I’m gonna clear that old man’s till, that’s what I’m gonna do.”

Jimmy had no faith. “But he might have a gun, Melvin, or the police might come, what then?”

“I know Pappy don’t have no gun. Cops, we wait until one passes. Then we go in and do it fast. Jimsy, I’ve worked it all out. Last two nights I’ve been staking the place. You gotta trust.”

“But why you rushin’ it now, w-why we doing this now—”

“Cuz tonight’s too cold for the wanderin’ drunks, and we gotta do this while Pappy’s alone in the shop. Three-thirty, quarter a’ four, Chow comes in to help make the donuts.” Melvin took a balled-up plastic bag from his pocket and pulled it open. *SHOP TOBY-MART*, the bag announced over a drawing of a toothy smile, *Where A Grin Is Always In Store!*

As part of the groundwork for Plan P, Melvin had poked two holes in this plastic bag, brilliantly approximating the position of the eyes relative to the rest of the head. He nodded sagely and presented the disguise to his pansy lieutenant. “Now you’ll want the specifics.” A downbeat. “I’ll tell you the specifics.”

It was time for Skinny Jimmy to earn his stripes.

Jimmy listened with increasing unhappiness as Melvin laid out the “specifics” and “stratagems” of Plan P, talking like martial drumbeats carried his words.

“Know this, Jimmy, I’m counting on you. Remember what I said. At my signal, you go in and get

some donuts. Next, the diversionary phase. Make a scene, call the donuts crusty or rotten—or better, say they’re fuckin’ *broken*, say it in a funny accent, that’ll really rile him...”

Jimmy looked at the white plastic Toby-Mart bag in Melvin’s hand. “Melvin, why’d I got to wear that bag on my head? Like, I mean, it’s plastic—”

Melvin’s face puckered alarmingly as he totally misunderstood Jimmy’s concerns.

“Why?” he hissed, his voice hushed but momentous. “I tell you why, Jimmy, ’cuz Plan P’s shot to shit if Pappy sees your face or my face! And I won’t allow that, I will *not!* I wanna make that old man cry, make him scared. I wanna see him come home all pop-eyed and freaky, and he’ll be crying to me, crying for sympathy, *got robbed, Melvin, coulda died*, and I’ll be smiling there knowin’ I broke him down, I played him completely—and he won’t even know he’s crying to the guy who engineered the payback!

“*That, Jimmy, that is the power of Plan P! And for Plan P to go forth and fuckin’ prosper, you need to hide your punky mug!*” To emphasize his point, Melvin jammed the plastic bag over Jimmy’s head and pulled it taut.

“I unnashand zhat,” Jimmy slurred through the bag, “but I can’t breef—” Then the grinning Toby-Mart logo got sucked into his mouth, cutting off his air, his words, his thoughts. In a panic, he swarmed his hands along the bag and poked himself

a vent. After several deep breaths, the dizziness—and his stomach acid—retracted to low tide. He began adjusting the plastic mask, tugging it left and right, trying fruitlessly to get his eyes lined up with the screwy eyeholes. What, was he a bird or a fish?

“What about za cam’ra?” he asked Melvin. “Zhere a cam’ra?” The airhole kept buzzing when he spoke. Tickled his lips.

“Don’t work right,” Melvin said, shaking his head. “Pappy’s always pissed about it.” He pointed to the corner of the front trash bin. “Now take position and be ready for my signal.” Jimmy didn’t move and Melvin pointed again. “Hit it!”

Jimmy shrank from his friend’s scorn and duck-walked to the far edge of the front bin, a single step from being out in the open. Then he settled to his knees and looked to Melvin with quavering but unwavering attention, waiting for Melvin’s signal in whatever form it might take. The Toby-Mart bag’s animal eyeholes half-blinded him and his view was straight ahead only, no angles visible. So all he could see was Melvin and Melvin alone. Yay.

After several minutes and no signal, both of Jimmy’s calves decided to fall asleep. He curled over to rub the muscles and get some blood moving in there. Scratch and squeeze, pound and knead, when he looked up he saw Melvin flinging about his arms and glowering. Whelp, there’s the signal, guess a cop drove by. How this prevented the cop from driving

by again, only Melvin knew. Jimmy waved a hand in resignation and recognition. Misery and hopelessness, roger that. Dire warnings buffaloeed through his brain, but he dodged them and tried to shove some iron up his spine.

It wasn't *that* bad, right? He wasn't supposed to hurt Pappy or do anything savage. His assigned task was to get some donuts and bitch about them being crusty or broken. With a plastic sack on his head. Melvin was the heavy here. Actually, Jimmy had privately decided not to "make a scene" about the donuts, even if they actually were broken or crusty. If Melvin needed a "diversionary phase," he totally knew better than to get it from Jimmy. Outsize behavior wasn't an element of the Jimmy personality.

With legs wobbly but obedient, he crept from concealment, turned the corner, and tottered along the front walkway of the Dandi Donuts. Nearing the door, he entered a mist of light billowing from the shop's tall steamy windows. The plastic around his head absorbed the brightness, the inner surface illuminating like a crinkled crystal ball. Jimmy hadn't been able to see much before, and could see even less now. But he knew he'd reached the shop's protruding entranceway when his forehead knocked into it.

His fingers found the edge of the door and then its handle. These fingers were shaky and wet and worsening, but he gripped the handle and tried

pulling open the door with graceful smoothness. Didn't work—the hinges shrieked each inch like a heavy-metal canary. He abandoned finesse and yanked hard, the door swinging wide with a miserable cry.

Mumble-minded, he stepped inside the Dandi Donuts, sweaty fingers slipping off the moistened handle. With a screech and a slam, the door banged shut behind him. He had entered the arena, and luck alone would carry him through. He fixed his eyeholes as best he could and approached the register.

Shit, Pappy's gonna recognize us right off. Maybe not me with this bag on, but he'll spot Melvin no matter what, Melvin's his own kid! This can't work. Tch, concentrate. Donuts. Gotta get donuts. Wonder how many. Two? Three? What kind? I dunno. Glazed. Yeah, keep it simple. Two glazed, nothing suspicious about that.

Behind the register hunkered Melvin's father, his caboose warping a milk crate. He heaved to his feet, placed his stubby hands on the countertop, and leaned forward with a grimace.

Hello, Pappy.

The old man tore into a coughing fit. Jimmy stood, uncertain and woozy, shifting his weight as Pappy quaked. Then Pappy settled down, wiped his mouth, and trained a squinty, red-balled gaze on Jimmy, just *staring* at him. After several long seconds Pappy lifted this gaze above Jimmy's head, to some-

thing Jimmy couldn't see through his plastic bag's animal eyeholes.

Might be that camera, the one Melvin said was broken, but Jimmy didn't know. He did know that his head was sweating relentlessly in this plastic bag, sweating like a big pig in a little greenhouse on a sun-baked desert plain, *that's* what he knew, and he didn't give a shit if pigs couldn't sweat, because that's how bad his head was sweating.

"Um, two glazz'd donutz?" he said, the airhole buzzing. As an afterthought he added, "Pleez?" If he was going to do bad things, at least he could try and do them politely.



GUS HAD SPENT A GOOD PART OF THE LAST EIGHTEEN YEARS denying his place in society. This donut-crumb life was a cruel fate for a man who had, in younger days, strutted some serious authority. He'd been a yard guard, Big Bull Gus, back when the trains meant something, back when *he* meant something—thick black boots, cold black stick, hot white spot of explosive candlepower!

But *oh* how a man could drop. Look who yanked him now. Pissy commuters, tip-shy students, church matrons built like midget wrestlers, grifty draggle-faced insomniacs. Gus took orders from everyone's monkey, almost two decades of taking orders. He used to *give* the orders thank-you-very-much. Eighteen years of Dandi-capping gave a man nothing, showed him squat besides a filthy busted window on humanity. *Humanity* as the pretty way to say *all the fuckers draggin' on me*. Just like bad gas, these draggin' fuckers, bad neverending gas that wouldn't quit for all the farts in China. Day and night, night and day, no escape and no exit, bad gas bubbling in sunshine and moonshine, in rainstorms and snowstorms, with dumb old Gus cuffed to the register sixty hours weekly, counting all the extra shifts he pulled.

Bad gas fuckers! Bitch-bitch-bitchin' about their favorite donut being sold out, stale, "broken," or just plain shitty. Wanting funny coffee flavors like Vanilla Peanut. Sitting at the counter and never shutting up about the CIA, NSA, WTO, Freemasons, the Alien Infiltration, the Holy See. Yakkety-yak, conspiracies were goddamn currency in America, but the Galactic Panzerkardinal wasn't about to send black-zirconium choppers over the U. S. of A anytime soon, so stuff your trap and let Gus nap, asshole. Clear enough the Jews had control and everything else was disinformation.

Pissfaced and old, pissfaced and young, all types would come to itch his bung. The kids, hell, some of the kids were alright, but who'd peg a hope on the others, the boozin'-in-the-park punks, the glassy-eyed buzzcuts in hooded sweats, barking and strutting like every floor's a rassel-ring. Weekend after weekend they piled in tough and hard, spouting this jumble of surfer-talk, macho grunts, and rapper jive:

"Yo, you got fuckin' dunked by that stone bitch up the club. You can't choke that, you gotta certify, know I'm saying?"

"Fuzzy booger, the word! Cathy was mazack, off the hinge and up the cooler, what up with that shazam shit?"

"Gee-Izzo, chip out an' fuck that loco-hoko, I tellin' you. She ain't worth your pumpernickel, trudy be."

"Word again. Word be true. Slap me some, my nigs."

Gus was pretty sure the real nigs found it a hoot, these kinky scrubs talking like them, aping their rapper videos, spilling good money on their booga-booga elephant clothes. Not that *Gus* found it a hoot. His own kid was scrubby as anyone, tramping 'round the house wearing these giant dumb headphones like a coconut split in two, head pumping and fingers stabbing the air like some jit-brained darkie mime. Child gone slow, wanted to drop a level? Wanted to piss off ol' dad? Guilty both counts.

Gus didn't hate the Afros, not one-to-one personal, but hey, if he woke up on Christmas to find all of 'em gone, then shit yeah, Virginia, he *would* believe in Santa Claus. Gus had the charts, and numbers don't lie: bush-league brainpower by and large, exceptions allowed, exceptions proving the rule. As for blacks running things, there's a dirty joke! Look what they done to his town—birthplace of liberty, right! You want nigger liberty, try Liberia, all the chance in the world and can't do shit. The *White Voice* had taught Gus plenty about Liberia, and damn relevant it was: you get generous and give those people a whole country to be free, and see what happens? They muck it up, board a boat, come back crying refugee.

Melvin didn't get it. "But Pappy," he'd whine, "black people built up half the country and with no respect from anybody and now they just wanna get along like everyone else!"

But Melvin didn't work the night register and he'd never had a nigger's gun in his face and by what fucking right did he deserve an opinion on anything? Age seventeen and holding forth like a social scientist. Six years back Gus got robbed and Melvin listened then, he had respect, but now he came on like fuckin' PBS: "But Pappy, ain't no sense to hate the black guy at the gas station or the black guy runnin' American Express or the black guy sellin' pretzels or the black mayor all because a hunderp'cent different

black guy robbed you." Christ. Least he didn't run with the blacks, none that Gus ever seen—kid was all the time chumming with that mute scrawnybones, Jimmy so-so, Jimmy Fucknut.

Doctor Melvin Ph.D., teach me about the world, couldja please? One time Gus was serving up the real deal on Sacagawea—a hardy squaw, no disrespect, but hardly worth coinage—and Melvin backtalked to say he liked the coin and liked the girl, and now it was time to "show York some love." Who?

Knowing the truth of things didn't make Gus a troglobite. He thought lesbians were fantastic, didn't he? Even black lezzies. And that made him modern enough. What's more, he had a secret foxy smile, yes he did, a secret smile he saved for his specific favorite lezzies, these wild wreckerball girls with fat-assed jammies who'd stomp in every few weeks for a dozen donuts and a few long, long (long!) crullers. These girls always got—and Gus knew they enjoyed—his secret foxy smile.

He was one of those people with a visual gift, a technicolor brain—and didn't it come in handy! He'd close his eyes and construct sopping extravaganzas, mentally beholding his nub-hunting lovelies squishing jelly donuts between their sweet thighs and taking ravenous turns licking off the filling. Then it was time for the strap-on, of course. Gus loved the idea, the mission, the mechanics of this lucky device. The strap-on of his mind was sizzling pink, leather-

harnessed, stuffed with batteries to make it hum and sing. Sometimes it was four-ended like a tire iron for quadroleptic capacity. Sometimes his face, miniaturized and thirsty, became a voodoo knob on the happy prong.

In his dreams, what these sluts would do! They'd pile into big juicy groups and perform unnatural acts. And co-starring every dream was the one good girl unsure about or uncomprehending of her real cuntillious nature, she was innocent and shy and repressed in her plaid skirt and scrunchy white socks, but then the bad bad devil girls rubbed her up real good and suddenly she became the rudest fister in the whole horny clique, jamming her rosary beads like Oriental sex toys. Onward Christian hussies!

Visionary stuff, and imagine his life if he'd known the right people. Gus the Director! Gus the Mogul! Not Gus the Porno Cashier, crankin' mental orgies to hurry the nights. Shit else to do. Unstacking and restacking the styrofoam cups didn't satisfy, origami napkins weren't any fun pastime, over eighteen aching years he'd invented a thousand diversions but none of 'em compared to fantasy pussy, a river of constant and comforting invention. He did keep a small television behind the counter, but it barely got air channels, and after midnight the programming was Million Dollar Mush like "Ordinary People" or "Beaches" or some twat selling an electronic ab-crunching machine that zapped the gut and made it

hard. Gus wouldn't mind belting it to his crotch and seeing what happened.

Tonight he was tired, tonight he was sad, tonight he was aching for sexy relief. Especially 'cause he was pulling a dipshit double shift and it wasn't even three hours into that seventeen-hour slate. But he felt so worn through, so low already on this damn sorry excuse, and he needed his girls, needed his fantasias, just for merciful persistence.

Shop wasn't empty, though. A dumbfuck kid was at the counter and that made it hard to play. Before Dumbfuck came in, Gus had been working on a nap, lining up a cast, trying to kickstart his horny cortex. Then Dumbfuck entered the shop and flopped down at the way end of the counter, and by the time Gus peeled up his eyes and clumped over there, he'd found the punk keeled to the countertop, down pat like *that*. Asshole—only Gus was cleared to sleep in here. After rousing Dumbfuck and fixing him a cup of tea, Gus had returned to his milk-crate seat.

Milk crate, such dignity. No real chairs allowed at the register, or Gus would drag a La-Z-Boy back here. Boss Song didn't give a fuck about employee morale, they never heard the term where he came from. Gus reached between his legs to adjust the pillow that defended his butt from diamond corrugation. Then he shut his eyes and tried to rest, but before too long the DandiChino tank began whipping and scraping and flashing its service indicator.

He got up, unplugged the jalopy, and sat back down. He clicked on the TV, heard the theme to “Love Story,” clicked it off. Again he tried for naptime. Nap, horsey, nap!

No good. Wasn’t happening. He glanced down the counter and saw Dumbfuck’s cup of tea sitting by its lonesome. Dumbfuck was off in the bathroom, seemed like. Gus hadn’t cared to scope him. Young and (surprise) fucked-up, that’s all Gus had registered, s’all he cared to know. Fucked-up enough to jack in the bathroom? Some shifts were a goddamn parade of jam-handed jackers pasting his toilet. He’d give the kid fifteen minutes in there. Then he was ass-out.

Gus sat down, scratched himself, watched the wall clock. 2:43 a.m., about an hour ’til morning Chow. Chow-boy always showed between three-thirty and four, and together they’d fry up a mountain of donuts to stock the racks. After that, Chow usually took up the counter so Gus could go home. Not today, though—today was a Tuesday, and on Tuesday and Thursday mornings Chow would hang up his apron by eight and pedal off to the community college, leaving behind a grim and exhausted Gus to mind the shop until the boy’s evening return. There’s the burn, Gus being yoked into double shifts to further Chow’s education. *Somebody* was going places.

Gus tipped back his head and balanced it on an empty donut rack. No sleep, no furlough, no tail

tonight. A few minutes later he heard the front door strain open and slam shut, and he lifted his lids to see a nimrod with a plastic bag on his head. Standing in the entrance, clownish sneakers paused on the Dandi Donuts welcome mat, the nimrod fluttered his hands and tottered in place, saliva-wet plastic sucking into his every breath. Then he pulled at his eyeholes and tottered in place some more.

What the fuck kind of thug was this? So what he didn’t *look* dangerous, looks meant squat. Here he comes, approaching the register in a dicey shuffle. Gus stood up and stared at him, then raised this stare to the shop’s ceiling-mounted security camera. Look up, nimrod. Look up and see the camera blinking its little red light. Don’t somehow figure out that’s all it does, blink a goddamn light. Video feed crapped out months ago.

Going on eight years since Boss Song installed the camera. A lemon through and through—even fresh from the box, the image quality had been dirt. Now it was snow. Not an improvement. Boss Song kept promising a new system, soon, very soon, very “top-of-line technology,” but Gus knew not to trust the prick. Everything he said was code for “Shut up fat man, you’re lucky I don’t fire you and hire one of my three hundred cousins for half your white-slave wage.” Boss Song owned four other Dandi Donuts, all suburban higher-volume, making Gus the fifth wheel manning the fifth wheel. Song was a tricky

yellow skinflint, but no stooge when it came to capital allocation.

The nimrod spoke, his voice a pansy wobble buzzing through the plastic bag: “Two glazz’d donutz, pleez?”

Gus was on high alert. Maybe this guy wasn’t strung out, maybe he had monkeypox or flesh-eating disease or something equally nasty. “Two glazed. To go?” Take it and leave.

“Uh, zhure,” said the nimrod.

Gus filled the order and dropped it on the countertop.

“Thank yuz.”

Polite fuckin’ nimrod, Gus thought. “That’ll be a buck-seven—” he began, his hand going to the register, but right then a second faceless fool swept through the door and charged straight at him. Concealing *this* asshole’s head was a dog-tired duffel bag done up in Marlboro logos. One eye, a dark swirling octopus eye, winked from a small stringy hole in the duffel’s fabric. And what, what—this wooly shit wouldn’t stop—*what* was this Marlboro Man hoisting up like a pig-nosed lance?

Was that a *blunderbuss*? A huge fancy John Paul Davy Jones flintlock blunderbuss from the Iron Age? Looked exactly that. Gus stared in fear and disbelief. Shiver his fucking timbers.

Commotion in the donut shop. A stream of noise loud enough to breach the bathroom’s closed door. Raised voices. Police? Had he been found? Wayne went to the door and pressed his ear to it—no, not police, wrong cadence, wrong message. Threats of pain and death. A fight? A robbery?

Robbery. On the floor lay the silver pistol, its crooked figure becoming the axis of the room. No. Bad idea. Don’t think about being a savior. Don’t think about redemption.

Wayne bent down, grabbed the pistol, straightened up. He slipped the gun into his pocket and considered his next move. Hadn’t there been a small corridor dividing the restrooms from the main part of the donut shop? Teeth clenched and throat tight, he cracked open the bathroom door and peered through the gap. Yes—outside the bathroom was a short narrow hallway, set off from the seating area. Wayne opened the door wider. A relief, it didn’t creak or squeal. He slunk into the hallway and eased the door shut behind him, carefully releasing the knob to prevent a telltale click. This hallway was like an alcove: the angle of its corner allowed him to nudge past and spy on the rest of the shop. The further out he stuck his head, the more he would see—and, of course, the more he’d risk being seen.

He gave a gingerly peep which revealed half the main room, including the spot where he’d been sitting. His cup of tea was resting on the counter, full



but for the few sips he'd taken. From the cup's rim dangled the string and tab of the sunken tea bag, the tab barely shifting to the slow cycles of the ceiling fan.

Be bold! Wayne leaned out a few more inches. Now he could see the whole room, he could see the situation.

At the far corner stood a skinny guy with a plastic bag over his head. Looked like a Toby-Mart bag? The guy's shoulders were bunched up, his hands tugging at themselves. Though jittery and strange, he was immensely less disturbing than the room's other newcomer, a burly, heavyset man whose head was wrapped in a Marlboro duffel bag.

This duffel-head was up at the register and dominating it, pinning the old cashier with a great sausage of a gun, a bloated trunk of wood and iron and gold. Curses and commands blasted out from the mask, the voice brutish and distorted—and even with the duffel tucking down the volume, a radiant fury made each word roar: “You heard me, shitcase! Scoot yer ass to the safe and pony up the goods! Fast, cockface, fast!”



Fucking hell. Robbed by pissants. Gus reflexively glanced at his tip jar, counted three rusty pennies, and pitied himself for owning a life cheaper than a nickel. Jaw shaking and eyes low, he said to Marlboro Man, “Look, th-the thing’s a drop safe. Only

the owner got the key. D’I look—d’I look like the owner, y’see me looking like an owner?”

Marlboro Man smacked his blunderbuss against the counter like a lunatic judge whacking a mighty gavel. “Ah, ah—fine! Then, then pop that mother-fuckin’ drawer!”

The second this shit was over, Boss Song was gonna get a phone call. Screw the late hour, Gus was gonna rag him good. Where was his new fancy security system? Where was his panic button? What the fuck was Gus but cannon fodder for the ugly tunnel rat, doing his scutwork so the prick could lease another Benz and floor it up the on-ramp of Gus’s sore ass?

Gus mashed the button and the cash drawer scooted out—then he looked up from the register and found himself staring straight into the flaring barrel of the blunderbuss. Marlboro Man was jamming the weapon right at his face—to intimidate, sure, but the barrel happened to be tilted a few degrees upward, enough for its insides to collect a very illuminating gleam from the ceiling lights.

And there were many, many ceiling lights. Boss Song believed some juju about the darkness being wild, about the darkness inviting devils, and he kept his Dandi Donuts stores supremely lit by a billion fluorescent tubes that could altogether blind God, or at least give Him a splitting headache. And with these lights so bright and the gun’s muzzle so wide,

Gus could see down the barrel's polished inners all the way to the firing chamber.

And what he saw, deep within the metal pipe, was not powder or lead or nails or anything that'd be the usual charge for such a weapon. What he saw was air. Only.

Gus drew his head a few inches back and edged a lateral gaze to the gun's flintlock.

Which held no flint.

Which wasn't even cocked.

Marlboro Man kept screaming, vowing to liquefy Gus's head and shit down his whistling trachea. Christ alive, but there was something funny about his voice. Sounded like he was working to rough it up, pump it into some drill-sergeant bellow, and his fabric helmet muted and baffled the tone—but Gus could swear there was *something* familiar there. Too familiar...nah, it couldn't be. Just damn well couldn't. What sense would that make?

Now Marlboro Man was kicking the display case under the register, the toes of his sneaker bouncing off the tempered pane without leaving a mark. The lumpy brownies piled inside were harder than this dickless retard. And the retard's plastic-brained pal was shirking in the background, looking set to wet himself.

There might be two of them, but they were both about to learn that Gus was nobody's pushover. He straightened up and fixed an eye to Marlboro Man.

“C'mon, faggot,” he said, waving a hand before the open barrel of the blunderbuss. “Take a shot. Splatter this old man's brain all over the wall.”



Still undetected, still hiding in the hallway, Wayne prepared to do something. Exactly what, exactly how, he didn't know.

His hand slipped down and tugged the pistol from his pocket. The draw was too natural for comfort, and he kept his forefinger a distance from the trigger. Safety on or not, clip empty or not, Wayne didn't trust this weapon, or himself.

The pistol felt heavy in his grasp, uncannily so, forty or fifty ounces of steel that commanded a thousand psychosomatic pounds. Yet, profundity aside, its slender form was dwarfed by the duffel-head's brawny boomstick. Wayne sped through his mental dictionary, hoping for a clue to the danger, for a proper definition of his potential adversary's elaborate armament:

blunderbuss (n)—16th century handheld muzzle-loading cannon. Used by pirates (see scurvy) when they misplaced their rapiers. Uniquely-designed ballistics allows for varied ammunition beyond lead shot, anything from broken crockery to chicken bones. Precision accuracy impossible but unnecessary; wide spread obviates need for aiming. Made obsolete by the invention of the common rifle, a gun which misfired, in a comparatively superlative figure, only 60% of the time.

He could stay in the hallway, stay invisible. All this would pass. But what if it passed with the old cashier ending up bloody jelly? There could be no greater indictment than inaction. How could Wayne reclaim his morals if he cowered and shrunk, if he allowed more death? He saw the blunderbuss against the cashier's face, heard threats and vehemence and violence. He could stop this. He had a soul to save. Two souls to save.

"You fuckin' with me?" The duffel-head knocked the muzzle of his blunderbuss against the cashier's cheek. "Fuckin' with *this*?"


"Goddamn!" The cashier reached for the blunderbuss.

The duffel-head yanked back the weapon and the cashier's grasping fingers slipped off the barrel. The duffel-head retreated a pace and rebalanced his aim at the cashier's face.

Go! Wayne launched from the hallway, his pistol flashing in the room's white light. "Stop this," he said, and to his surprise the words boomed from his chest like angry oratory. "*Now.*"

The two robbers veered towards him. The cashier lurched sideways, his face gnarled and heated.

"Who'wa *fuck!*" yelled the duffel-head, his curse shining with the purity of surprise. He cantilevered his unwieldy firearm at Wayne. "Back y'self off or I'll spark your ass!"



Who was this nutbird! Jimmy tugged at his eyeholes to get a better glimpse. A ruined look on his face, a shiny thing in his hand. Shiny? Thing? Pointed this way? A...a pistol? A pistol! The luck of that, some guy popping up from nowhere, from the godforsaken shitter, and armed too! Jimmy almost dumped his bladder, it felt like a thousand feathery demons were tickling his squinty sphincter. A crazy-ass surprise, Melvin? Spot on, you're a fucking prophet. But who was getting the shock now, asshole? Who was gonna get punctured tonight, asshole? Us! Us!

As dizziness took him, enveloped him, Jimmy cast about for support and saw to his left a March of Dimes candy dispenser: a glass globe on skinny metal legs, gumballs piled inside, a picture of a smiling baby pasted to the front. He swayed towards the machine, threw his arms around it, squeezed for salvation.

Jimmy knew he was no intellectual powerball. Not that he was stupid, not biologically, but he could watch Jeopardy for weeks without any fear of ego-boost. Jeopardy Kids' Challenge was better—a little embarrassing to get creamed by ten-year-olds, but the questions were a lot more fun. Jimmy always liked state capitols and state birds. All said and done, whether smart or not or unsmart or not, he believed he had a bit of wisdom, a snack-pack of wisdom, a

doggie bag of wisdom. Enough to see that the sneaky unplanned elements could and would bite you in the ass. And this pistol-packing headjob was as unplanned as it got.

Desperation moled down Jimmy's gut and he tightened his grip on the candy dispenser. Gumballs rattled in the glass globe as his body shook and his knees buckled. *Won't you help us?* asked the smiling March of Dimes baby, its mouth huge against Jimmy's crinkled plastic eyehole. *Yes* he would help *yes* he'd buy a billion gumballs *yes* all his change now onto eternity would be gumball change just *please* let him survive, please smiling baby *please*.

Then the Toby-Mart bag twisted the wrong way, eyeholes vanishing and everything becoming a blurry white wash. Jimmy grappled one-handed with the plastic blindfold while keeping his other arm locked around the gumball globe. He felt the dispenser tilt dangerously off-center, he felt its thin legs strain beneath the weight of his struggling body. He had to fix this mask, free his eyes, he had to see what was going on!



Wayne stood before the blunderbuss, restraining his eyes from its cavernous barrel. His own weapon, his tiny pistol, was raised and pointed forward, his fingers like a mitten around its narrow grip. He wasn't touching the trigger, and the safety was on, and the

front sight was tilted a notch away from his duffel-headed opponent.

Wayne had hoped that the blunderbuss was a fake or too much of a relic to work; he'd hoped that his pistol would intimidate the duffel-head into surrendering. These hopes still lived but seemed stupidly academic now that the vintage cannon might blow a bowling ball at his face. His ears would be a ten-seven split. A tremor wracked his legs and he stumbled backwards but then caught himself—

“Some fuckin’ joke,” the old cashier declared, thrusting a finger at the blunderbuss. “Bitch ain’t put no charge innit. It can’t shoot shit.”

From behind the duffel, a muffled curse. The aim of the blunderbuss quivered and faltered.

“Huh.” Wayne’s teeth clamped together and he firmed his stance. He stepped closer, tipped up his pistol, waggled it for show. “That true? That true?”

The duffel-head dangled the blunderbuss and said nothing.

The cashier stared at Wayne, then at Wayne’s pistol, then at Wayne’s chest. He stared at Wayne as if really seeing him for the first time. And he didn’t appear overjoyed by what he saw.

What, Wayne thought, just what did he look like?

The wound on his chest had bled anew, not greatly, but enough to stain a fresh wet stripe into his turned-around t-shirt. The sides of his jeans were streaked from where he’d wiped his hands of the un-

conscious woman's blood. A strange rictus was on his face—he could feel it there but couldn't alter it—and whatever it imparted wasn't friendly.

A diplomatic tone entered the cashier's voice. "Yeah, guy, it's true. Thanks. Now if it's alright I'm gonna call th—"

With a shattering of glass and a bouncing of gumballs, the corner candy dispenser hit the floor and exploded. Collapsing atop the toppled ruin was the other robber, the smaller one wearing a plastic Toby-Mart bag. "Melzzin!" he squealed.

"Jimmy!" the duffel-head cried, whipping towards his fallen companion.

"Melvin," the cashier croaked. His focus left Wayne and shot straight to the duffel-head. "God-damn Melvin!"

Melvin's duffel was like a sauna on his skull, the dial cranked up to cuckoo. His body was quaking and he was blind now—when he'd snapped around at Jimmy's cry, the duffel had skewed and he'd lost sight of the ripped-through peephole. But even sightless, he knew that Plan P was over, he knew the jig was up. Jimmy was down, and their cover was blown, and the dude in front of him had a real gun, a bright scary pistol. Melvin knew he might die, he supposed he might not. The choice wasn't his to make.

Hot and frozen with his best friend bleeding on

the glass-covered floor, both of their futures in the deepest of doubt, Melvin wished he'd never devised Plan D or Plan P, wished for a rewind button, and most of all wished that he and Jimmy had spent the night lounging at Jimmy's house, safe and honest, crunching Old Bay potato chips and watching that stupid fucking show with the funny animal videos.

The burden of attention had left Wayne; he lowered his pistol and assessed the situation. The duffel-head's name was Melvin, and he and the old cashier seemed to know each other. They also seemed to despise, hate, and loathe each other with an intensity bordering on the homicidal.

Or familial. "You're so fucking stupid, kid," the cashier said, a tremendous scowl damaging his hairy face. "Godawful fucking stupid. Your slut mother put you up to this? Oh, if she did. Oh if she did I'm gonna—"

Melvin clamped the blunderbuss under his arm and tore off the Marlboro duffel to reveal features swollen, red, and young. "Fuck you, Pappy, fuck you! I hate you enough myself without any help from that bitch!"

"You better not go home!" the cashier—Pappy?—yelled. "You ever show yer face again, I'll kill you!" Then he turned to glower at Jimmy, he of the Toby-Mart headwrap, who had struggled to a sitting

position atop a strew of gumballs and broken glass. “And you, shithead! Next time I see you, you’re dog chow.”

Jimmy didn’t respond. His body was shaking and he was struggling to see, but his plastic mask interfered—the holes in the bag looked optimized for mouth and chin, or ear and nose, not eye and eye. He reached up and ripped the plastic off his head, sweat splashing in all directions. Wayne saw the kid’s face and immediately thought of Gumby.

“You gonna kill me, huh?” Melvin yelled at Pappy. “You ain’t got the right to kill nobody, not the stones either!”

Sidelined, ignored, Wayne stood watching from a few paces away. Melvin’s voice wasn’t rough and deep anymore, each outburst shedding a few more years, and his hollering collided with Pappy’s hollering to form a screamingly incoherent duet. Spit flew from Pappy’s lips and his arms swooped up and down. Melvin stamped his feet and puffed his chest, fingers frantic on the blunderbuss. Back and forth they went, louder and louder, curses raging and tempers overloading—then Pappy charged around the counter, his mouth in mid-howl and fist raised to strike.

Melvin fainted sideways, slipped on gumballs, tried to maintain balance. He failed resoundingly and tumbled past Wayne, ramming Wayne’s arm as he flew by. Unready for the hit, Wayne felt the impact rattle his wrist, he felt his grip jerk open—but reac-

tion came an instant too late, his fingers closing on air, the pistol already fumbled.

Melvin somersaulted to the floor, missing by inches a cruel spike of glass. He rolled with the blunderbuss tucked inside his body and jumped up snarling. But the snarl instantly died and his eyes went wide.

“All you, halt,” Pappy ordered.

Wayne’s arms slackened, his gun-hand empty and weightless. Quick, the cashier had been so quick, leaping for and swiping up the fumbled pistol, and now he was in charge, pointing the weapon at everyone. “Allya freeze,” he said, “allya fuckin’ freeze, I’m callin’ the goddamn cops. Nobody brings guns into my store. Not my own damn kid, and not you—” the pistol’s beady mouth flicked towards Wayne “—h’ever you are.”

The cops, coming here? No. Wayne wasn’t ready. He wasn’t prepared. It was his right to choose his confession, to choose when and how and why. He couldn’t be arrested, not like this, he couldn’t be dragged into the station like a felon! When his memory lost its chaos, when he’d prepared his story, he would walk in and speak with calm. Then they could manacle him, rake him with scorn—but he’d retain some dignity.

Judging from his steely expression, Pappy had found his own dignity behind the sights of a gun. He leveled the barrel at each of them in turn: first at

Wayne, then at Jimmy, then at Melvin. Wayne bent his vision at the pistol. Yes, the safety was on, Pappy hadn't figured to flip it off. But Wayne guessed he might—the old man held the gun with such confidence, it was only a matter of time before he thought to check it.

The gun was empty, it *was*. He was sure. He would bet his life on that half-remembered haze by the Ben Franklin Bridge. He should trust himself. He could turn around and walk out of this donut shop and nothing dangerous would happen. Pappy said *freeze!* having no idea the clip was em—

The *clip* was empty. The clip's job was to feed bullets into the pistol's firing chamber, one by one. Upon feeding its last bullet into the chamber, the clip would be empty even though the gun remained loaded for one final shot. Could that be the case now? Or before, with the dead man?

Wayne's memory churned, deranged and unreliable. When checking the clip, had he also checked the chamber? How was it done—you pulled back the top of the pistol, or pushed it forward, or cracked it open by a hinge? No, he couldn't say.

The threat of a loaded chamber hadn't seen until now, until the pistol was out of his hands, out of his control.

Pappy jabbed the pistol at Melvin, jabbed it twice. "Pop! Pop! Lesson for you, kid, how you like it? How's it feel? Will I, won't I? Howzit fuckin' feel?"

Melvin's face was ruled by dread and he was hugging his blunderbuss like a security blanket, a shield, a hopeless talisman. Watching him, Wayne felt rooted in place, unresolved, until he returned his attention to Pappy and saw the man slowly retreating, moving behind the counter, sneaking a glance to the telephone on the back wall. He was getting closer and closer to making that call, to calling the cops—

And the safety was still on—

Wayne lunged forward and slid over the counter's corner edge, upending the tip jar and sending a napkin dispenser airborne. His arms sprung out and struck past the gun's muzzle: his left hand grabbing and lifting Pappy's wrist, his right a fist against Pappy's face, hard, pain crackling from knuckles to palm to wrist. Pappy grunted, crumbled, thumped against the floor.

Wayne's right hand felt broken and he let it drop to his side. Melvin hustled over and looked down at Pappy, who was flat on his back, breathing softly, gut drooping sideways. Melvin knelt and poked him. No response. Melvin stood up and wandered over to the window, mumbling to himself. Staring at Pappy's placid bulk, Wayne was thankful that the old man had fallen behind the counter, an area free of the candy dispenser's shattered glass.

Ah—the pistol was missing, not lying beside Pappy or hooked in his fingers. It must've jumped

from his grip, but to where? Deeper behind the counter? Over it? Across the room?

There. In Jimmy's hand. Held up like a bunch of bananas. The kid looked at the gun, then at Wayne.

Wayne's mouth had gone dry. "Don't mess with that gun," he said. "It's ki—" He stopped. "It's shot someone tonight."

"No shit." Jimmy released the pistol as if it were electrified. It knocked against the floor, spinning, and Wayne impulsively ducked for cover. He shook off the fear and straightened up.

"You...you KO'ed Pappy," Melvin said to Wayne.

True, he had. Was this a good thing or a bad thing?

"Dude, you KO'ed Pappy!" Melvin chanted, pitch rising. "KO'ed Pappy! KO'ed Pappy!" Like a jubilee.

Fantastic. Wayne was so happy for him.

Jimmy tried to stand but got only halfway before cringing and sinking. "Ow, Melvin! I got glass in my shoes."

Wayne went and picked up the pistol. He knew he had to hurry out of here. People might come by any second—*police* might cruise by any second. But first this gun had to be dumped, and dumped well. Later he might regret it, this act that might seem to punctuate his guilt. Presently he had greater concerns. The gun was evil, and Wayne would not have any more of it. He couldn't leave it in the donut shop, and he couldn't throw it where it might be found. If found, it could be used. And when it was used,

whenever the day and wherever the place, Wayne's soul would know, though his mind might not.

Stepping over Pappy, he rounded the inside counter and saw a half-full trash can below the register. He popped the clip from the pistol and pocketed it, then dropped the pistol into the can. He grabbed several stale donuts off the pastry rack and tossed them in as well. Overtop this went a pile of napkins, some food-handling gloves, half a pot of hot water, and more donuts. Finally he whisked the bulging bag from the can and knotted it. Presumably there was a garbage bin out back; upon leaving he'd heave the bag into it. Nobody would find the gun buried in glop and thrown in a dumpster.

Melvin was watching him.

"Don't even *think* of it," Wayne said, resting the trash bag on the floor. "Gun's fucking marked, like I told you." Again, the harshness of his voice surprised him. Why couldn't he have used this rancor, this force, to talk to the man he'd shot? Why had he only managed to stammer and babble so pathetically? He didn't know what was happening to him.

Melvin shook his head. "Wasn't thinking nothing."

Wayne nodded and drew a new trash bag from a dispenser by the empty can. He lined the can and filled it with more donuts, more napkins, another slosh of hot water, jelly packs, a split carton of Dandi-Chino syrup. Now the trash can was again half-full, looking much as it had before he'd dumped the gun.

The cash drawer was sticking out of the register, open from when Pappy had sprung it. A hundred, maybe two, in the till. Though Wayne had no money, he couldn't take it. Shouldn't take it. He wasn't a thief. But some others were: Melvin noticed the aim of Wayne's gaze and asked, "Yo, could I get some of that?"

When had Wayne become alpha male? This was all very wrong. "Do what you want. I'm gone."

He left the Dandi Donuts, carrying the gun-bearing trash bag with him. Seeing two garbage bins parked beside the shop, he went and hefted the bag into the far bin, wincing at the spike of pain in his right hand. Then he stepped away from the bins and eyed the roof-line of the Dandi Donuts. He dug his left hand into his jeans pocket, took out the pistol clip, and lobbed it atop the building, where it clinked out of sight, out of reach.

He turned and meandered several paces down the street. The wind chafed him, gooseflesh rippled his arms, and under the cold gusts he bowed and buckled.

Teeth chattering, muscles clenching, he pulled up straight and wondered what to do with himself.

From behind, the screech of the donut shop's door opening, and then Melvin's voice. "Yo! You can't just split like that!"

Wayne spun to face him. More trouble, was it?

"You gotta take a few bucks too!"

He did? He *gotta*? Why? But before he could verbalize the question, Melvin answered it.

"You kicked Pappy's ass! Here!" Melvin bounded up and handed Wayne a wad of bills.

Wayne took the money and stuffed it into his pocket, habit choosing his right hand, pain nipping the fingers. He didn't think to reject the cash—principles be damned, it was better he get some than Melvin and Jimmy take it all. "Th-thanks," he said, unconscionably warmed by Melvin's offering.

"Yeah, hey." Melvin's voice was meek and crackling. "I-I didn't mean to do nothin' to you, point no pirate gun at you, stuff like that..."

Like hell, Wayne thought. But he said nothing.

A heavy pause ensued until Melvin said, "Yo, uh, you know your shirt's ripped across the back?"

Wayne knew. "Mm-hm."

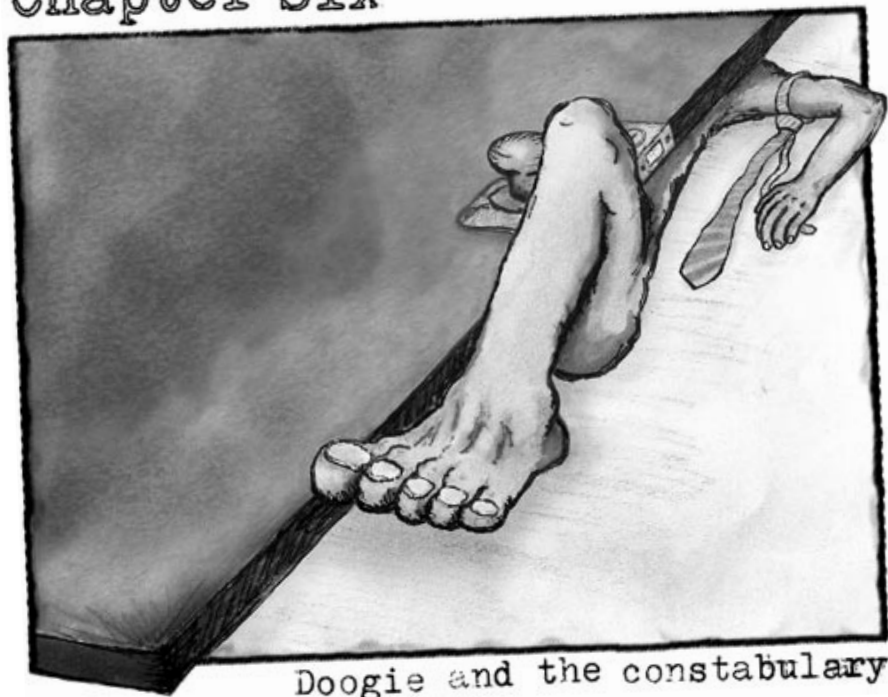
"—and those stains, is that fuckin' blood?"

"Mm-hm."

"Okay!" Melvin dashed back inside the Dandi Donuts.

Then Wayne ran from there, seeking the darkest alleys, keeping warm through the pumping of his muscles, which soon filled with acid. He rested against a wall, pulled the money from his pocket, and counted the bills, favoring his left hand throughout. Two twenties, two tens, two fives, five ones. Seventy-five dollars. How much time could he buy for seventy-five dollars?

Chapter Six



WHO WAS BANGING ON THE DOOR? NOT WAYNE ALREADY? Doogie didn't see how, 'twas still too soon for that, Wayne was on the Jiffy-shift for another hour minimum. Also besides as well, Wayne had keys and wouldn't need to bang. And what big bangs they were, too! Koko scared! Koko sad. Koko likes kittens. Koko likes gorilla dust.

Bang bang! A man's voice, crackling with power but not yet a holler: "Hey in there, open the door. Police."

Sirens, klaxons, and savage strobes cascaded through Doogie's head in a soggy sort of way. He gaped at the door and then pivoted this gape to Kevin, who squinted in response.

"Uh, Doog," Kevin said, "is the door talking?"

The voice, louder: "We can hear the music, we know someone's in there. C'mon now!"

With scary synchronicity, the cassette in the stereo began to warble and gurgle. The machine strained against the tangled ribbon, its rotors yammering in protest—*l'amore è nell'aria stasera, l'arrrrrrrrrr*—and then the old tape snapped in two, squelching the fussy hyperventilating of Italian trance-pop.

Bang bang! A garden of candles decorated the room, and with each pound on the door their candied blossoms shook.

"Kev, Kev," Doogie panted, flopping arms to embody his panic, "it's the fuzz I think!" A cooling wetness grew between his thighs. "The p'leece!"

"Naw, D-man, but you got no clothes on, you're cuckoo wi'out cuckoo-clothes!" Laughter carbonated Kevin's drawl, and he snorted and floated a finger to Doogie's crotch. "Red alert! Mighty Namor has spilted on your dickens!"

Bang bang! Now the voice outside the door sounded richly peeved: “We *know* Wayne Milton lives here. Open up!” More pounding. “This is the last time we ask nice!”

Kevin gestured to the door and fell over. “Why they wanna space invade, why they want Wayne?” he asked Doogie. “The man done wrong? The man been bad?” Goat noises burst from Kevin’s throat and convulsed the air. “Bad! Ba-a-ad! Bah-h-h-d!”

“What’s going on in there? You people listening? We urgently need to find Wayne Milton!”

Doogie cast the leaking bong off his lap and shook his head. Whipping cream and eggs a-scramble! If they needed to find Wayne, that meant he was lost! “Didja check *Jiff*? Check *Jiff*!”

Collapsed and drooling, Kevin cackled, “Crappy newspaper! Crappy newspaper! Crapping in newspaper! Like a bird!”

Murmurs, mumbles, silence. Then, a cranky bellow: “Whoever y’are, Milton or not, open this door or we’ll do it for ya!”

Doogie’s guardian angel smacked him upside the head. *Sober up, dipshit!* she advised. Doogie nodded; that was a good idea.

Between him and Kevin sat a coffee table, three scented votives burning atop it. The first candle smelled of chocolate, the second of cinnamon, and the third of vanilla—juxtaposed flavonoids as virtual s’mores, a happy camper’s delight!

Also on the table and guilty of greater redolence, funny little flora in a zip-lock bag. Top quality flora, first-rate flora, good organic American-made flora that was inexplicably anathema to certain stolid beholders. Was that *really* the cops out there? Doogie completely hoped not, but if true be the case, then it was holy-poly hallelujah that his heaping mercantile stash was stored elsewhere, off-site, leagues from home. The stuff in the bag was but a pinch of personal. Wayne, you daft smartie.

Bang bang! Come to think of it—pinch or heap, it was none too sharp to have buds sittin’ there all plain-sighted with the force at your door. Doogie lurched a hand towards the weedy zip-lock bag, snagged it, and jammed it into the waxen meat of the chocolate candle, which had been lit for the past hour and was receptively moist. But this didn’t conceal much of anything, so he upended the vanilla candle and squashed it overtop. Then he took this stoked-up sandwich and hurled it across the room. Into the kitchenette it flew, hitting a shelf and knocking off a pair of unclean—but not *dirty*—coffee mugs. The mugs fell to the floor and shattered with alarming volume.

Bang bang! “Stop your activity and open this door *now!*”

Smoke twiddled about the room, unconcerned, pleasant, swimming through the ether, collecting in the corners. Doogie trailed his eyes from cloud

to cloud. Brownian motion. Kevin intruded upon Doogie's particle physics. He was slapping the soft parts of Doogie's feet and pointing to the door, which was still under stress from the long (and loud) arm of the law.

"Doogie, man, that door's gonna go *down*," Kevin said, the muscles of his shoulders firm and strong. "You're so nude, I'll protect it for you!" He made for the door in a half-slither-half-crawl and Doogie marveled at the inconceivable, indisputable sight of his lover acting decisive and brave. And the IOC said it wasn't performance-enhancing, huh! For his part, Doogie felt the situation required a more nuanced approach, and he considered the coffee table in front of him. Defensive positions! He dropped below the table as a soldier would sandbags.

Bang bang! "Don't think we can't smell what's up in there!"

"Kev, stop, you're nude too!" Doogie wailed from his rampart, belatedly realizing that his champion was girded in nothing but a striped orange necktie knotted around the left bicep. Of course Doogie had been *enjoying* it, but he hadn't objectively *realized* it until now. "They're gonna knock the door on your dick, go get a robe'f you wanna be heroic!"

Kevin, inches from the door, observed the classy necktie dangling from his arm. He glided his fingertips over it, groaned, and flung himself ramrod straight. "Boner!"

Bang bang!

Doogie slammed his forehead to the table. "No question."

"Allsasudden I don't feel good," Kevin said, his voice plaintive. "My eyes're like seeing gray and fuzzy, I can't—"

A cry burst from outside the room, and—*slam!*—Kevin's nudeness got stomped by a metal door that until now had swung only laterally. The kinetic energy traveled the floorboards and buzzed Doogie's thighs.

"Gorf," Kevin gurgled from underneath his steel conqueror. Or something sounding like that. "Gorf, gorf, gorf."

Doogie was glad the door was hollow, because otherwise he'd need a spatula to get Kevin off his hardwood. But he wasn't glad of anything else. "It's like two-two-see in the morning, coppers!" he yelled, waving at the broken digital clock sunk in a tussle of shed clothing. "We ain't your domain, man, that door's like the Bill of Rights you just knocked down!"

Two policemen stood in the yawning frame, their radios gargling. One bent down and hauled the fallen door off Kevin. He pulled it out of the apartment and leaned it against the hallway wall. The other cop stepped into the den and scanned the tableau. He stroked his square jaw and looked back to his partner. "Chaz, what the fuck is this? Dispatch crackin' on us? You *sure* we got the right unit?"

Chaz lifted his cap and scratched his head. “Look, Rick, they said this was the address, okay? Wayne Milton, Conifer Arms, ’partment three-B.”

Rick smirked. “Apartment, huh? Maybe we should call this place a fucking suite?”

Chaz walked into the den and sniffed the fragrant air. “Mmm, it ain’t chicken that’s cookin’ in here.” He glanced at Kevin, trembling nude on the floor, and then to Doogie, nude behind a table. He cocked his hands on his hips. “Golly, please tell me one of you’s Mr. Milton, though I really doubt it.”

Doogie pursed his lips and tensed his cheeks. Wildebeests on patrol, wildebeests battle-ramming his den like Santa Anna at the ’Mo! With lamps low, blankets tossed, and candlelight playing, the room no doubt appeared some secret velveteen opium lounge. “Show me the warrant!” he demanded. “Can’t go breakin’ down doors witou’na warrant!” His voice kept tilting towards a dopey slur, the glaring cops generating a heavy pressure.

“We didn’t *want* to break down the door, did we?” Chaz said. “You boys gave us no choice. And this is an exigent situation, my man. Rapid action authorized.” A shrug. “Or so we were told.”

“D-Doogie, Doogie,” Kevin chanted, his body curled into a pink sphere, his gaze locked on the officers’ black boots. “What’s g-going on, Doogie?”

How to answer Kevin’s question, this meek, squeaky, superbly poised question? What *was* going

on? Wayne had some serious explaining to do, if he wasn’t shot or stabbed or worse. Doogie hoped not. He liked Wayne.

Rick and Chaz glanced at Kevin, then tilted their heads to Doogie in a garden-mammal fashion.

“Yeah,” Rick said, “what’s going on, Doogie?”

“Wayne, he lives here, no he does,” Doogie said coldly, “but you can see he’s right now basement. I mean absent.”

“Absent, huh.” Rick palmed the butt of his gun. “You happen to know where he is? You happen to know what he’s doing?”

“Yappenta yappenta—” Saliva ruined Doogie’s utterance, and he wiped his mouth and tried again. “Y’happen t’ have the decency to let us get dressed? How ’bout that?”

“We’d like that,” Chaz said. “Please proceed.”

Doogie grabbed his clothes and got himself together, then helped Kevin do the same. At close inspection Kevin didn’t appear injured, only bruised, which was lucky given the violence of that door-slam—but his composure was thoroughly shredded, and he gnawed on his knuckles with animal fixation.

“So where is he?” Rick asked Doogie.

“Work, he’s working now,” Doogie said, standing up straight and returning Rick’s stare. The room wobbled but he managed to steady himself. “Why you wanna know?”

Rick scowled and looked to Chaz. “Two-thirty in the morning,” Chaz said, “what work’s he doing?”

Doogie’s instinct was to keep mum, or lie. But the cops would find out eventually. No virtue being difficult on that score. “*Jiff*. The tabloid. Night production, what he does.”

“*Jiff*,” Chaz said. “And he’s supposed to get back when?”

“Three-thirty, quarter t’ four, uh, later if he’s real hungry.”

Chaz considered this and turned to Rick. “I’ll call in, see what they want us to do.”

“Hm, sure.” Rick looked around, his eyes pausing at every suspect nook. “You’re gonna tell ’em about—”

“Whasallis racket, bangin’ down doors!” A woman’s voice, angry but exhausted. “Uffer peep’l sinda buildin’ trinta sleep!”

Doogie, Kevin and the two officers turned to face the woman. She was standing in the building’s hallway, right outside the doorless doorframe. With puffy eyes she looked at the police, then at Doogie and Kevin.

“Whaya-du, whaya-du,” she said, squinting and bending forward, “break the gaw’dam law?” She crossed her arms and tugged at the sleeves of her checkered pajamas. Her hair was tangled sideways and her feet were swaddled in oversized Kermit the Frog slippers.

The sight of this green grinning footwear busted Kevin’s water main. “Ahh, the frog, the frog!” he wailed, spraying tears and spit. “Waa-aaa-aah!” Even battered and bruised, Kevin was still invincibly stoned, still on his fantastic voyage, although his former bravery had undergone a wholesale inversion.

Doogie considered slapping the boy, but instead knelt down, hugged his shoulders, and said, “Kev, it’s only Kermit.”

“I always liked Kermit,” Chaz said thoughtfully. He pointed to the woman’s feet. “Ma’am, where’d you get those? They’d be a good Halloween present for the wife.”

“Hawl’een? Hawl’een?” The woman craned her neck forward, vertebrae clacking like a vintage coaster.

Rick snickered. “Kerment,” he scoffed, “who gives a fuck about Kerment?”

“Kermit, you dick, Ker-*mit*,” Chaz said. “Sardonic detachment contradicted by a sense of responsibility. I can relate.”

“Chaz, you pussy,” Rick said, “it’s a fucking frog puppet.”

“Bite me, dropout.”

“G.E.D.!”

“Not exactly Everest.”

Rick bobbed a fist at his partner. “Bite *me*.”

The woman in the Kermit slippers turned and left.

Finished with soothing Kevin, Doogie stood up and said, “Tell me what’s going on, what’s happened to Wayne?”

“All in good time.” Chaz pulled his radio from his belt. “*Jiff*, you said? Let’s check it out.”

“I got a right to know why—”

“What!” Rick broke in, his face twisted. “What right you got? The information’s on a need-to-know basis!”

Chaz lowered the radio and grimaced at his partner. “Y’know what *you* need to know, Gitmo Ricky?”

Rick shook his head.

“When to can it.” Chaz’s grimace became a smile. Rick glowered but said nothing.

“Why do you want Wayne?” Doogie asked Chaz. “Just tell me *something*.”


“Not my place to tell, kid. You’ll find out soon.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“After we take you and your sniveling foo-foo to the station, I’m sure you’ll get all the lowdown you need.”

“You’re not taking me anywhere. I know my rights.”

“That you may,” Chaz said, appraising the aromatic room. He inhaled deeply, then held up his radio. “I’ve gotta call in now, see? If pushed, I can score enough warrants to make your life hell. Please be considerate.”



At the police station, Doogie was confined to a small gray concrete room. No fancy one-way mirror in this stale cube, the monotony reinforced by a bare metal table and two matching chairs. Doogie’s butt claimed one of these chairs, the one Officer Rick had kicked from under the table and dumped him on.

“Sit tight, sweetums,” the cop had said before leaving and locking the door behind him.

Locked in! Bolted in! Doogie was imprisoned! For what? All he’d been doing was enjoying life’s bounty in the privacy of his own (albeit, rented) home. He and his fellow man, absorbing natural goodness and engaging in acts that solons of antiquity advocated as a daily indulgence, acts that certain United States congressmen equated with dog-fucking and insatiable thievery.

Prognosis, livid. Fate, clouded. Confusion, absolute. But this wasn’t the time for egotism: this was Wayne’s mess, it was Wayne the cops had been looking for, Wayne was the object of desire. Doogie was only a bit player in this production. Whatever was Wayne’s story, then? What had befallen him, or what had he gone and done? Wayne acting stupid, Doogie could imagine. Wayne acting foolish, Doogie could see. But Wayne acting wicked or larcenous? Wayne doing evil?

Doogie accepted that human possibility was all-inclusive, but if Wayne were borderline desperate or delinquent, Doogie would've noticed somewhere along the line. Therefore he was left to assume that trouble had come to meet Wayne, and Wayne's response to this trouble had landed him on the cops' wanted list, and a chain-reaction from this response had landed Doogie into the interrogation chamber—which is where he now sat with his balls sucked into his throat, waiting for some official type to pop in and shine some light, or snuff it altogether.

Outside the windowless door, scrabbling feet ran along the plastic-tiled hallway: *scritta scratta scritta scratta*. Back and forth went these feet, a chatter of light speedy steps. *Scritta scratta scritta scratta. Scritta scratta scritta scratta. Scritta scratta scritta scratta*. Criss-cross, criss-cross, again and again. Who? Why? Doogie didn't like it.

Scritta scratta scritta scratta. What if the cops uncovered his extensive pot peddling? What if they cracked his Puffet PDA or pumped Kevin for information? *Scritta scratta scritta scratta*.

Scritta scratta scritta scratta. What if they found Wayne and he was dead and Doogie had to ID the cold blue body? That would freak him the fuck out. *Scritta scratta scritta scratta*.

Scritta this, scratta that, calm down! Wayne was beyond hypothesis, wherever he was. And Doogie could master his own plight—he was a scholar, erudite and learned, the Fourth Amendment fixed on his

brain like a cerebral, comma-filled, run-on tattoo: *The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.*

“Freedom is earned, man,” he said, placing his elbows on the cold table and clasping his hands together. *The right of the people to be secure!* Smug Officer Chaz could paper the Great Wall with warrants, try to search Doogie's e-mails, tap his phone—all for nothing! All for nothing! Any warrants the cops could henceforth get would be struck down, worthless, inadmissible due to the rude and unreasonable way they busted in to begin with. Ain't no retroactive maneuvering gonna strike that from the record! Defeat law with law! Bring on the battle!

Ballast regained, Doogie wondered where the cops had stashed Kevin. The boy'd be fine though—he was quick to bawl, but under that he was sharp enough to fend for himself. If not, tough. Gettin' wasted, dippin' wicks, peekin' the boo was fine and fun—and necessary!—provided you had the wits to survive when the gnarly witch hunt ran torches to your door. In a world of challenges, yeah, what good was sentiment.

Doogie shut his eyes. He knew he shouldn't be here. He knew that this breach of his inalienable

rights deserved a full-throated call-to-arms. In fact, a certain segregation increasingly bisected his gray matter: with a fracas of horny cymbals, a proud and noble thought coalition demanded a fine rousing of legal knights, whilst the remaining share of brain-waves lollygagged on the cranial beach, softly reciting paraphrased filets from Hermann Hesse's *Siddharta*, a book that, if memory served, climaxed with an old dude sitting on a rock.



Sometime later—a half-hour, an hour? Doogie couldn't rightly feel time in this room, and besides he was pretty tranced by now, even with those scabbly feet periodically crossing the outside corridor. Anyhow, sometime later but not too much later, the door opened and a man stepped in.

He gave Doogie a momentary look, then leaned back through the doorway and called down the hall: "And Ricky, once again—will you *stop* screwing with McGruff? He's a goddamn work dog. We didn't spend thousands of dollars training the beast so it could search and rescue your tied-up sock. *Please.*" He shook his head, shut the door, and walked over to the table. "Tip o'da morn'n, Doug."

Morning? Technically so, but even accounting for an hour in this room, it wasn't yet coffee-and-biscuits time. The man, who had neither a super-

frappé nor a buttermilk morsel in hand, skated out the empty chair and sat down. Onto the table he dropped a folder and a pen; the pen clattered against the steel surface, rolled to the edge, and fell to the concrete floor.

The man wrinkled his nose, then bent down and grabbed the pen. He straightened up with a hand pressed to his spine. "Ahh. Ahh. In a hundred years, my friend—give or take a dozen—we're gonna develop immortality, can you fucking stand that? A thousand millennia of humanity come and gone, leaving both you and me a mere nanobyte from Ponce de Leon's wet dream, dying just decades short of forever. Me sooner than you, let's hope. Hell above, heaven below, smoke 'em if you got 'em, what's the damn difference? What, I ask you?"

Doogie remained silent and studied his visitor: a plainclothes cop or desk patroller or low-grade head shrinker, thickly built and short. He wore a leather jacket that doubled as a dishrag, to judge by coloration and condition. Its puckered lapels shone with a fresh wetness, and past them the man's oxford shirt was shaded damp in patches. Sudden cloudburst or bathroom mishap, what was the culprit? Doogie recalled no sprinkles or showers on the ride to the station, but he did remember his Puffet computer forecasting a chance of rain.

The man rubbed his eyes and sighed with an overbaked melancholy. "Not a deep thinker, are

ya. Okay, first off, I already dealt with your buddy Kevin. Totally useless, waste of my time, that guy. I'm hoping you'll be more reasonable."

"Hah! Playing tough already?" Doogie slapped his palms on the table. "You toss me in this room and 'spect me to be all quaking, and now I gotta roll over and be your kind of 'reasonable'—yeah, like *I'm* in the wrong? I know my rights, dude, and I know when I got the law on my side."

The man took a napkin from his pocket and blotted his shirt. "Ho-ho, kitten's got spunk! Say, *dude*, aren't you curious about why you're in here at all? Don't you wanna know? Or you just as narcissistic as your idiot boyfr—"

"My privacy, intruded. My property, molested. My dignity, stolen. Every one of my Fourth Amendment rights, thrown to the jackals like so much trash." Doogie jabbed his finger in the air with each downbeat. Take that, wet rumped copper!

Wet rumped copper didn't respond immediately, though his face assumed a lazy kind of alertness. "Look," he said, his words slow and deliberate, "I don't need a lesson in Constitutional law. I don't care about you, your momma, your pot party, your reaming complex. I don't even want to talk about you, get it? *You* are not important here. But, okay, you're the insistent type, so we could find something to book you with, if you'd like."

Doogie crossed his arms. "Don't play with me!"

"Hey, if you're up for it, so am I," the man said with a shrug and a swirl of his napkin. "We could get *at least* possession. Maybe more, too, maybe moral turp'tude! Though we'd have to tap the suits in Harrisburg for that ride. Think outside the box, ahh, yeah...how about reckless endangerment of hundreds of people! I heard your love nest was a firebug's dream, all these candles burning while you're off trippin' the astral plane—one *real* trip, you're looking at a towering inferno!"

Doogie ground his teeth. "Man, cut it out. You think it's funny to mock people when you got the upper hand?"

The man hummed a few notes. "You got some spirit."

"I sure do, and I'm about to get a lawyer, too."

The man gave Doogie a toothy, unsettling smile. "Feisty, feisty," he murmured, running his napkin along a lapel. "Fee, fi, fo, fum, Sherpti got a feisty one." Then he looked fully at Doogie and said, "Enough with the pleasantries. I'm Detective Sherpti, at your service. And you of course are Douglas Royko. Or do you prefer—*ahem*—Doogie?"

What kind of name was Sherpti? Sounded like a Tibetan dog. "I *prefer* to know what in the hell's going on."

Detective Sherpti poked a thumb at himself. "Then, Mr. Royko, I'm your man. If you'd like to call a lawyer, that's perfectly kosher, I'll even fetch

the yellow pages. But I'm not charging you with anything and I don't intend to. You can trust me on that, or not. Up to you."

Doogie unfolded his arms and thought about it. "I'll hold my phone call *and* my judgement for now, how's that."

"Very fair, Doug, very fair," Sherpti said, pinching his brow. "So I heard Rick and Chaz gave you and your boyfriend a hard time, they were a little rough on you? Bustin' up your *flagrante seducto*, staring at your dicks, stirring up a scene, doin' the heavy-duty cop jive. They're insecure, they gotta be manly twenty-four seven, it's a burden sometimes. Been a long time since I wore blue, glad about it too. Anybody could use some happy leaf, it's them. Health plan don't cover it."

"What, you're nicer? At least Ranger Rick didn't accuse me of a reaming complex."

"I did?"

"Yeah, a minute ago! A minute ago you..."

Doogie dropped his voice. Was he being tricked here? "Reaming complex."

Detective Sherpti balled up his wet napkin and tossed it in the corner, his clothes a shade drier than when he'd first entered the room. "In that case, tell me, Doug, am I wrong? All hype aside, sex is just a compulsion, and you *do* have a reaming complex. I, too, have a reaming complex. Or let's say I used to, in my salad days. Not, mind you, my toss-the-salad

days. One may say we ream in opposition—you, the dark side, and I, the light..."

"Neanderthal," Doogie grumbled under his breath.

Sherpti heard this and frowned. "Are you calling me a throwback?"

Doogie eyed the cop in challenge. "That's...that's right."

"Then fix your science, kid," Sherpti said with a crooked grin. "Neanderthals're like those hobbit guys, an evolutionary dead end. Us homo sapiens loped outta Africa and had 'em for dinner like thirty-thousand years ago. In a paleo sense, I can't be thrown back to something I wasn't much related to, can I?"

"No, but—" Doogie's ire was slipping "—your attitude's like, devolved, like, backwards, primitive, so I was saying—"

"Italdi? Australopithecus? That'll work better." Sherpti's forefinger popped up and waggled. "What'd I read—Neanderthal DNA and human DNA don't jibe, no ancestral bridge from former to latter. So even if I did a total atavistic relapse and started smearing wildebeest drawings on the wall with my own feces, or dragging my knuckles and humping this table, or pulling stone tools from my ass, you'd be ill-informed to call me a Neanderthal." The detective took a breather. He seemed to be enjoying himself, and looked about to pontificate further.

Aloof schoolmarmish ridicule! Doogie was not charmed. “Hey detective,” he said firmly. “You ever heard of *GLAAD*?”

“Gläd? The trash bag chosen by four out of five Finns?”

Ugh, somebody get the hook. “No. Gee, El, Ay, Ay, Dee. *GLAAD*. Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.”

“You put it that way, sure I have,” Sherpti said. “Although as queer acronyms go, I’ve long fancied *LABIATE*.”

“Lesbians and Bisexuals Advancing Tolerance Education?” Doogie was almost impressed.

“That’s the one, Doug.” The detective gave him a mild look. “So...*GLAAD*, huh. Are you?”

“Am I? Am I what?”

“Glad. To be gay.”

Nice fucking poke there, Doogie thought. Sure he was *GLAAD* to be gay! Completely! Then again—no. He might be *GLAAD* to be gay but he wasn’t exceptionally glad to be gay. He was glad to have two working legs and decent eyes and a healthy gastrointestinal tract, but gayness was a more qualified thing. A necessary and important thing, most definitely, but not a reservoir of ardent pride, regardless of his efforts to make it so. Sometimes he even felt guilty about the whole deal. He used to have a family, he used to be a good son. Yeah, Dad, I agree, girls are pretty. Yeah, Dad, what you say, men are hairy and

repulsive, well, duh, you’re living proof of that. Yeah, Dad, I wanted to be fucking normal too.

Maybe he should be glad, maybe that was the thrust of the name *GLAAD*, because the alternative to being glad really sucked. An extra vowel, a stupid spelling? That was small potatoes, miniscule potatoes. Doogie could rise above his pettiness.

The door swung open and smacked against the wall, and Officer Chaz leaned in with a grin. He nodded to Sherpti, chuffed, and pointed to the detective’s clothes. “Ooh, Slurpy, you’re still moist.”

Sherpti kicked forward and vaulted to a stance, arms straight and hands taut against the table. “Chaz, hey! Please go away?”

Chaz nodded curtly. “Yes sir, Detective Slurpy!”

“Hey, remember—no press, no names. Zip lip, save ship.”

“I know, I know. But you let the other fruit-chew go. He’s gonna leak, I betcha. I can tell.”

“No he won’t, not after I scared the piss out of him.”

Chaz laughed. “You sure did, boss, right onto your shirt!”

“Knock off and make yourself useful, willya?”

“Aw, Slurpy, I’m OD and straight to sleep,” Chaz said. “Ricky freakin’ *fatigues* me.” He forked his fingers and jabbed them at Doogie and the detective. “You two enjoy yourselves.” With a bow, he twirled away and slammed the door.

As Doogie listened to the officer's booted feet jaunt and dwindle down the hall, Sherpti sat down, grabbed his pen, and began clicking the button that revealed and retracted the ballpoint, *tik-tak-tik-tak*.

"So...Kevin's out, then?" Doogie ventured.

"Yep, I took him home myself." Sherpti stopped clicking the pen's button and patted a hand to his chest. Then he frowned and pulled the still-damp shirt from his skin.

"To *his* home? Or back to my place?"

"His home. Townhouse west of Graduate, right? Where he asked to go." Sherpti looked at Doogie. "Displeased?"

"He didn't ask to stick around, to wait for me, ah..."

The detective folded his hands. "Did he care about your welfare, that's what you mean?"

"Naah...well, sort of."

"'Fraid he took the opposite tack. Understandably he fingered you for that snatch o' weed you'd both been piping." Sherpti sat back and nodded slowly. "But he didn't stop there, not quite. See, due to his self-preservatory blabbermouth I know certain things about you that I ain't gonna mention to my superiors. Like your income source and its non-existent W-2."

Doogie's comfort level, already floundering, dropped into the Mariana Trench. "Eh, b-but..."

"Oh, normally I *would* tell my betters, see, 'cause most splitters are fucking jerks. Buy a fat brick, dice it up, make a killing, move on to harder, richer shit.

Mercenary pricks, by and large. But I hear you're exclusive to the soft buds, eh? I hear you even got an age restriction? Twenty-one or thereabouts? Nice call. Those older kids give you less grief, less IOUs as well?"

Doogie gulped. "Uh." Sweat drizzled from his temples.

"Relax. Once Kevin ratted, I probed him deeper to find out your style of business. Better you with some glimmer of propriety than the assholes who'd take your place." Sherpti frowned. "Just don't get greedy, y'hear?"

"Greedy," Doogie peeped, skin tingling. "No, never me."

"Excellent." The detective raised the folder he'd brought. "Now that I've terrified you, let's get to business. You're here because we need to find Wayne Milton. You two rent together, is that *all* ya do?" His palm went up. "S'cuse my Neanderthal ways."

Doogie breathed deeply. Now they were talking about Wayne. Sweet Jude on rye, thank you. "We're friends, that's all."

Sherpti lowered his folder and leaned across the table. "Here's the thing, Doug. A man died a couple hours ago. Face down on the street. Your Wayne is involved. *That's* what got you here."

"Wayne? What? I don't understand."

"Welcome to my world." Sherpti rapped his pen to his temple. "Franklin Hollander. Know the name?"

“No.”

“Okay.” Sherpti made a rectangle with his fingers. “Picture this. Around a quarter to two, this Franklin Hollander is driving down Tallon Street. Two blocks past Spring Garden, his vehicle breaks down. Inside the following twenty minutes, he gets in a fight and dies. A fight with whom? At least two others were present, one being a comatose girl from the mysterious East, the other *possibly* being Wayne Milton. The girl was traveling in Hollander’s car, we know that much from her luggage in the back.”

“Mysterious East? Where the hell is that?”

“She’s Japanese, killjoy. We found her on the ground, knocked out and bloody, a nice crack opening the back of her head. And under her head was a—well, we’ll get to that. She’s at the hospital, docs say she’s stable. After this—” Sherpti waved a hand between himself and Doogie “—I’ll go see for myself. Hopefully she’ll be awake and open to some friendly questioning.”

“How’d she crack her head?”

“Supposedly she fell—that’s according to Hollander’s 911 call. No mention of Wayne or anyone else in that call. The working theory is he showed up after.”

“911 call? I don’t see, I’m not clear how or why Wayne would get messed up in...in whatever this is. How do you know he was there, you got proof?”

“We got proof, and forensics will double that proof.”

“One forty-five, two, he’s at work, he’s *supposed* to be.”

Sherpti opened his folder. “Working at *Jiff*.”

“Yes.”

Sherpti pulled a file from the folder and studied it. “*Jiff*’s offices are nine, ten blocks from Tallon Street, about a mile and a half away? According to his boss, he left work early, one o’clock or thereabouts. What would send him towards Tallon? He got pals down there, a girl, some hangout?”

“You talked to his boss, you know when he left work? What *else* do you know? Stop teasing out the info and tell me.”

Sherpti nodded. “After you told Chaz where Wayne worked, he called it in. I looked up *Jiff*’s number and gave ’em a buzz, ’round three o’clock. Caught the manager on her way out the door. She said Wayne had felt ill, and because it was a slow night she allowed him to leave early.

“One o’clock, one-ten, that’s when he left.”

Sherpti reached into his folder, took out a packet of photos, and handed them to Doogie. “And at one-forty, one-fifty, we’ve got this.”

Doogie took the photos and surveyed them with growing alarm: Wayne’s wallet and keys. Wayne’s brand of cigarettes. Wayne’s jacket, blood-coated.

“T-the blood—” Doogie stammered.

“Not his,” Sherpti said. “Hers. Jacket was under the Japanese girl’s cracked head, rolled into a pillow.”

Actually helped out, I'm told. Wallet, keys, and cigarettes, zipped inside the jacket. Personal effects, missing the person."

"I don't get it."

"Me neither," Sherpti said, chopping his hand through the air. "He's gonna want those smokes."

"All Wayne's stuff but no Wayne. You think he's... y'think..." A fluttering entered Doogie's core and swelled to a gruesome flapping of scar-crossed bat wings. It wouldn't do to think of some random thug dumping Wayne's jacketless, walletless body in the river. Thankfully, that hypothesis made absolutely no sense. Or it made as much sense as everything else.

"Nah, nah," Sherpti said, squeezing his chin. "More a chance he panicked and ran, left his shit there. But that's just a guess." He looked keenly at Doogie. "Wayne have a cell phone?"

"No."

Sherpti nodded and made a mark in his folder. "A car?"

"No."

Sherpti nodded and made a second mark. "A gun?"

"No," Doogie said, then cocked his head. "Course not."

Sherpti made a third mark. "You've got a gun?"

"Uh-uh," Doogie said. "We're gun-free in 3B."

"This fight Hollander was in, there was a gunshot."

"Hollander was shot? By who?"

Sherpti closed the folder. "Hollander wasn't shot."

"But he's who died, right! If not him then who got shot? Not Wayne, he didn't get shot? Who got shot?"

"Bibendum."

"Who?"

"Bibendum. Right through the sidewall."

Doogie slammed his palms against the steel table, which returned a great clamor. "Who, where? Sidewall? S'that near the stomach? The chest? Where is it?"

"The tire, Doug," Sherpti explained. "The tire of Franklin Hollander's truck. Bullet lodged itself in the wheel rim."

"Hollander, it went through him and into the tire?"

Sherpti hunched forward and cradled his head in his arms. "No, no, no." He spread his wrists to make a space and peeked through it. "Like I said, Franklin Hollander wasn't shot. He died from a coronary. Matter of fact, he was still alive when the ambulance got there—alive, but too far gone to come back. EMT's slapped and zapped but he didn't make it to the hospital even, he did the final flatline en route and there was no reviving him."

"But the gun, who had it, who shot it—"

"Better question, where is it? And where's your roomie?" The detective sat up straight. "I told you Hollander wasn't shot, and that's completely accurate—but how's this, the front of his shirt *does*

have—” Sherpti paused, cleared his throat “—it does have a burn mark. A singe, really, fibers more charred than broken. Gun was fired with the muzzle close to or sideways against his chest, so we’re thinking from the discharge on the fabric. Lab boys’ll take a better look in a few hours, come sunup. Hollander’s neck and arm were scorched, too, but those’re steam burns, most likely from the truck’s burst radiator. Nothing else around to cause such welts.”

“I’ll read between your lines,” Doogie said. “You think that Wayne was on the street helping this Japanese girl, the girlfriend of this Hollander, and also Hollander was calling an ambulance for her, but then he and Wayne suddenly decided to fight each other? Then Wayne, uh, Wayne might’ve shot at Hollander with a magically appearing gun, but missed at point-blank range and hit the tire of Hollander’s broken-down truck? And the shock of the gunshot—its *bang!*—might’ve given Hollander a heart attack?”

“Well, Doug,” Sherpti said coolly, “we’re testing several scenarios.”

“And you’re sure Wayne had this, this *gun*. I can’t see that.”

Sherpti cleared his throat. “We’re not sure of anything, but that’ll change when the day gets rolling. We’re checking Hollander’s records with State, see if *he* had a legal gun. Might be revealing once we determine the bullet’s characteristics.”

Doogie’s scalp began to itch. He raked his fingers under his hair and said, “Wayne, like, he barely knows how to throw a snowball, let alone shoot a gun.”

The detective puckered his lips and blew air through his nose. “It’s like Tetris, Doug. A second to learn, a lifetime to master.”



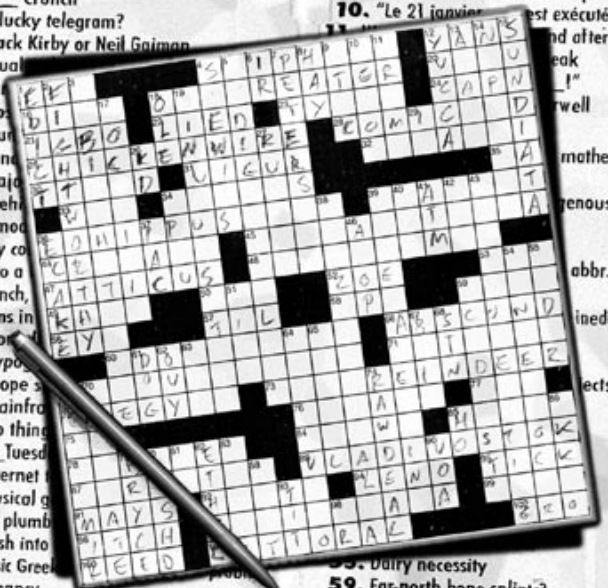
PART II.

ACROSS

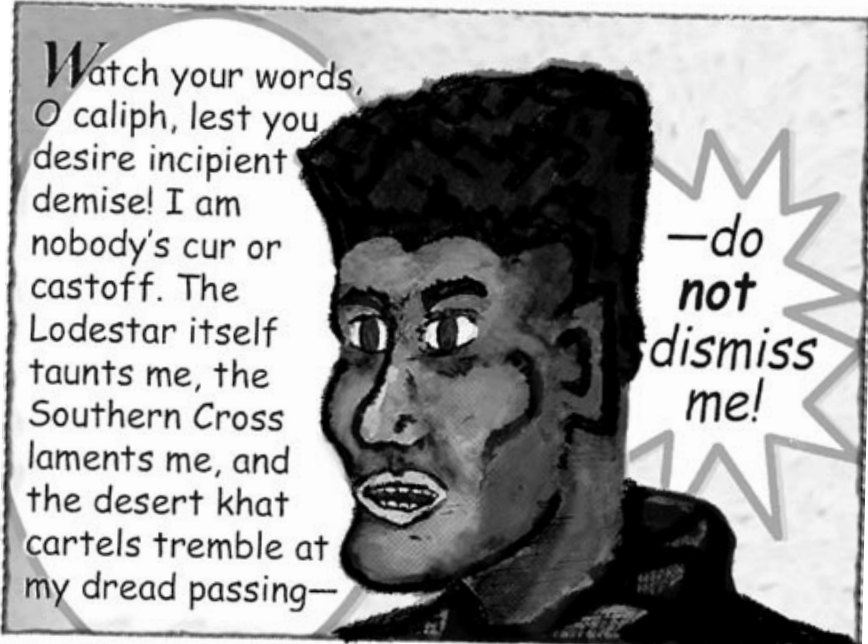
1. Young newt
4. Captain's station
12. TV chef Martin and family
16. Antifreeze chemical
18. Devourer of stinky Westerns?
20. Zippy Brazilian sloth
21. Nigerian language, once
22. Prevaricated
23. Automotive rubber to Chaucer?
24. ___ Crunch
25. Plucky telegram?
28. Jack Kirby or Neil Gaiman
30. Dual
31. Tu
32. Pos
33. Hut
34. Tena
35. Majo
36. Preh
39. Commo
44. Junky co
45. Ode to a
47. Mr. Finch,
48. Marans in
49. Sor
50. Typo
52. Trope s
53. Mainfra
56. No thing
57. ___ Tuesd
58. Internet
59. Musical g
60. He plumb
66. Dash into
69. Classic Gree
71. Dormancy
72. Funeral call, if deceased loved baseball?
73. St. Nick's steed, rendered in Dutch cheese?
75. Xmas syllable or meretricious female
76. Ellie, in full: var.
77. Tooth on a sprocket; often stressed
78. What royal sorts love to do
84. Cereal lbs.
85. He gave 'em hell
87. Prexy's son and hotelier, U. ___
89. SE terminus of the Trans-Siberian RR
91. The "Say Hey Kid" of baseball
92. Portugese frigate of old
94. Late-night host
95. Head-burrowing disease incubator
96. It can befall a jock
97. Existential disgust, Peruvian style?
99. Scythe handle: var.
100. Without which, no sexy tune
101. Not verbatim, but of the coast
102. Miracle___

DOWN

1. Diktat
2. Deserving of fisticuffs
3. Title of Jefferson's secret memoirs?
4. Buddy's pad, if buddy named Stewart
5. What a muckraker does: sentence
6. Ayatollahs' web domain
7. Disciple's spirit?
8. Roll in it, make it, munch it
9. Adorable, from the bottom up?
10. "Le 21 janvier, le plus exécuté."
11. ___ and after lib.
12. ___ peak
13. ___ well
14. ___ mathematicians?
15. ___ venous protest?
16. ___ abbr.
17. ___ inedible CRTs?
18. ___ ects?
59. Dairy necessity
59. Far-north bone splinis?
61. Importune
62. Last two vowels, plus that tag-along
63. Common form: abbr.
64. Executive power over DVD choice?
65. Rejected airline mascot?
67. Bath, in Holland
68. Where the trn. arrives
69. Woeful Yiddishism
70. What Viagra purports to do
74. Arnie gets shafted in '86 flick, as do viewers
79. Utah national park
80. Virgil's Aenid: "His crest is ___ away"
81. Typographic dash
82. Wife of Julius, and not the Orange one
83. Earthbound spirit, in Islam: var.
85. Xmas syllable or holmium symbol
86. Zipperhead
88. 80's hair-metal band, and how
90. Tongue of US
93. A tat engenders this
98. Possessive or calendric abbr.: 2 ltrs.



Chapter seven



Percy, in dusks and dawns

SEVERAL NIGHTS BEFORE DOUG ROYKO (known aliases: Doogie, Scout, Koko) found himself on the no-frills hot seat, rapping and snapping with Detective Peter Sherpti (known aliases: Slurpy, Wumpus, K'pusta), a lovesick man named Percy Morrison pawed at his computer, the whole of body and soul beset by excited debate: Should he go? Should he go see her? Should he go to Cleveland and flesh out his fantasy?

This fantasy had just signed off with a *nite*, *Baby* -- *I got to get some sleep*. Percy needed sleep, too, but that was the last thing he felt like doing. His heart was rocking at a clip unreached for years, the boggled arteries crying, "Settle, man, settle!"

Drawing his body forward, bending his fingers to mouse buttons, he opened up a file folder and clicked through a column of digital pictures. Vivid pixels soaked into his face as he lingered with, doted on, visually nuzzled each perfect image. Isabelle, looking merry. Isabelle, looking pensive. Isabelle, looking bashful. Eyes at once dark and bright. Red lips nudging to a grin. Black hair pulled back and brows arched...

She had a digital camera, and for him she took self-portraits. None salacious, but all delicious, all flirtatious, and Percy couldn't get enough. Sadly, her camera had broken about a week back and she hadn't e-mailed any since. Not that he had cause to complain. The library he'd amassed was pleasure enough and pleasure itself. Isabelle's mouth, neck, nose, the curves of her ears, he could gaze at them for ages and ages—but only theoretically, and in truth his electron-pelted eyes ached to be closed. He brought the cursor to the menu bar and clicked the shutdown button. After a rattle and a churn, the computer powered off.

He remained motionless before the blank screen, his thoughts purified by the centrifuge of love.

Tonight, Isabelle had asked him to come. What she'd typed, the letters glowing and real: *come and see me*. She found him (or claimed to find him) smart, interesting, handsome. That was a complementary triumvirate hard to resist. Equally hard to believe, but Percy wasn't about to quibble. Some misapprehensions were inseparable from happiness.

How to define their courtship, how to sing this Ballad of Percy and Isabelle? It was romantic, but lacking the classic rituals of romance. Erotic, but lacking leathered cliché. For almost three months now, the plinky rhythms of Percy's life had been mangled and tangled, lucified and energized, courtesy of this addicting girl and a cunning piece of message-exchange software.

This software had a name, *Mercurine*, and it was more than the sum of its code; it was a vector for obsession, a savory telegraph of immense reach. Percy embraced *Mercurine*, he lay among its tantalizing fruit, and to be without would confound him. Such dependence could foster paranoia—was he being monitored? Was this some secret government experiment? If so, thank God it didn't involve syphilis.

At night, he'd dial the Internet and fire up *Mercurine*, anticipating Isabelle, and there she'd be, not always but just enough. Brains and keyboards so engaged, they'd swap warmth and witticisms, her words jumping the screen and rushing his nerves. She was his spice, his cayenne, his dizzy elixir. She healed his

heart and quickened his blood, and more besides.

Ding! went the computer with every message she'd send. *Ding!*—a simple beep that sang like a celesta. Percy would read the sentences typed by her far-off fingers, smile, shiver; then he'd tap out his own response, a little poem of connection to fly across the fibers. *Dong!*—Percy has returned your message with one of his own. *Dong!*—Percy hopes you like it.

Percy's housemate, Samson, thought he was pussy-whipped. "And with no pussy in sight! Nothin' even to smell!"

Two months ago, Percy had mailed Isabelle a picture of himself. Real mail, carried by trucks. He lacked a digital camera or scanner, and besides, there was something classy about an honest-to-goodness photograph, one tenderly slipped into a padded envelope alongside a heartfelt-yet-lighthearted note, a smiley beside the signature. Epistolary cachet, memento vita, the ineffable of pen and ink and transport.

He'd upturned his papers and piles looking for a perfect snapshot, finally settling on one taken over a year ago, before his father's heart quit, before that world had collapsed. The shot had Percy in the cargo hold of his father's truck, mock-smashing a client's crate with a sledgehammer. For a mailing address, Isabelle had given her office. Nothing unreasonable about that, at the time they'd only just met, giving an office address was smart and cautious. Also possi-

ble, she lived in some jumbled lodge where the daily mail often got trampled or taken. Percy understood such accommodations.

> *will wonders never cease, you ..are.. a black guy,* she messaged after receiving the photo.

> *Eh, mi chica, so was Jesus,* he'd keyed back.

> *and look what happened to him. i swear i thought u were a pale wrinkled pervy grandpa :) the last one was...*

Throughout their correspondence, he'd never asked for her home address, nor her phone, thinking that she'd supply it when ready. And—see!—now she was ready. She wanted him to come. Isabelle, Isabelle Patel. Nice rhyme to her name, a pleasing sound to whisper. Indian, Desi not American, had parents who immigrated to Ohio mid-eighties and ran a Sleepy Lodge off a cold patch of Interstate 70. She was finishing up graduate studies at Cleveland's Case Western University, worked administration at the student center, wanted to be a teacher. Isabelle Patel. Gold, pure gold, dark gold. So dark as to be, in some meaner place, untouchable, she was a beauty to him. He would not let her forget this, and every so often he'd needle her senses:

> *So I was roaming the web yesterday. Saw a funny banner ad.*

> *yeah?*

> *"Fairness cream"?*

> *...uh-oh. Percy, stay off the indian sites, ok??*

> *"FairEver Fairness Cream uses natural vegetable*

emollients to induce melanin reduction and lighten all skin types! After a few applications your skin will glow and radiate like fresh milk! FairEver, the safe and gentle way to fairness!”

> things take time, you know that, they did here too.

> Please don't de-melanize yourself, ebon Isabelle. My dusky Dalit dreams shan't fulfill should you pearlesce like dairy.

Isabelle Patel, ring my bell. Tonight, only an hour ago, her fingers had typed that magical string:

> So here it is -- come and see me.

His response: > You know I would.

> then why not?

Because you might be a liar. Because you might be a lie. Because you might be puppetry. Because you might be real. Because you are my dream, and I idolize you, and I enjoy idolizing you. Because you are half yourself, half my invention, and all my need. Isabelle, overnight companion, since first crossing wires on a summer's sweaty eve we've swapped notes on so much, on everything, and as our notes merge in the buffer so do we, cuneiform Congress, cabbage-soup Chomsky, Chevrolet crusaders on ketamine. You're involved with the world, you're in love with the world, and it hurts you like it hurts me. You're my ideal, but who can remain my ideal? Who'd want to?

Percy had lived in Philadelphia for much of his life. He knew it, understood it. An etching of municipal topography stained by the colors of memory. He felt no great link to Philly, not since his father passed. There were several reasons to leave, and only one to stay. Apropos of its singularity, that one reason had hooks: every weekend, Percy spent several hours of his time—these days, his most abundant resource—to mentor a reading circle at the library. Told stories, acted foolish, did what he could to feed words to kids who were often hungrier for food. While Percy didn't get involved in anyone's hard luck, he'd supply a sack of Tastykakes to bribe the kids into participating. And participate they did, sometimes they did, frosted chocolate on lips, teeth, and cheeks. Reading lines, reading rhymes, often stumbling in speech, often learning a word.

Percy wrote his own stories, drew awful illustrations for them, and pasted/xeroxed/stapled everything together for each weekend's regaling. He'd never thought himself a born raconteur, but he was certainly doing a bang-up job of impersonating one, judging by the entrancement of the kids and the cautious approval of the library staff. Cautious, he knew, because while the staff all loved his spirit—and in an offhand way loved him, as he'd been a fixture at the library since his boyhood years—they were less unanimous about his creative license.

Percy wished he were famous like Fergie or Seinfeld, Ed Koch or Madonna, any of those vaporous stars who diversified their careers by birthing a children's book every fortnight or thereabouts. He'd even take Lynne Cheney, who relaxed between racy potboilers and *DeathOfWesternCiv* polemics with cute, whimsically illustrated picture books celebrating America's indelible virtues and incredible heroes.

Thomas Jefferson Goes to Market! Color Me Kabbalah! Budgie the Wedgie Poo-Poo Toddlump! Burn 'em, burn 'em to heaven, then step right up and dish the kids a meat-o-riffic hunk of *Melaninja!*—*The Intense Saga of the Darkest Stealthy Warrior Ever to Battle Evil Injustice*, followed by *Melaninja Resurrected!*—*The Affecting Tale of the Stealthy Warrior Who Deftly Sidesteps at the Approach of an Untimely Violent Death*. For the younger set, try *Melaninja Yawns!*—*The Frightful Fable of the Sleepy Warrior Who Lost His Special Blanket, a Bequest of the Kushite Queen Tiye*.

Admitted, *Melaninja*'s exploits lacked Newbery nuance or Caldecott charm; they were nothing so fine as *Bud*, *Not Buddy* or *Yo! Yes?*, the latter being disruptively fun to act aloud with a tangle o' tots. But Percy's creation was no shrinking African violet—*Melaninja* adroitly trounced virtuous ribstickers like *God Is a Multichrome Casserole*, *Grandma's Sick (But Not Gross)*, *My Niner Jammed So Let's Shake Hands*, or *Father's Day Comes Twice a Year* (although the boisterous sequel, *Too Many Uncles!*, was a personal favorite.)

Nobility aside, what would better jolt a second-grader's pulse: artless moral induction, or the same fibrous lessons woven into incantatory epics of a smolder-eyed Ju'hoansi hunter-child who witnesses his family's capture and execution, flees his Kalahari home to the Nubian metropolis of Meroe (where he handily masters ancient metallurgy), traverses the fertile crescent, trods the Silk Road, enjoys dialectic with Siddharta Gautama, gallops with the virile precursors of the Golden Horde, suffers the ascetic's life while enduring brutal and secret instruction in the warrior's arts, and finally becomes a legend in his own and every time as the swarthy paragon of mental celerity and lyncine agility—becomes, in short, the intrepid champion known as *Melaninja!*

Given *Melaninja*'s nomadic spirit, Percy was confident that he'd eventually wander onto bookstore shelves and bestseller lists. Currently, *Melaninja* fought his heroic battles on the backsides of discarded school assignments and meeting minutes that Percy pulled from the library's recycled-paper bin.

One plump sweetie, an assistant administrator, had voiced that the wonderful name *Melaninja*, when delivered by a child's unintentioned mumble to any cruel, jaded, or clumsy ear, could be misheard as the painful derogation *Melon-Ninja*. Or as a type of skin cancer. Or as anything but what Percy insisted it was. But Percy had anticipated the well-meant concern:

“Nehemi,” he’d said, “any chump trifles with these kids now, he’s gonna get a half-hour lecture on biology *and* proper spelling. Y’know how I tell it—best way to handle troublemakers, make ’em feel stupid. Bruises heal, stupid doesn’t.”

“That’s the way to handle troublemakers?”

Nehemi’s dimples grew angry. “Try just crossing the street. Bruises heal unless they kill, and killing happens a lot. In case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Can’t fight that. You win. Anything else?”

“Don’t change the subject. Melon-Ninja.”

“Who’s that?”

“Lot of people don’t think you’re funny, Percy. Or right in the head.”

“Aw, Nemie, who’s to judge? Who besides you, I mean.”

“The community’s got a right to judge, and—”

“Community don’t like it, they can come speak t’ me—”

“You? To you?” Nehemi said. “I’m the one takin’ the calls. My *job* to take the calls. Percy, baby, take your disputatious brain and make up somethin’ new.”

“One or two people grinding an axe, two, three more with ears fulla wax—I’m sorry, but that’s no crisis, it’s an opportunity. And listen, Nehemi, seein’ how you opened the subject—we got to claim this melon thing, claim it and bury it. Why’s it that anyone but us can roll out the market with a cart fulla Jubilees—and they sure do, piled up high and

no one thinks nothing, but you or I do it and all of a sudden people snicker like we’re a walking joke? Like our backyard barbecue’s somehow funnier than everybody else’s? Watermelon *came* from the Kalahari, came over in chains, and even that ancestral right gets stripped and awarded to the dogs of oppression. C’mon, Nemie, *I* like watermelon. *You* like watermelon. Let’s take it back. Let’s hop the bus and clean the snobby suburbs out of moist African nectar. Hold our heads high behind melon-filled carts of heritage.”

Nehemi had sighed in defeat, the kind of defeat that implies permission, and in such fashion did Melaninja Deftly Sidestep Political Censure. Whether Melaninja could Deftly Sidestep Gathering Budgetary Woes that Threatened to Padlock the Library Doors on Weekends, stay tuned.

Performing stories for the kids was fun, troubling, sad, great, the engine of Percy’s happiness. A happiness that, until Isabelle, had seemed modest but substantive enough to live on. This girl, though—she dazzled him with a joy so full, he yipped and yapped and wished for more. A joy not better or nobler, but very different and lushly powerful, benevolent atoms splitting in his skull. Okay, it *was* better, but admitting the truth felt impolitic.


Was there any reason to stay in Philly? The kids. Why else? No else. Not like his housemate Samson needed him around, or cared about him

beyond his rent share. Not like Samson was even findable half the time; currently, Percy hadn't seen the wretched player for nearly a week. Most likely he was sprawled on a schlitz-soaked faux-leopard rug in some hen's boudoir, sucking spoils from some unchained sweat-stained party. Of course, Samson would insist the rug was soaked not with schlitz but with Remy or Courvoisier or whichever tonic was the glory of the week.

Percy wanted to go see Isabelle, and he could. His one regret was abandoning his reading group, if only for a few weeks, but the kids would survive, and sure, they'd survive if he never came back. He'd send postcards. And while undertaking a quest of love was risky at best, it was equally risky and plenty less dignified to succumb to salty snacks and sloth.

He could fleece his checking account, pull enough green for a bus ticket, new underwear, and a book or two of crossword puzzles. He liked a good crossword puzzle. He wasn't some kind of crazed aficionado, like those who would agonize for weeks over the cryptic razzlement of the *Guardian* or *Atlantic* variety—at most Percy would agonize a single night, perhaps two in rare cases. And he wasn't much for geeky British-style punnery, so his tastes remained with the classic Americana of the straight-forward clue-and-answer type. In Percy's mind, a well-wrought puzzle earned itself a secure berth in

the grand reckoning of things, right above Memphis dry rub and just below true love.



Fall was Percy's favorite season. The air was all complex smells and sharp tastes, and when you inhaled, the flavors burst up your nostrils with a tingling chill that deepened the whole experience of breathing. Some mornings he would take walks, long walks, gone off for miles with a mix in his headphones. Mornings were for music, nights were for open ears.

A selected journey: Percy steps out his door and locks both bolts. He descends the leering stairway and comes into the street, where he hooks on phones and starts up the mix. With Donny Hathaway and fresh air for company, he skirts torn trash bags and scowls at sloppy gang tags; he passes through the streets with his face to the sun. Philly, Philly, strung in discordant notes. Collapsed rowhomes rubbing against fresh-painted twins, a drug factory and a church sharing a common corner. Ruined lots wrapped by masterful ironwork, berries for the picking. In the house Percy rents, the walls alone shed enough lead to build a fallout shelter, the ancient paint bubbled and powdered and desperate for a sealing coat—something he'll handle later, right after he fixes a loose banister and replaces the lock on the back door that's been clumsily jimmed for the

second time this month. Three cheers for his landlord, who only gives a pager number.

He ambles two dozen blocks to the University of Pennsylvania and sits on a bench. Into his ears a diva sings *back in the day-ay, things were cool*, and he likes the wistful ache of an invented golden age. When the song ends, he stops the tape, pulls off the phones, and settles back to watch the university kids scurry between buildings. The threads of the moment, Percy can see, are poofy fleece vests in primary hues. Unsurprisingly, they wear adorably on the ladies but clownish on the men, who resemble campy bellhops with the bulging things zipped over their chests. Unisex Fashion, 0, Floppy Fisherman Hat Syndrome, 1.

Beside the bench, a thick wooden post rises from the sidewalk. Dozens of handbills, their corners crowding and overlapping, are stapled onto it. Percy looks over and finds himself illiterate. Much of the writing is Chinese; some is the loopier Korean. Percy gets to thinking about Thai phonemes, those slinky glyphs, all curliques and waves. Once he'd sought to learn them, but no longer. He is content to be a one-language guy, an easy task with that one language as ubiquitous as English. Again he looks at the handbills. Ubiquity ebbing and flowing.

He stands up and continues down the block. A Toby-Mart is on the corner, and he enters and makes a beeline for the magazine rack, where the new issue

of the New York Crossword Digest waits on the upper shelf. The format of the NYCD is perfect for inducing needful headaches: sixteen puzzles per issue, the opening puzzle quick and fun, each successive one tougher. He takes the magazine, then stops by the cooler and grabs a root beer. After paying up, he leaves the store and returns to the bench. It's chilly but invigorating, and he doesn't feel like going home.

He checks his pocket for a pencil—yep, there we go. He opens the crossword magazine and surveys the first puzzle over several swigs of root beer. Then the soda is lowered, the pencil is lifted, and solving commences. He's halfway done the first puzzle when a female voice breaks his concentration.

“Brother's pretty quick with the words.”

Percy looks up, surprised. Sitting on the far edge of his bench, a girl with playful eyes. Young, better part of a decade younger than him, a student maybe. Hair natural, cropped short, elegant. What he likes. He likes it long, too. His heart jumps a pace, and he smiles. “Harmless little habit, nothin' but.”

She smiles back. “That pencil of yours don't hardly stop. Scribble scribble!” She takes him up and down, and Percy knows he's both being categorized and defying categorization. With a scrunch, her eyes reflect his wardrobe. “You go here?”

Nothing earned to up and *come* here, one must go as well. He puts aside the crossword magazine and surveys himself: blue sweatpants, red pullover, old

Eagles windbreaker, a “swoosh” cap softened by age. Plop in some loosely-laced yellow hightops and stir until rumpled. He scans the blue-jean stream of academe and—surprise!—sees nobody tweaked up like Skip Gates. What’s the clue, what sign on his back says *outsider*?

“My tweeds are presently in hock,” he says, cocking his head. “So I’m reduced to wearing these everyday idioms.”

The girl snorts, but not meanly. “Touchy, ain’t we?”

Percy nods. “Thin skin, layered deep. That’s me.”

“Look, all you need’s a messenger bag. Fixes any getup.”

“I’ll bet,” Percy says. “But where would I keep the pony?”

“My, my.” The girl leans over and looks past him, her glance going down the street. A moment later she stands. “Think I see my man comin’, Mr. Scribble. Catch ya later, hm?”

Feeling catty, Percy says, “What’d you go mention *your man* for? Not like it’s crucial information.”

“What?”

“You could’ve just said, *Well, gotta go, or Oop, my friend’s here, see ya*. But you on purpose told me, some nobody stranger, that you had a boyfriend. S’funny to me, is all.”

“You always so analytical?”

“A-yup,” he drawls. “And I can’t turn it off.” He

bends forward to follow her gaze down the street, and sees that “her man” is pushing seventy, complete with walker and natty fedora. Percy’s mouth crimps to a smile. “Aw, me and my foolishness.”

“You’re somethin’ cute, Mr. Scribble, but no match for grandpa.” The girl grins and stands up. “Catch you!”

She bounces over to the old man and gives him a hug, and together they continue up the street. They pass by Percy, and as they do, the girl waves a coquettish farewell and the old man tips his hat. Percy waves back and raps himself on the head. Then he puts on his phones and presses play on his walkman. Here’s Curtis, piping of Hell below and how we’re all gonna go—a sentiment that Percy is often receptive to, but not today. Next comes Stew, peerless in weirdness, crooning about whatever and whoever hits his mind. Upon Stew’s dapper fade, Tom Waits fumbles in from the service road, his engine knocking like the heart of Saturday night. When Tom exits, Percy flips the tape and meets the Hieroglyphics in mid-flow, halfway to Soweto. OutKast follows, bashing out gasoline dreams and darker seams, and then Clarence Carter steps to the microphone, his guitar biting sweetly and his voice yelping about slippin’ away.

Percy needs to slip away. Always he is slipping down. He needs to go somewhere. He needs to do something. For though he has tried, Percy Morrison

by his lonesome can't slow, let alone reverse, the creeping devaluation of his life. The death of his father, the loss of his bearings, his purpose, his smile: the past year has not been good. Percy knows he is strong, but he is also aware of an opposite truth. This awareness doesn't help, and sunlight doesn't help, and alcohol makes him sick and weed makes him cry. For too long he's seen each new day as nothing but a referendum on his fortitude.

Last March he'd sold his father's Topkick diesel, drove it down to Richmond and signed it away. With Pop gone, Percy doesn't haul. He can, knows how, knows the roads and contacts. But it is no job to do alone, impossible almost, and while he'd loved his father's truck, it had to go. To his father, the Topkick had been a symbol, a six-gear wonderbeast of beauty, of independence, of respect. A symbol not of servility, but of utility. And those with utility could claw out a life despite the blows of fate. At worst you'd go down fighting.

Percy, who'd washed the Topkick when young and driven it when less young, still believes in these qualities, still respects the truck's invisible cargo of pride, of grace, of *substance*—but with Pop's passing, the truck had undertaken too heavy a weight, and from then on its virtues were buried by sorrow. For peace of mind, and for cash, Percy liquidated it.

The truck had been clean, as ideals should be, and it sold at a good price. Enough money for a

long lazy float, for a leave of absence, the term extendable via increased privation. It bothers him to think this way, but he does. He has more liberty than he deserves, less than he wants.

No truck, no father: no direction.

No interest in seeking one, either.

No *anima*.

But then he meets Isabelle. And Isabelle is new, exciting, a giver of hope. And he is free to go to her; so he will, so he should. The rush of adventure, a chance to see some walls besides his own. The kids at the library will miss him, he knows. When he returns, if he returns, he can teach them about occasional selfishness and how it saves the spirit from ruin. *Melaninja Indulged!—The Redeeming Ballad of a Stealthy Warrior Who Got Mighty Lonesome and Sought Sweetness*. But will he find it?

Percy's mother lives, if still she does, across the ocean. Thailand. Percy has no memory of her. At seventeen, she gave him life. At eighteen she was left behind. 03/06/75, the date marked on his father's oldest passport.

His mother. Pictures and letters. Percy remembers the air-mail stamps, postage from times long past. He was eight when the relay broke, when the letters stopped. When he'd felt the snap and cried *Why, tell me why*, the small sound of a know-nothing child shivering before the world. His father had responded with lies: Her English was very bad, and she was too

embarrassed about it. Her culture prevented contact, hard to explain, hard to understand. She had a new family, nobody's fault, that's how the world works.

His father's lifeless excuses had been ever-changing but always strained, and Percy, even so young, learned to accept and later to forgive the effort. He had a father and he was thankful. He wanted a mother and he was envious. His block was a business of mothers and grandmas yelling out window and door, pacing from porch to corner, queuing the bus for a thirty-dollar day. Percy would watch them tug and braid, dish and damn, cook and carry on. His father couldn't cook. Soup, he made soup. Percy's friends would visit, eat his father's soup, flee wailing, hacking, laughing into the street.

Growing up. Growing wary. The richness of life, the blessings of air and magic. And then? The taste of concrete, bitter and broken-mouthed. Respect the game. Bow before the stupid and shallow. See your world as others do, a needless ruin to be mocked and boxed and sold as culture.

His life is an accident. Evolution is a recording of fortunate accidents.

— *Our brother Percy, the war baby, yeah, we dig.*

— *'sup, Perce, your pops was stationed up in Thailand? What I heard goes on there, like crazy, like you wouldn't believe.*

— *Saw this movie, man. Girls hollering "no fuck you, too boku!" Damn, what can I say? Me too, plenty boku, know I'm saying?*

— *Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.*

Percy cannot find his mother, he can find no news of her, and here the Internet has no value. A billion pages versus a hamfisted dragnet, night after night of Boolean logic, hours given to hope and waste. Far down a hyperlink chain he'd found a few gleaming mentions of his father's battalion—a staff sergeant's diary of the road to Nakhon Phanom, a mechanic's ode to some woman he'd known, a colorful map of the transporters' line-of-communication route. Specialist Morrison, front and center, where is the girl you loved? Who was the girl you loved?

Searching for the past. Where was the future?

> *percy...i might just be falling for you, Isabelle*
has typed, and he has believed.

> *So here it is -- come and see me.*

Should he go? He deliberates.

Three nights pass. To keep his mind stout and independent, he forces himself to stay off the computer. He deliberates.

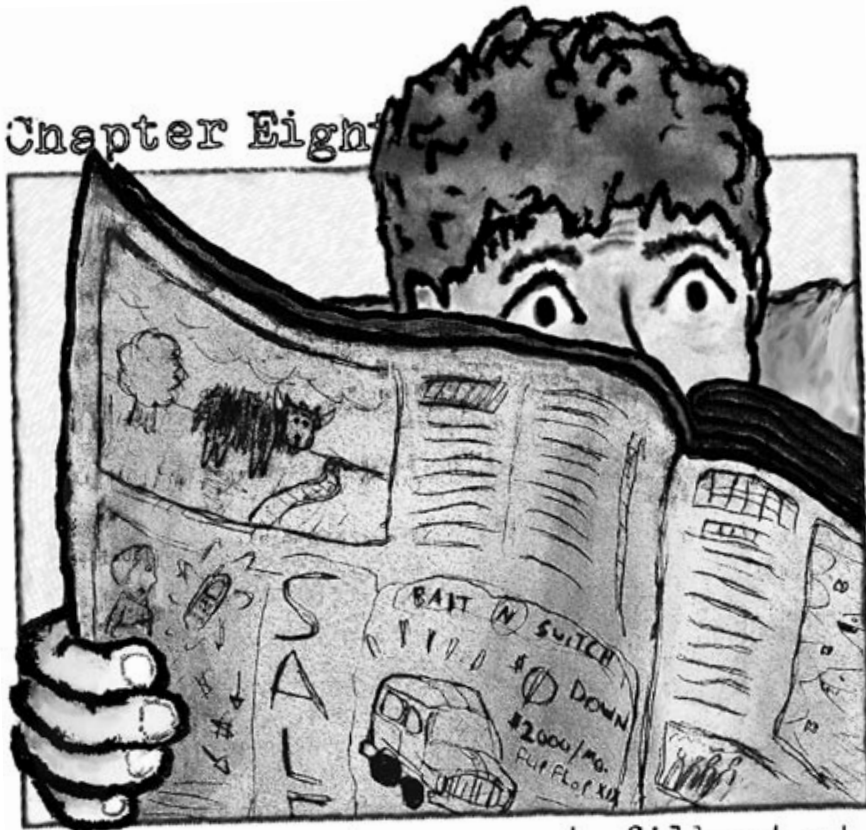
On the fourth night he logs on and she is there. He deliberates. Breathes deeply. And decides.

When his fingertips touch the keys, he imagines the plastic to be skin, soft and dark and female.

Isabelle Patel. It is a wonderful name.

He knows very well that he has to go.

Chapter Eight



morning comes to filbert st.

FAR FROM THE TIPSY, TIMELESS HOPES OF ROMANCE, a reacquaintance with immediate distress: Wayne Milton, standing in a bus depot on a morning young, cold, and dark, Melvin's gift of seventy-five dollars in his pocket. Three hours thirty-six minutes since he'd triggered that terrible gunshot, the deep snap of it still boxing his eardrums; three hours thirty-six minutes since his attempt to help a bleeding woman became terminally corrupted by violence.

The lesion on his chest had dried by now, and it pained him faintly but itched him freely. Higher up, his throat felt thick and foul, aching with each tiresome swallow, and his nostrils could barely suck air. Temperature and balance unstable, his was an instant flu, born from the elements and elemental fears. A worry for the body and another for the heart, a worry for the past and present and every next moment.

He sheltered in a corner of the bus station's lobby, his posture and placement concealing the wreckage of his turned-around t-shirt. His back was pushed to the wall, hiding the bullet-ripped fabric and soap-dulled bloodstains, while his folded arms covered a cranberry stripe, the freshly clotted seepage of his chest wound. Posted to his left, a route map, North America awaiting. No price notation, for that he'd have to ask the woman drowsing at the ticket counter. So many cities. Where to go?

Portland, Oregon? Say hello to his mother? He didn't even know her phone number offhand. Her and Leo's phone number, to be precise. How would she react to his story, could he confide, what would she say? He could hardly guess anymore. Mother. Born again. Dunked in a tub. A ritual that drowned the wit and nourished the shrew. Lord Jesus was glory and light, but did he have to be a silent third party in every conversation and at every gathering? Oh, that's right, he was only silent to *Wayne*. The rebirthed all had holy antennae jammed up their absolved asses.

Besides, Portland was too distant for seventy-five bucks, and he'd be getting no half-price discounts for purchasing tickets a week or two in advance—he'd be leaving today. This morning. Before the sun if possible. Seventy-five dollars might not get him to Central Standard Time.

Keeping his arms over his chest, he stepped up to the ticket counter. The woman behind it rose from her slump, looking very tired. Her eyelids hung crookedly from squinted brows and her bangs were partway stuck to her forehead. Her shirt-tag said "Marcietta" and it looked equally exhausted, tilted, the center "i" threatening to drop off and split her name in two. She rubbed her eyes and cleared her throat.

"Help you?" she said, blinking at him.

Wayne stood there, unsure of what to do. Then Marcietta sighed and clicked her fingernails to the countertop. They were long perfect claws, blue like toilet deodorizer, and Wayne watched them tap and tap. He squeezed the bridge of his nose and disengaged from his stupefied orbit.

"S-seventy-five bucks," he said, lips catching on teeth, "What's it good for, mile-wise, distance-wise?"

Perking up, Marcietta bobbed her head and said, "Who you running from?" Her voice, suddenly clear and indiscreet, carried through the room. Wayne blanched, his breath faltering. People were arranging

at his back—he could feel their presence, their attention, their suspicion. Marcietta might as well program the scrolling lightboard to stop displaying departure alerts and start flashing *Hello Trailhound travelers, please note the neophyte fugitive at the ticket counter!* He had to cut off this line of conversation.

"Cleveland!" he blurted out. Good as anywhere.

"I got a cousin named Cleveland," Marcietta said with a laugh. "I'd run from him, too." She held her fingernails up to the counter lamp and tilted them. The blue polish was rich with crystals that glittered in the halogen, a pretty effect. Wayne admired the tiny lightshow.

"Nice nails," he said. Marcietta's laugh had been wonderful to hear, and he hoped for a smile. He craved a smile.

She lowered her hand, yawned, smiled.

Joy. Wayne rocked back and forth on his feet. Marcietta quit smiling and eyed him expectantly. But Wayne's flowchart was clogged. His resolve was disarrayed. What was he doing here? Oh. Ticket. Cleveland. Bus. Escape.

Grumbling noises came from behind, and Wayne glanced around to the people next in line, a clan of six: a man, a woman, four children. The two adults browbeated and glared at him, while the kids attempted mimicry of their elders with blessedly uneven success. The man cracked a sneer and said with quiet scorn, "Wanna get on with it?"

Wayne knew they were looking at his shirt, sure they were. No way could he keep wearing this turned-around tee with a rip on one side and blood on both sides. The shirt's gray tone remained a blessing, defusing the blood-color, but every way otherwise the garment advertised—*blared*—his trauma. Blood was on his jeans as well, but those stains were thin, flaky, and brown; they hadn't soaked into the fabric like the stains on the shirt. Without question, the shirt had to go, and it would. In a moment. Ticket comes first. Ticket was paramount.

"Cleveland," he told Marcietta. "The city. How much?"

Her fingernails flashed over the keys. "Philly to Cleveland, twelve hours thirty-five minutes estimated time. One way, forty-six dollars. Round trip, eighty-four."

"One way, I'll take it. When does it leave?"

"Earliest bus from now, six-thirty, departs gate nine. Cash?"

With his left hand, Wayne pulled several crinkled bills from his pocket. Over the past two hours, the pain in his Pappy-punching right hand had faded to a lively soreness, nothing broken that he could tell. The hand would heal fine if used sparingly—no rash finger-bending or excitable gripping—hence his conscious attempt to give it a rest.

Marcietta saw the money in Wayne's hand and said, "Cash." The drawer under the keyboard clanked

open and a printer whirred behind the counter. When the printer stopped, Marcietta tore free the ticket. "With tax, fifty-three fourteen."

Thick-fingered, Wayne shuffled up fifty-five dollars.

"What's that shirt?" Marcietta asked, taking the money.

"Huh?"

"Stuff on it."

"Aah..." Wayne squeezed his arms. "A souvenir. From this indie slasher flick, premiere night. Zombies. And, um, grizzly bears. Like, zombie grizzly bears." He turned around. "See, it's specially made, the back's slashed. Slasher movie. Bear claws."

"Why they didn't make the blood more red?"

"Printing mistake, they said. Wrong ink."

"You think they'd put a bear print on it, like a bloody paw. The movie's name, too. What good's the shirt without that?"

"What I thought too," Wayne said. "But, eh, it was free."

"What *is* the movie's name?" Marcietta asked.

"Lair of the White Bear."

"There's just one bear?"

"Well," Wayne said, "she's the momma bear."

Marcietta shook her head. "Momma zombie." She dropped change and the bus ticket into his hand, then tapped her blue nails on the glass of her monitor. "Remember, gate nine, six-thirty."

Wayne pocketed the ticket and money. “Thanks.”

“Enjoy your ride,” she said, and motioned to the family behind Wayne. The family grunted in unison: the freak was done, and Marcietta would be theirs! No, not just yet.

“Marcietta,” Wayne said.

She glanced up, looking surprised he was still there. “Hm?”

“I got these, these nephews, um, and one of ’em’s a bus enthusiast, really likes buses,” Wayne said, spinning the first lie that came to him. “*Especially* Trailhound. You got any t-shirts, sweatshirts, something I could buy, like for him to wear? Promotional stuff like that?”

“Promotional stuff?” Marcietta was impassive. “Like your zombie shirt?”

“I was thinkin’ a shirt that says ‘Hot on the Trailhound’ or whatever your commercials say? He’d love that.”

Marcietta shook her head and said, “Don’t have nothing like that.” But at seeing his reaction, she stroked her cheek and added, “I could check in the back.”

Wayne nodded fervently. “Please. That’d be great.”

Marcietta locked her register and went to the rear office. Now the counter was unstaffed, and the indignant crew at Wayne’s back was going to kill him. Sure enough, the father hissed a phrase clear and close for Wayne to hear: “Jeez, whaddafuck.”

Wayne’s chest redoubled its itching and his neck rippled with heat. After a sweltering moment, Marcietta emerged from the back office. “Look here.” She shook open a cloth bundle to reveal an illustrated t-shirt. “Sure it’s a little old, but that wouldn’t matter to you.”

Happy dogs playing poker on a bus. Trailhound logo below the picture, plus the words *TrailCon ’98 Vegas: Flushed with Pride!*

“Ten bucks,” she said.

“Marcietta, you are my sparkling angel.” Wayne sorted out ten dollars and exchanged it for the shirt. Now he had a little under twelve dollars left. “Thank you.”

He surrendered the counter and entered the terminal’s waiting area, which was empty but for two people sleeping at opposite corners. He went to a third corner and ripped off his guilt-ridden t-shirt, almost shrieking as the fabric tore free of his scabbed chest. Oops. Clenching back tears, he checked the long wound for wet spots, found it mostly dry, and eased on his new Trailhound shirt. Instantly he felt more composed. All praise to Marcietta. After trashing his old shirt, he retreated to the back of the room. Here, several sturdy chairs were arranged in a line, and bolted to the arm of each was a stark black box stenciled “TV.” These sets had probably witnessed the moon landing. Durable goods.

Wayne looked at the station's wall clock. 5:34. The morning news would be on. He sat before a television and dropped thirty-five cents into its coin slot. The screen coughed up a wavy field of lines, nothing more. He fiddled with a stubborn dial until audio lurched from the set, voices trilling the cheery pitch of an infomercial. He began twisting a different stubborn dial. Still no picture, but from the sound he knew the station was changing. *Click*, fitness show, *click*, prayer drive, *click*, newscast.

Stop! Wayne rapped his knuckles against the glass, but no video emerged to match the audio. A woman's voice, tweeting from the speaker grille: "—parently found wounded and unconscious near Hollander's body. We do not have her identity."

Wait, was this reporter talking about the Asian woman he'd lost a jacket to? And Hollander, was that the man he'd shot? Wayne stopped drumming on the screen and listened hard.

"Police and an ambulance were dispatched after a 911 phone call. As of yet we have no transcript of this call. How-*ever*, our Informer Six exclusive source has spoken directly to a police detective investigating the case, and it appears that the desperate call was placed around a quarter to two by Hollander, who was seeking medical aid for the unconscious woman."

Wayne looked around, saw nobody paying him any attention, and bashed his fist on the television's

top. Lucky hit! The picture emerged, snowy but recognizable. Now he could see the reporter. She was outside in the morning dark, shooting on location. But this location gave nothing to her and nothing to anyone, because nothing remained. Four hours on, the broken truck and broken woman were gone, the dead man in flannel was gone, and the street was ready for the morning's eventual traffic.

"We have information from our source and two unrelated tips that a gunshot was heard at or near the time of Franklin Hollander's death—" The reporter paused for a moment's air. "—also we've discovered that a bullet was recovered from the incident scene."

The dead man's first name was Franklin. Did they have to say his first name? Did they have to make him any more real?

The reporter, with gusto: "Who fired the shot? No gun was found at or near the scene. Our source, who as we said wishes to remain anonymous, indicates that police found signs of a struggle between Hollander and another person. Could this person be the gunman, and who exactly is he? Earlier this morning, police entered the Center City apartment of this man—" A grainy, enlarged photograph of a face claimed the screen from corner to corner. The eyes were squinted and red, an uneven spate of hair dotted the neck and chin, the lips were curled in a corrupted sneer. This face stunned Wayne, it kicked the air from him.

But it wasn't his own face—it belonged to his friend and apartment-mate Doogie. Seedy, stubbled, inflamed by the freakish demonic glow of improper color correction, Doogie was looking like bad news indeed, a mad vagabond with a lust for wickedry. A tremor rose in Wayne's throat, and bile came with it, searing his nasal passages and watering his eyes.

People were filling up the bus depot's waiting room, group by group and loner by loner. Fearing that his miserable expression would court attention, Wayne reached over and snatched a ruffle of newspaper lying two seats away. He tore open the pages and ducked behind them. Yesterday's *Philadelphia Keynote*, the sports section. Peeking just over the newspaper's top, he kept an eye to the television.

"Wayne Milton—" the reporter flexed dramatic, her finger jabbing towards Doogie's face, now hovering at the screen's upper right corner "—white male, aged twenty-four. Our source has indisputable proof that police breached Milton's apartment after finding evidence linking him to the scene."

The picture briefly changed to a shot of Conifer Street Arms, the building's front. Wayne stifled a shudder at this glimpse of home. Connie Arms, honey, take me back, make it right! Then it was back to Doogie's face, and the reporter punctuated her next line with a disapproving frown: "Milton was not present, but evidence of drug use was." Evidence of drug use? So the apartment had been searched. Bad

for Doogie—but as consolation, evidence of drug use was worlds better than evidence of drug dealing.

"So here are the questions," the reporter stated. "When will Wayne Milton surface, and will the missing gun surface with him? Until that happens, confusion is all we can count on."

Confusion, exactly, Wayne wouldn't dispute. What else to call it, how else to describe his name married to Doogie's picture, a mismatch beamed to the whole region? Easy to deduce how it happened: some clumsy aide in the Informer Six TV studio had acquired photos of Wayne and Doogie but goofed when labeling them. Wayne did production work, he knew about goofs. His guilt was nailed to Doogie's forehead because of a sleepy-eyed staffer's casual blunder.

His guilt—he'd convicted himself already. No, Wayne wouldn't accept this guilt, this blame, he wouldn't be some sodden ox yoked to Hollander's corpse, the dead man's finger pointed in rigor mortis: *You did this*. Maybe so, but Hollander was certainly complicit in his own killing. Right, totally right, yet a ticking had commenced inside Wayne, a wrongness at his core. His name was Wayne Milton, and he was alive. His attacker's name was Franklin Hollander, and he was dead. So be it. Tumble of a loaded die.

Move on. Wayne pulled the bus ticket from his pocket and studied it. A plan was forming around this ticket, the accidental kind of plan, drafty with

holes but better than nothing. He would escape to the highway, the journey buying him a reprieve, the reprieve allowing him to plot his fate without the constant brain-clotting fear of capture. Twelve hours on a Cleveland-bound bus would be time enough to divine a solution, find salvation, or resign to incarceration.

On the television, the reporter proclaimed onwards, her voice a nasal note of caution. “Please, if you see Wayne Milton—” Doogie’s picture zoomed back to full-screen size, Wayne’s name tacked below it “—notify police. Do not try to approach him, as he may have a gun.” With that, the news broke for a commercial. A family-style sedan raced through canyons while the on-screen text bragged of nine airbags, built-in child seats, three hundred horsepower, and free puppy on approved credit. The news returned. Weather and traffic. Good chance of showers today. Roads clear so far.

Wayne’s lips were mashed to his teeth, he felt like a huge filthy rodent, a scuttle went down his arms and legs. He sank deeper behind his paper. The news ended. More news followed. Then he had an idea. Nothing brilliant, but possibly helpful to Doogie. He wouldn’t dare call the police from inside the depot, but he still had a half-hour before his bus left. Dropping his newspaper and his caution, he sprang from the chair, out the depot door, and into a gritty, sunless dawn. After five blocks of distancing, he went

up to a pay phone. He fed it fifty cents and dialed his own apartment.

Doogie didn’t answer, which confirmed Wayne’s fear. He hung up and dialed the cops.

Through the cold receiver, a voice to match: “Police.”

“There was a mistake on the television news,” Wayne stated. “Channel Six. Informer Six. They put Doug Royko’s face on the screen, but he’s innocent. It’s a mistake, a mistake.” Then he hung up and fled from the phone, running as if the cops could bust out from the coin-return in hot pursuit.

A ludicrous thought, but psychic: when Wayne got back to the Trailhound depot, an officer was at the door with arms crossed. He smiled at Wayne, who was huffing from his run.


“Late for a bus?” the cop asked.

“Ah, y-yeah,” Wayne stammered, “gotta catch it.”

The cop nodded. “Better get your ass in there, then.” He gestured to the door. “Have a good morning.”

“You too,” Wayne said, and entered the depot with forced calm. He sped to the back of the increasingly busy waiting room and grabbed another loose fold of newsprint. Again the *Philadelphia Keynote*, but a different section, and the date read today. Just off the press and already cast aside? Wayne looked around but didn’t see the rest of the issue. He opened up the single section and hid behind it. Eyes jittery

and ears tuned for boarding announcements, he awaited his getaway ride.



In the bathroom of the same bus depot, Percy stood and laughed. He was, quite remarkably, happy. Buttoned over his chest was his father's jacket, good as new after a few seams mended; on his back was a seasoned knapsack, cinched tight against his shoulder blades. The jacket would provide luck and warmth, in that order—and the knapsack was an old friend, Percy's traveling companion for over a decade. It was sturdy, trusty, and vintage enough to have been made in Trenton.

A ticket to Cleveland, a fresh crossword magazine, and a walkman were curled into a pouch stitched along the knapsack's outer shell. This marsupial feature was a handy thing, because the bag's main compartment was supremely stuffed and unopenable for fear of never again closing it. A Pandora's box, sort of, minus myth and plus toiletries. To get the thing buckled shut, Percy had been forced to apply a few stomps and an ironman squeeze. All gestures of affection, naturally, but the knapsack wasn't above some good-natured retribution, and Percy now suspected that his clothes were soaked in mouthwash and cologne. It didn't much worry him, his garments possibly stinking like a mint julep. With Isabelle on his mind, nothing much worried him. And he was

presently enjoying a mood in which many ordinary things revealed a disarmingly comedic nature.

For a Trailhound depot, this was a surprising and admirable bathroom, made all the more so by Percy being its sole inhabitant. Circa his roadway days, in truck stops and diners and bars, Percy's restroom visits would customarily star a gallery of urinal groaners and bowl moaners. Not here, and splendid was the emptiness.

Did any parade ever look so fine as this elegant row of porcelain soldiers standing at attention? Fixed atop each urinal's piping was a smooth cube of translucent agate, a tiny red eye glaring from within. Your everyday automated flushers, biding time until visiting courtiers engaged them. The faucets along the wall also beamed out ruby motion-sensors, as did the hand dryer. Even the soap spigots were cybernetic! Scruffy burglar-alarm castaways silently craving the order to blow, squirt, swirl, spray!

Were they as they seemed, ingenuous innocent bathroom toys? No! They were harbingers of the nanotechnical future, a dazzling Dickian fauxtopia: first, a door-mounted ingress beam would impel a buckyball zipper to power down the fly with a kinetically charged micromotor. Then the urinal-embedded RFID would cue the sphincter, and everything would flow faultlessly until the prostate transponder beeped the proper checksum. All throughout, the vesicular remuneration subliminator

would engage your brain and pulse light beer slogans while you drained the dirty weasel.

If Percy didn't ramp up and drain *his* dirty weasel, he was going to miss his six-thirty bus to Cleveland. That would bleaken his heart most ashamedly. He walked to the nearest of the urinals. Stationed before it, he kept his posture straight and his head up. No, Percy would not look down at the urinal cake. But the cake *wanted* him to look. It *demande*d he look.

He looked. So moist and vital, this frosty white cake, this selfless circle of common heroism. When catalyzed by onrushing fluid, it unleashed harsh perfume to nullify septic fragrance; it defanged the yellow banshee with sacrificial zeal. The cake was resting at the urinal's bowl-shaped bottom, its purific halo encased by a plastic cage whose molded drape conformed to the bowl's concavity. And hark! This molded drape wished to impart a message to Percy and his tinkling kin, for printed in deep purple over the discolored vinyl substrate was this command: *D.A.R.E. to keep kids off drugs! 1-800-DARE-NOW!*

A vision came to Percy: a quartet of shifty, grifty kids squatting around a fire of splinted rubbish, the flames belching a grisly and consumptive smoke. One kid's sleeve is already up, his face febrile and arm raked with damage. Another kid fondles a carbon-stained pipe, a watery disease in his eyes. A third, the baby of the bunch, pulls a teabag of milled

leaf from one shoe and papers from another. He's nervous, chewing his cruddy nails.

Body language runs hot—soon the games will begin, soon but not yet, and the three turn skittish when regarding the fourth member of their junked-up convent. He is the superior and the ultimate, and he dominates the mood. His bearing is hard and tight, beady and tough, and he sneers at his companions with precipitous contempt. They meet his scorn with deference, and watch silently as his hand enters the pocket of his midnight-blue coat. A moment later the hand leaves the pocket—and gripped in the fingers is a disc-shaped metal case, brilliantly obsidian.

The eyes of the others follow this glinted case as he gently rests it on the ground. He whispers a password no one can understand and the lid lifts, soundless and smooth. From behind his ear he pulls a pair of ribbed metal chopsticks. Expertly wielding them, he dips into the case and removes a lambent circle of supercharged vibration. Dazzling through the dirty smoke of the rubbish-fire, the circle resembles an electrified hockey puck, chaotically white instead of chalky black.

The other kids gasp as one. They've heard of this prize, they've talked of it—but to see it? Imagination *bleeds* to see it! The cake, the *cake*, cooked up in a secret Piscataway lab hidden beneath a manmade lake. A laboratory codenamed *The Bakery*, a place of hype

and rumor, a narcotic mint of laser-bored tunnels on total lockdown, armored detail throughout.

One kid whispers, awestruck, “Yo, you got the *cake!*”

The keeper of the cake nods. He does not smile. One never smiles where the cake is concerned. Enthralled beyond pretense, the group rapturously watches as he lifts the cake—held fast in his chopsticks—to his open mouth. The group gives a collective shiver: these chopsticks, solid titanium, commence to smoke. The keeper places the cake halfway into his mouth, wraps his lips around it, and takes the mad sap into his body, sucking and sucking until the cake’s chemical lucidity trembles and fades.

Soon it is done. The cake is spent. The keeper is quiet.

Nobody speaks. Five seconds pass. Ten. Fifteen. Maybe it’s all fake, maybe the legend of the cake ain’t nothin’ but a lie—

Abruptly the keeper tumbles back, his pupils dancing like live shrimp on hot oil. His limbs convulse, his tongue springs from his mouth, his throat opens in a great loud whine. This whine crescendos, peaks, falters—and ends. He lies motionless, the fatal cake dropped to the ground, inert.

A stillness follows, a powerful quashing silence. Breaking it is the kid who before had whispered in awe; with a guttural curse, he places his stash on the ground and creeps over to the lifeless body.

The others join him, and together they form a snug circle and look at the dried-up cake with bitter dread. “Fucking cake,” one says after a moment of silence, his gaze cold and without tears. “Why’d he have to take the *cake?*”

End scene, fade to black.

Certainly not a library story. Not much of a story, period. Percy finished up and belted his jeans, the imagery fading from his mind. He stepped away from the urinal and waited for the automatic flusher to animate. No go, so he danced his hand before the electric eye in increasingly creative figures. Success finally came in the form of a flying knuckle-bird, the electric eye winking its approval. As he flapped thumb and pinky, the plumbing rattled cool water down the chute and over the cake.

When Percy went to the sink, a speaker in the bathroom began to crackle. *Ding!* A boarding announcement was about to broadcast. Was it, is it, wait, wait—hah, so it is! The news he’s been longing to hear! “Six-thirty to Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Chicago, now boarding, gate nine, now boarding...”

Isabelle Patel, pilot light of my loins, here I come.

Chapter Nine



tipples & sniffles

KAZU IS DRUNK. KAZU IS AT THE SNAK CLUB BAR IN TOKYO. Kazu is drinking whiskey. Kazu hates whiskey. Hates it! A taste like medicine and melted tires. Why must he keep drinking it? Look at him slouched over the bar. Watch his mouth open, hear his voice speak the poison words! Whiskey, whiskey, give me whiskey.

Turn left, see his boss. Whiskey, give the man whiskey. Turn right, see his officemates lining the bar. More whiskey, give 'em more whiskey. Slurp, there went his own whiskey. Last one. No more whiskey ever again.

Stupid bartender: Kазy! One more whiskey?

“Shut up, you monkey. I’ve had enough.”

Eh, Kaz! Don’t lie, you need your vitamins. Drink up!

A letter is in Kazu’s pocket. He sips from his refreshed glass and looks around. His co-workers pay him no mind. The stupid bartender has gone to hassle others and pays him no mind. He takes the letter from his pocket. Nice quality stationery, the kind his sister likes, color and texture of pressed berries, dried flowers, plant crap. The letter was received today but already the creases from his folding and re-folding run deeply across the page. He’s been opening and closing it, holding it and reading it, in his office, in the company washroom, in an alleyway, at this bar.

My Kazuhito,

(Sorry, already I’m sorry.)

How’s the weather in Tokyo? Ha. More relevant – you will be glad to know that I finally left “the pig.”

(My words. I called her boyfriend a pig. He used her. With her permission. Always the same story.)

Sorry about the pills. I’m better now.

(Why didn’t you call me?)

Why didn’t you call me?

(My Aki. I didn’t know, the doctors didn’t contact me, I didn’t know! There’s nobody left but you to tell me and you don’t tell me anything.)

I'm going to America. Don't be mad.

"Eh, Kaz, nothing beats whiskey!"

(How can you go?)

I've taken care of the costs and everything else. Don't worry.


(That's not what I meant.)

We'll talk soon, okay.

(Okay.)

— *Aki.*

(How can you go?)



Doogie was reposed on a blue couch at the police station, waiting for Detective Sherpti to finish up some paperwork so they could leave. The detective had offered to drive Doogie home, and while it wasn't that long a walk to Conifer Street Arms, refusal was *not* an option. Why Sherpti demanded to play taxi, he wouldn't say. Probably he wanted to pop into the apartment and have himself a gander. Do some unsanctioned snoopering or whatnot.

Doogie didn't need any "favors" from Detective Sherpti, but right now the cop was King and his decree Law, this power vested by coercion: Sherpti knew about Doogie's felonial farmers' market but was declining to make the arrest, or even investigate—a gracious oversight, mayhaps, but one that raised a Sword of Damocles over Doogie's head. His very, very tired head.

"How much longer?" Doogie nuzzled deeper into the blue couch. "Don't mind if I fall asleep."

Sherpti motioned for him to be patient, then returned to his forms. "I'm on the last stack. Patience, my pon-farrian padawan. It's early still, and dawn has yet to stroke our cheeks."

Doogie had no idea what the detective was talking about, big surprise. He was just glad to be out of that cold, hard interrogation room and nuzzled into this soft, comfy sofa. Who knew that, sacked away in back rooms, police stations had such friendly furniture? A thought came to him. "Hey, if you had Wayne's keys, why'd your jugheads smash my door instead of simply unlocking it? They wanted the satisfaction?"

Sherpti didn't look up from his paperwork. "Rick and Chaz didn't have the keys. When we called the address over the radio, they were cruising nearest and popped by. Anyway, using a suspect's keys is one of those thorny legal issues—"

"Suspect? Wayne's a suspect now?"

"Person of interest. Better?"

"Yeah. Kicking down a door is not a thorny legal issue?"

"That, little piggy, is defensible police procedure. As a general rule, we don't stand before a potentially hostile sus—eh, *person of interest's* door and kindly suggest he open up. Either the perp hoofs out the back or he shoots out the front."

“Ah, but if your guys didn’t have keys, how’d they get into the building? Lobby door’s always locked, somebody buzzed ’em in? *I* sure didn’t.”

“Electronic override, codebook, jaybar, fire escape, who knows. We do this for a living.” Sherpti squared up and signed the paperwork packet, then stood and clapped Doogie on the shoulder. “Up, me boy, we’re off.”

Doogie got to his feet, yawned, and followed the detective to the building’s exit. Out in the parking lot, he gave a shiver and looked around. Dark and heavy lay the early-morning sky, giving no taste of the dawn on tap.

Sherpti pulled out his keys and walked over to a small angular coupe. To Doogie it was an undignified conveyance, more unpleasant than sporty, a wedge of gray cheese with pop-up headlights. Sherpti unlocked the doors and they ducked inside the car’s petite cabin. Doogie kicked something on the matless floor and looked down to see a score of Tic Tac boxes, all empty.

“Cheaper than Nicorette,” Sherpti said.

Doogie didn’t find this explanation very hard-boiled.

The detective tapped his car key against his finger and gave Doogie a serious look. “Now, Doug, it’s inevitable—the media will track you down. My advice, don’t talk to ’em. Especially the TV guys. You tell ’em all we discussed about Wayne and Hollander and

so on, they’ll blow it up on the newscast and create what I call a misinformation problem. I suggest you keep to yourself. I *strongly* suggest it.”

Doogie had no plans to tell the media anything, but a spark of protest still fizzled within him, be he Damocles or not. “Don’t I got a right to talk to the press? I’m *pretty* sure I do—”

Sherpti started the car. “You do, but look, you’ll only worsen the, the misinformation, and then it might get real inflated, real chaotic. The news people might declare your Wayne guilty for the ratings boost. Accuracy ain’t their forte, sizzle is.”

“If you want the news to get it right, why don’t you tell them what you know?”

Sherpti cranked into reverse and hit the gas. The car whirred backwards, sounding like a toy. “Public announcements are a compromised business,” he said. “Nobody trusts the cops and nobody trusts the media. We don’t want Wayne’s name connected to Hollander’s death. The quieter we keep it, the better our chance at finding him clean.” He shifted into first and sat there talking. “TV, radio, they start howling his name, yapping about gunshots, about death, this half-assed bricabrac, he might duck and run t’ who knows where. The media might know something’s up, scannin’ the bands, but it’s a big city, and they aren’t likely to jerry up a story ’til there’s real meat to fry.” He stomped the gas pedal and broke the city speed limit before reaching the end of the police lot.

Doogie clamped his fingers to the door grip. “Oof...”

The detective pumped the brakes at the lot’s exit, then gunned the car into the street. “My best hope—my best plausible hope—is that Wayne’s okay, he’s okay but confused, and sometime soon, even today, he’ll recover his senses. He’ll realize we have his ID, and come to us. Him with no priors, plus your testimony, makes me think this incident could be a wacked-out accident, reverse serendipity. *Could* be. Given that, I hope he’ll get smart and visit us, not the other way around.” Sherpti chuckled. “At the least, he might touch base with you. That case, gimme a ring.”

If Doogie responded with noises instead of words, he could avoid sarcastic commentary. Worth a try. “Erm.”

Sherpti kept his eyes to the road. “We don’t *know* Wayne shot the gun, don’t know *where* the gun is. All we know is Wayne was there at the scene—and that, too, is partly circumstantial. Television would take our ignorance as willful secrecy, they’d try to analyze and extrapolate. Which would lead to a boiling crock of dogshit, scrolling updates, dramatic huff ’n’ puff. Especially if it shapes up to be a slow news day otherwise.”

Doogie bobbed his head. “Gaah.” No, enough with the stupid noises. “What about the newspapers?”

“Sure, the papers’ll get it, but we don’t have to worry about their stories ’til tomorrow morning, and

that’s a long way away. In any case—if Wayne doesn’t show by late afternoon or early evening today, we’ll give a proper public statement.”

“You don’t want me to talk, I wouldn’t anyway. What about Kevin, what if *he* talks to the media? What if they find him?”

Sherpti’s voice became dismissive. “Eh, Kevin.”

“You told him everything you told me? Dead guy, bleeding woman, gunshot, all that?”

“Most of it. He projectile-puked halfway through my rundown, right after my offhand suggestion that his tears were a pathetic ruse. Bad suggestion.” Sherpti’s lips flattened in a peckish sneer. “Puke was only the half of it, the boy dripped more snot than a whole preschool. Pain in the—”

“You should feel lucky if vomit and snot’s all you got coming. Y’should feel lucky your Ricky and Chaz didn’t break any bones with that door. If it were me I’d be fixin’ up a lawsuit so fas—”

“Stop.” The detective’s brow twisted like a switchback.

Wary of Sherpti’s expression, Doogie complied, but then in a softer voice said, “I just don’t like you rippin’ on Kevin, okay?”

“Gosh, you’re so forgiving of him. You shoulda heard him ratting you out between sobs. ‘Doogie’s gil-tee! Wah! Doogie sells poot, lotsa poot! Wah! I dinny do nussin’, lemme go!’ The boy could’ve got you felony time and all you do is defend him.”

“Look, get off it,” Doogie said. “I think I’ll wait to hear his side of the story, if you don’t mind.”

“It’s your life. Anyway. After Kaybee ralphed on me, I gave up and took him home out of sympathy, the misguided type.”

“You told him to keep quiet, too?”

“Well.” Sherpti shrugged. “I *tried* to be nice. Really I did. ‘Please don’t talk to the press, Kevin, it would hurt the quality of our investigation.’ See, nice. But he kept bawling, and I couldn’t pierce that wall of tears. And hell if I was gonna babysit the fussybucket to make sure he kept his mouth shut—I just wanted to get rid of him and get on with things.

“So, okay, I told a few prison tales to engender a...a *respect* for silence. Like, don’t go off and blab to the press, Kevin, or we’ll introduce you to our lonely friends at the supermax. The moment Miss Kevin heard the word *prison*, he stopped crying real quick and did this meek little nod. I took that as compliance.”

“Oh, I bet you did. You cops love playing that intimidation game, you get *off* on it. Gets your blood hot.”

The detective flopped his head aside and gave Doogie a look of prepared indifference. “My job’s all about sangfroid, me lad. You may not like it, but intimidation works.”

Wisely or not, Doogie felt his anger rise. “A bully at heart. You book me with something big, I’ll fight

you, you try me. But Kevin was just smoking out! You can’t jail him for a misdemeanor like that. No way at all.”

“Really?” Sherpti said. “Law says we can hold lawbreakers on our discretion, regardless of charge. Down Texas way, a lady jaywalked and spent a week-end in stir. Atone, woman!”

“But that’s Texas.”

“It was until last week, when the Supreme Court pulled a five-four to make it national.”

Doogie resolved to subscribe to the newspaper when this bedlam was over. Grabbing it once a week at the Toby-Mart seemed glaringly insufficient all of a sudden. “Somebody should bitch-slap Scalia,” he muttered, his wind gone.

“How you talk. My dog’s name is Nino.”

“How I talk? Lemme tell you, *my* talk is not your problem. Forget the crying and puking, I’ll wage that Kevin’s right now calling up the press and spilling every damn thing you wanted down low. I bet your tough-guy pose backfired and you just don’t know it yet.”

“Yeah right,” Sherpti said. “I’m sure you know him inside and out, but the thought of jail’s enough to check me, let alone a pussy boychik like him.”

“Passive-aggressive.”

“What?”

“Kevin is.”

Sherpti waved his hand. “So?”

“So?” Doogie said sternly. “I’ll tell you so, Dick Sherpti. Like once he was furious at me but wouldn’t let me know, and he had two rental videos that we’d taken out on my account. He’d promised to return them, *don’t worry, D-man, I’ll get ’em back, sure thing*, but he was secretly scamming me because he thought I’d been flirting with this tribal ’roid-bot down at the club, as if I *liked* inked-up baldies—”

“Doug, please skip that part and find a point.”

“Point? Point is that Kevin was pissed, real pissed, but he didn’t let it show, not a piffle of steam. Two months later I get this hundred-dollar jab on my credit card. Kevin didn’t return the tapes, man. He melted ’em in a non-stick pan, low heat and lots of Pam. Passive-aggressive, total textbook, makin’ me drop a centagram on *Robotjox* and *Spurtacus*.”

Sherpti looked at him. “Did you say *Spurtacus*?”

“Sure did. I’m sorry to say it wasn’t a quality homage.”

“Shocking.” Sherpti scowled. “Anyway, Doug, that situation’s a bit different. You’re talking about a petty-cash spat, not prison.”

“So you say,” Doogie said. “Maybe I don’t have a Supreme Court to connect my corollaries, but I know what I know.”

When they turned onto Conifer Street, Sherpti let out a mean cackle and pointed out the windshield.

“Perk up, Doug, it’s the fuckin’ welcome wagon.”

Doogie perked up and just as quickly ducked down. Idling before his apartment building was a white van whose back and side decals read “Informer Six: Philly’s HomeTownSource!”

Informer Six was the news arm of a “local” TV station, and about as HomeTown to Philly as a manatee. The station was owned by Ulfus Communications Systems, a quasi-national amorphous mass headquartered on a lovely tax-sheltered islet missing from most maps. In the Philadelphia market alone, Ulfus owned two additional “local” TV channels, seven “local” FM stations ranging from payola rock to payola country, and WINF1030 NewsRadio, the leader on the AM band.

“Busy little beavers.” Sherpti made a fist and gnawed on it. “Chomp chomp. Can’t say I’m happy about this.”

Doogie wrapped his arms over his face. “Chomp.”

“In fact, to say it true, I’m madder than a shit-house kookaburra to see this clown here.” Sherpti skidded the car into a fire zone behind the news van’s windowless rear, then yanked the brake and turned to Doogie. “Wait here and keep low.”

Doogie nodded and sunk deeper while Sherpti popped the door and sprang outside. Doogie watched him rap the side of the news van and jog up to its driver’s-side window. When the window rolled down, Sherpti thrust his head into the opening.

From his seat in the car, Doogie couldn't see the detective's face, only his shoulders tilting against the van—and from the rowdy jabbing of those shoulders, there appeared to be either an argument or a strangling taking place. The bustle continued until Sherpti stepped back, dipped into his pocket, and unsheathed his badge. He knocked it against his palm and threw a mockingly sympathetic look at the van's driver; he stabbed his finger in a “git, git!” fashion. The driver turned on the van's headlights and motored off in a huff. Sherpti folded his arms and skipped in place, after which he turned and gestured for Doogie to exit the car.

Doogie did. “Thanks. I wonder how they knew—”

Sherpti cut him off with a grunt and said, “They got their ways.” He scoped the block as if something were missing, his eyes cocked and scrutinizing. Then he cursed under his breath and motioned to the entrance of Conifer Street Arms. “Shall we?”

Doogie was about to protest but then considered the Damocles blade dangling overhead in a lazy spin. His displeasure must have shown, because Sherpti said, “Oh, I'm not up to no good. Just curious to see how the boys left your hidey-hole.”

Doogie unlocked the lobby door and together they went inside. They climbed three floors and traveled the hallway to unit 3B, a home sweet home no longer inviolate. The apartment's kicked-in door had been stood up and tilted against the empty frame,

blocking the way inside. Twisted hinges and splinter-dusted screws lay in a pile on the floor. Doogie touched the door's dented face and scraped a fingernail along the black smudge left by a bootsole.

Sherpti attempted to turn the door's pitted brass knob. “Still locked, I see.” He examined the door's edge, then nudged his toe to the ruptured hinges and fasteners. “Looks like Rick and Chaz couldn't get your door back on.”

“Some joker *you* are,” Doogie said sourly, taking his key and twisting open the doorknob's tumblers. Minor satisfaction, the mechanism was intact. “Why you think they even tried? All your stormtroopers did was lean it against the opening so anybody could kick it aside and help himself to my shit.”

“At least they did that.” Sherpti slid the door off the entrance and tipped it to the hallway wall. He peered into the dark apartment, reached in, and flipped on the lights.

“Yoo-hoo, Wayne Milton, c'mon out!” he called, then pulled back and smirked at Doogie. “Stranger things have happened.” He ran his hand along the empty doorframe. “Reattaching your door's gonna take wider-gauge screws and new hinges. Be glad your deadbolt wasn't engaged—the frame's still intact.”

“Be glad? Be glad?” Doogie sputtered. “Grrr—”

“You, my friend, need a dose of your own medicine.” Sherpti entered the apartment and circled the

den, weaving his feet around extinguished candles, empty cans, pillows, clutter. “Which room is Wayne’s?”

Doogie shuffled up and waved to a door whose inexpertly painted face was largely obscured by a poster of Picasso’s *Guernica* turned sideways and fixed with artfully sparse staples. Sherpti went through this door and casually knocked it half-closed behind him. With the detective so occupied, Doogie sped to his bedroom and did a quick inventory. Nothing seemed taken or stolen, a welcome relief. He dug in a drawer and pulled out his Puffet PDA, which looked unmolested. His relief doubled: this little computer served (under heavy encryption) as ledger, rolodex, and wireless e-mail client, and its contents were vastly incriminating.

Doogie flipped open the Puffet, booted the system, and checked his e-mail. A few client leads, nothing from Kevin. He loaded up Mercurine PortaMessage to see if Kevin was online (*alpine_slush* was Kevin’s screen name, as he loved to ski; Doogie felt the nickname fit regardless.) But *alpine_slush* was listed as offline, so Doogie closed the Puffet and stashed it back in the drawer. He returned to the den and fell into a pile of pillows just as Sherpti emerged from Wayne’s room.

“Find everything?” Doogie asked.

Ignoring the question, the detective pocketed his hands and frowned at his surroundings. “All these

pillows. Don’t you guys believe in chairs?”

“*Feng shui*, man. All the rage.”

“Oh, Doogster, that’s like *so* last year. The cognoscenti’s moved on to habanero-chai enemas with a sprig, just a sprig, of basil.” Again Sherpti went to the doorframe and traced a finger down its length. “I’ve gotta hit the hospital now, but hey—I’ll spot you ten for the hinges and stuff. Feel better?”

“No.”

The detective shook his head. “This stuff happens. It’s this new training, this survivalist thing. A warrior mentality. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. You probably know that we’re the heroin mecca of the eastern seaboard? Except our pilgrimage is so hallowed it happens every day.”

“I hate needles,” Doogie said. He rubbed at his arms.

“Me too.” Sherpti snuck a ten-dollar bill from his wallet. “Go buy a few screws on me.”

Doogie stood up, took the money, and mumbled a thanks. He leaned against the wall and chewed the inside of his cheek. Looking pointlessly around the room, he noticed Kevin’s leather jacket hanging on a wall peg.

“Tsh,” he said under his breath, “forgot the Torotex.” He remembered dressing Kevin in the hazy aftermath of the police attack, when blubbing was all the boy would do. Boxers, crewneck, chinos, cross-trainers: Doogie had gathered Kevin’s clothes

and yanked them over their owner, smartly thinking to slip Kevin's wallet and keys into the chino pockets. Shortly thereafter they'd been locked in the perp hutch, processed, and driven to interrogation. Among such drama Doogie had overlooked Kevin's deluxe coat, his prized Torotex vintage-spec bombardier.

Sherpti followed Doogie's gaze. "Sweet jacket, garden-boy."

"It's Kevin's."

Sherpti went to the jacket, pulled up a flap, looked at the lining. "Aye, a map of occupied France!" He popped the Torotex off the peg and spread it open, inside out. "Wanna hear the story of Uncle Luke and *la belle mademoiselle*? It's a Sherpti family classic."

"No, man, I don't."

Sherpti returned Kevin's jacket to the peg. "Your loss."

Doogie shoved himself off the wall, thoughts of Kevin amassing. Truthfully, he was saddened by Kevin's squealing on his weed dealing, but he also knew better than to judge rashly. Really, he should visit Kevin and have a chat. But he always hated going to Kevin's place. Kevin lived in a five-room boarding house that illegally domiciled eleven people. Super cheap living for Kevin, half the price of Doogie's rent—but Kevin's overabundant housemates were awful folk, total scabbers, vulgar holdouts from the bareback age. Of their ilk Doogie did not approve.

Though Kevin had his own room (and a great couch, and stolen cable), the bathroom and kitchen were communally defiled by these squalid Philistines.

Doogie stepped out of the apartment and into the hallway, where he sternly regarded the loose door propped to the wall. "How'm I gonna keep this door shut tight while I'm out for screws and hinges? Can't leave it loose, be an open invitation..."

"What's to steal?" Sherpti said, casting his arms about the apartment and then joining Doogie in the hallway.

"My shit! Wayne's shit, too."

"You're a smart chipper, you'll figure something out."

Doogie glowered.

The detective extended a hand and said, "Shalom, Doug. Miss Takayanagi calls."

Doogie shook it. "Yeah. Who?"

"The Japanese girl with the head wound. She's at University Hospital, bandaged up, more or less conscious. Or so I hear."

"You said she was knocked out the whole time and didn't get to see Wayne, but you can't know that for certain, right?"

"I'm going there to find out."

"Can I come?"

"Oh." Sherpti frowned. "I'm afraid not."

"Aw, fuck, if she might be talkin' about Wayne then shouldn't I be hearin' it? He's *my* roommate—"

“Doug, look.” Sherpti held out his hands and patted the air. “Maybe later, but I’ve got procedure to keep. What you *should* do is get some sleep. Wayne’s gonna show, he’ll be all right.”

Doogie scowled. “Hah, I trust you.”

“As you should,” Sherpti said, and left.

Though tired and dismayed, Doogie didn’t want to sleep or sit around. It was too early for the hardware store to be open, but other duties could pass the time: he would drop by Kevin’s, drop off the jacket, have a cuppa tea and a long chat.

But he wouldn’t leave home without giving his busted front door a temporary fix, as the Conifer Street Arms building had many floors and gobs of strange neighbors. Doogie allowed that nobody’d scavenged the apartment while he’d been trapped at the police station, but that could be dumb luck.

Also true, as Sherpti had sneered, there wasn’t much of value in the den itself—but neither Doogie’s nor Wayne’s bedroom had a lockable door. Inside Doogie’s bedroom was a fat jar of rainy-day cash, an elegant overcoat for steppin’ out (a *rovercoat* in Doogie’s parlance), and a bevy of private stuff. Inside Wayne’s, some junk. But it was probably important junk to Wayne. Wherever he was, he’d certainly appreciate Doogie’s consideration.

Doogie figured he didn’t *have* to visit Kevin. Security-wise, it was easier for Kevin to visit him, and a phone call could make that happen. But Doogie

ached to make a statement by paying his spineless lover a personal visit, a visit taken On the Wings of Love! Doogie was often afflicted with the desire to appear magnanimous and lordly, and surprising Kevin with a jacket and forgiveness would sate that silly yen.

Debate over, time to heave-ho! Doogie lugged door 3B into the apartment and tried to set it in the frame, but at removing his hands it immediately fell inward. He pushed the door back into the frame and tried to affix it by engaging the deadbolt. Now the door dove to the floor with a one-half twist. Consternating. A new approach was needed, and under the kitchenette sink he found three rolls of duct tape, a coil of speaker wire, and a roach bomb. He remembered buying the bomb, so the other stuff had to be Wayne’s. What could be done with these implements? Could he destroy intruders by triggering the roach bomb to a booby-trapped tripwire? No. But the duct tape would suffice, if used right. He tore off a goodly length and enjoyed the way it clung to his fingers, its weave both soft and resilient.

In the chamber of his mind, grace and precision contrived a solution. First he placed Kevin’s leather jacket in the building’s hallway. Then he reentered the apartment and knelt over the fallen door, tape roll in hand. He stretched the silver tape along the door’s upper edge, saw that it was good, and then proceeded to layer strips around the door’s entire

perimeter. This would expand the door's dimensions for increased on-frame friction.

Next he devised some duct-tape handles along the door's face. After backstepping out of the apartment and into the hallway, he reached through the entrance, grabbed these handles, and yanked the door up and into its frame, forcefully wiggling until it became good and lodged. Sticky silver bubbled out the flush seams of this jammed-in barrier, and Doogie granted these seams an aesthetic trim by stretching more tape over them, long graceful pulls. Then he stood in the hallway and grinned at his Tate-worthy handiwork, *door 3B resurrectum ductus*.

Inside the apartment, the phone began to ring. Doogie's grin faltered, and unthinkingly he twisted the knob and tried to open the door. Nope, it wouldn't budge. He pushed harder. The door nudged inward slightly, but no more.

The phone kept ringing. Only a shake past six, still early morning, who might it be? Wayne, could it possibly be Wayne? Kevin? Or most likely—as that Informer Six news van foreboded—some nasty reporter, already sniffing around? All these variables, and maybe the call was totally unrelated to this mess. Doubtful though. Four rings, five, six—

He should bust in and get it. A few hearty blows would surely topple the door, and it would be easy enough to jam shut a second time. He was about to gather his strength and kick his way inside when

the ringing stopped. He waited for it to start up again, but nothing came. Probably some harassing mudslinger, and Doogie resolved not to worry about it. He scooped up Kevin's Torotex bomber jacket and jogged down the stairs. Without thinking he approached the building's exit, but caught himself right before pulling open the lobby door and stepping street-side.

What if that news van had returned? What if it had brought friends? Doogie didn't want to flop out and be speared by twenty microphones. And guaranteed, he'd tank any interview. They'd jam a lens in his face and he'd say some dumb shit that would get played over and over on the TV, radio, everywhere. That would certainly uproot his well-cultivated herbal business, which was built on anonymity and his clients' belief that "D. Z. Roi" was a cool provisioner of unparalleled verbal discretion.

He pushed his forehead to the wire-netted window of the lobby door and tried to scope every angle of outside. Satisfied but cautious, he opened the door and stepped to the sidewalk. No van to be seen. He jogged to the end of the block. Coast clear. A blessing! May such boons persist.

The morning was cold, the wind about tripling the effect, and for protection he donned Kevin's jacket. Something hard was in the lining pocket, and he reached in to find Kevin's cell phone. Certainly Kevin needed *that* back. Doogie himself had no

cell phone, finding it too bothersome an imposition. Talking wasn't his favorite game, and his little wireless Puffet computer did everything a two-way pager could do, and with much more elegance. Though respectful of new-wave telephony, Doogie saw no luster in being its underling.

A mile and change to that freakshow Kevin called home: Doogie covered the distance quickly, working up a pleasant sweat beneath the Torotex bomber. At reaching the seedy, sardiney townhouse, he looked up to see Kevin's window dark.

"Get up, fluffy, get up," Doogie muttered, jabbing Kevin's doorbell with a crunky funk rhythm, but Kevin's light stayed off. Doogie waited a moment and hit the doorbell again. Nothing. He backed away, crossed his arms. Yelling up to the window would be indiscreet and foolhardy, because morning was hardly broken and such yelling might awaken Kevin's horrible housemates, who'd stream out the door and engulf him with hostile mucus and paddywhacking hands. Perhaps Kevin just wasn't home.

Headlights entered the block's far end and began approaching. With the morning sky still bleak, details were hard to see, but Doogie could tell that the vehicle was some sort of truck or van. Unworried but choosing to play it safe, he scooted across the street and behind a convenient tree. Peeking around it, he watched the vehicle—yes, a van—come down the street and stop before Kevin's townhome.

It was Informer Six! Philly's HomeTownSource! Good break, playing it safe. Doogie discerned it wasn't the same news van that'd been covering his place—while both vehicles shared identical decals, the body of this one was smaller and sharper-nosed. No doubt it was here to badger Kevin. How'd they find his address? Didn't matter, he wasn't home. Stupid van pudsuckers, go play in traffic!

The van's doors opened and the cabin lights came on. Hey, there in the shotgun seat, was that—!

Kevin exited the van's passenger side and a skunky Informer Six gofer exited the driver's side. Kevin carried two McDonald's bags; the gofer carried a beverage caddy with two coffees and two OJs. Both smiling recklessly, they slipped inside the townhome. A moment later Kevin's window swelled with light (and laughter? and joy? and savage savage savage appetites?)

Hell's tarnation! Doogie stalked over to the van and brazenly tried the doors. Locked. He brazenly kicked the tires. Firm. He brazenly swiped a key across the paint. Hiss. When his brazen dance subsided, Doogie considered that he might be overreacting. He accepted the possibility that stress was corrupting his judgement. He almost let his credulous inner sucker believe that Kevin was chummin' with the news guy only to make an ass of Detective Sherpti. An innocent passive-aggressive McBreakfast, period.

Doogie thought about buffeting Kevin's doorbell, but he didn't feel balanced, he didn't want to see Kevin anymore. His suspicion was a thick greasy cloud that Kevin would feel outright. And Doogie certainly didn't want to hang with any news twit; he was desperate to avoid such people. He would return to his apartment, kick in his taped door, and reassess the situation.

He backtracked home at a gloomy pace. Right before reaching his block, crossing the street towards it, he gasped and zipped into concealment. Poppycock and fiddlesticks! That first news van was back! And it really had brought friends!

Yes, that same van Detective Sherpti had repelled was once again idling before Conifer Street Arms, and across the street sat the van of a competing channel, and a *third* van hung at the opposite corner, two wheels tilted on the sidewalk. Nice, he was being hunted! Actually, Wayne was being hunted and Doogie was more like a consolation prize, but what comfort was that?

He shuffled backwards, turned around, shambled in circles. Head hung and hands pocketed, he slunk into a nearby alley. It was a well-swept residential alley, and one familiar to him. Along the narrow path were bright doors and windows decked by autumnal gardenry. Doogie sat on a mosaic-coated stoop and hugged his knees.

After a few minutes, one of the alleyway's doors

opened and a voice declared, "Look who's out my window, the early bird!"

Doogie nodded in greeting. "Hey, Bruce."


"C'mon in, have breakfast with me," Bruce said, clad in sandals and robe. "Your face cries out for coffee."

"More than you know, man. I'm worried, I'm cold, I'm tired, and my street is snared with talking heads."

Bruce crossed his arms against the chill. Shivering audibly, he hopped down his stoop and flip-flopped out of the alleyway to peer at Doogie's block. He came back a moment later. "You're a star now?"

"Nope. Long story. Well, semi-long. Or short. Gah."

"Right on," Bruce said, bidding Doogie to enter his home. "Come in, warm up, eat, chat. I can't solve your problems, but I am the architect of an angelic quiche."



The back of Aki's head itched, invisible ants marching in circles. Though she wouldn't dig back there, not again—the itching came and went, and on balance it was tolerable, while the consequence of jamming her fingers past the gauze and into the wound was nothing she wished to repeat.

She knew she was in a hospital. But how had she come here? When she closed her eyes, memory

whirred into motion, strips and blots of playback. Airplane air, thin and artificial. Black ocean underneath. Sleep, wake, read, eat. Watch the flight map, play the radio. Here's a form to complete. Chewing gum, ears popping, descending into Seattle customs. Nothing funny in her bags. Thank you ma'am, you may go. She changes planes. Aloft again, bypassing this huge land, west to east across a country as wide as the continent. At the midpoint she lands and again changes planes. Uneaten pretzels in her pocket, she launches into a dark sky and floats over dark earth. Does she sleep? Banking left, window vision, city lights rise to greet her. The airplane touches down with nary a shuddering wing. Welcome to Philadelphia. Shaking off stiffness and fatigue, she walks through the jetway and into a gray-and-white terminal building.

At the gate waits a man, and he speaks: "Hey, hello? I'm Franklin. Frank. Fishcake Birth, you must be Aki."

He is leaning on a railing, a large man, short blond hair, clean-shaven, plaid button-down. He's pointing at her sweatshirt. *Fishcake Birth*, it says, *good time for healthy family*, Fishcake Birth being both a pop group and a dried seafood snack.

She smiles for him, though all the gods she knows are telling her to reverse the tape and moonwalk back on the plane. Not that the plane would go home. Not that she has the money or willpower

to do much else but step forward and accept the moment. So she keeps smiling, and she can see the man's throat tighten as he studies her.

"Hello, Franklin-san," she says. It is empty at the airport, her flight arriving late at night. This makes her nervous. More nervous. The man places a hand on her shoulder and swivels her towards the terminal's wide hall.

"Franklin-san?" he says. "Huh, no need to be that formal. Flight okay, was the flight okay? Long trip. All right, um—" he pauses, face caught between smile and frown "—let's get your baggage." His words come faster than her ability to parse them, the quick beats of foreign speech rushing her ears like so much rainfall. She'll adapt, sure. She has the aptitude. But that is expected. Her work will be taken for granted.


Franklin guides her down an escalator and to the baggage conveyors. He speaks in infrequent bursts, complementing her (tired) face, her (forced) smile, and, when it comes, her (plain) luggage. Does he mean to charm? He may, but she doesn't know how to respond. English words rove her brain like stray pets, never coming when called.

They leave the airport in his truck. Branko, Broonko? Bronco. They drive over a highway, then down a ramp to city streets, stop and go through intersections like a game piece on a board.

Snap! The truck breaks down. She's outside now, standing behind him. Truck hood is up, he's reaching

into the engine. An explosion of liquid and noise. Franklin tumbles backwards, fast, she can't move aside in time, his body strikes her legs. She's knocked over and knocked out? Head to the ground, collision? This is the impact that split her skin, the impact that brought her to this hospital bed?

Memory unwound, she opens her eyes to soft and sterile surroundings: pillows beneath her head, thin gown on her body, white sheets under her, a gray blanket over her. Around her, walls of light blue. A window in the corner, the glass dark. By her side, a tray with her passport atop it. Clock on the wall, the hour hand nearing the six. Her eyes find the second hand and follow its smooth travel; her eyes close.



Eye-lids up, eyes to the corner window, the glass a dirty blue. Clock on the wall, hour hand nearing the eight. A meter from her bed, a man sitting on a folding chair. From the hospital? From the government? Where did her passport go? No longer on the tray. Seeing her wake, her visitor slides himself, and his chair, closer. *Screeeech*. In his hand, her passport.

“Miss Akiko Takayanagi?”

“*Hai*.” Her voice, small and airy.

“Hello and good morning. I’m Detective Sherpti.”

“The teky-sharty.”

The man shook his head. “De-tec-tive Sherp-ti.”

Ah! Detective. Like a policeman. “De-tec-tive Sherp-ti.”

The man bowed slightly, then smiled. “You got it. So—how are you feeling? How’s the head?”

She didn’t really know. “I am feeling...confused?” She pulled on the bed’s handrail but couldn’t find the strength to rise. Her head was a dirty swamp, a mossy crust. She wanted to sit up and drain it out, flush it away.

“I’ll bet,” Detective Sherpti said. “Nurse says you’ve been in and out since your fall. About, oh, six hours ago.” He gestured to her bandages. “Head cuts bleed like the devil, don’t they. Say, now that you’re up, are you thirsty? Do you need anything?”

Her ears latched onto that word, *thirsty*. Yes, she was thirsty and wanted some water. “*Omizu*?” Then she realized she’d asked in Japanese. Silly, but her head was boggled up and—

Dropping her passport on the bedside tray, the detective stood up, went to the sink, and filled a paper cup with water. He’d understood! Aki pushed against the mattress and yanked on the handrail. A black stroke crossed her vision, but the effort succeeded and she was upright. When the detective leaned in to give her the cup, she asked him, the words dashing out, “*Nihongo wakaru?*”

“Goodness, no,” he said, sitting down. “*Ie, chatta doke wakarimasen. Ni-Ni-Nihongo wa dekimasen.*” Aki fought past the thicket of bad accent and bad grammar to hear: “I only understand Japanese a little, and I can’t much speak it.” He wasn’t lying; she could barely understand him.

Detective Sherpti's face had reddened but his expression was gentle. "Once upon a time I had polyglot dreams. I'd speak every language, join the CIA, defend pretty girls from the red tide." He folded his hands. "But that world, heh, *kak rukoj snyalo*."

Aki sipped her water, unsure what he was talking about.

"But enough about me." The detective leaned in and looked evenly at her. "Tell me how you got yourself knocked out."

"Because—" again she ran through her memory "—because of the truck. Bronco. It broke. He tried to fix it."

"He? He who?"

"Franklin."

The detective nodded. "Franklin Hollander?"

"Yes."

"How about the other one?"

Aki scrunched her nose. "Other one?"

"Wayne. Wayne Milton."

An unfamiliar sound. "I don't know it. I know an Avery."

"An Avery? Was he with you?"

She shook her head. "I have not met Avery here, only in Japan, several year ago. Avery works with Franklin. I was alone with Franklin, then the truck gets smoke, gets broken."

Detective Sherpti nodded. "Tell me what happens next."

"When the engine stops from overheat, Franklin gets out to see. I get out too."

The detective bent closer. "Mm-hm, go on."

"Eh...Franklin opened hood, to look at the engine. Very angry. Then he opens the engine. But it was too hot. Water comes up. St-stream? Steam. Franklin, he jumps, jumped back. Fell against me."

"And then?"

"He onto me, I fell down. Ground hit me, on head. I don't remember after. Lights, maybe, a dream."

"A dream...and you don't remember anything or anybody else? Nobody placing something under your head, like a jacket, a cushion, a pillow?"

Aki gestured to the pillows on her bed. "Pillow? This?"

"No, not here. Back by Franklin's truck."

"I don't know that."

"Akiko," Detective Sherpti said, his voice heavy. "Akiko."

"Mm?"

"About Franklin, something happened to him. He's—" the detective paused, looked down "—he's passed away."

Passed away. Aki knew what that meant, she knew very well. She knew many idioms. Pass out, pass up, pass over. Pass away.

The detective stood and rubbed the back of his neck. "He had a heart attack soon after the accident,

soon after the truck broke down. He didn't recover. We tried to revive him. I'm sorry."

Aki's body fell back to the mattress and her arms flopped to her sides. The room bloated, leered, each corner stretching to a far orbit. The ceiling lights diffused then intensified, the air like a lens bending them. She shut her eyes and focused on breathing. Soon her chest unwound, and under closed eyelids she felt the lights retract and the room return to normal. She opened her eyes. Her circle of death had widened by one.

"I can come back later, you know. Come back later? *Ato de, ato de kaeru?*" Detective Sherpti gestured to the door.

She looked at him. "*Daijoo*bu, I am okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Akiko, we know there was a fight between Franklin and another man. Maybe a younger man, this Wayne Milton I mentioned earlier. We know Franklin's death is a consequence of this fight. We know —"

"*Nani?*" A fight? When?

"We know there was a gunshot."

She jerked a hand to her mouth. What was this fight, what was this gunshot, a moment ago it was *heart attack*. "Gun? Why gun? How gun?" Her voice was a whimper, though she hadn't wanted it to be, though she hated the tone. A gun! Were they all true,

the stories she'd heard of an America bristling with weapons and shootouts?

The detective shrugged. "You have no memory, right? Happened after your blackout."

"*Hai*, no memory."

"You know nothing."

"Yes," she agreed. Then, finding the words, she asked, "Eh—you said—Franklin—heart attack. Not shooting. You said."

"I did." Detective Sherpti's mouth became a thin flat line. "Because Franklin wasn't shot. Shot *at*, maybe. But you don't have any idea."

"Shot at." Aki paused. "It...happens very much? Shot at?"

"No, not so much. Not like this. Actually we think the gun may have belonged to Fr—"

The muscles of Aki's face were clenched and shaking, tears coating her cheeks. The detective yanked several tissues from a box on the bedstand and handed them to her.

"First night in the States?" he said.

Aki nodded.

He frowned and lowered his head. "Rotten luck."

She sniffled, looked at him. "Eh?"

"Rotten luck? Bad luck. You just flying in, and this..."

"Bad luck—" Aki wiped her face with the tissues "—is me."

"Huh?"

“Bad luck is me.” More tears. She curled up and quivered.

The detective placed a hand on her shoulder. “Akiko, would you like to call anybody? Here, or back home in Japan?”

She heard him, understood him, but wished he hadn’t asked. She could call her brother, call Kazu. He’d come, he’d blaze down to Narita and leap on the first plane out, work and wife suspended. Pity the taxi-man driving him to the terminal, he’d be in for a throttling: *hayaku-hayaku*, go faster, faster!

Her brother cared, and she loved him for that. But with the care came a verdict, every time a verdict. While she was the older one, Kazu had never seen her extra years as ones of experience. Instead they were evidence of her inadequacies, of her bankrupted purpose—and while he’d never so openly admit that opinion, she knew his ways. As a consequence of loving him, she knew his ways better than he did. Perhaps he could say the same of her. A rueful thought.

“No, no thank you,” she told the detective, flicking collected tears from the corner of her mouth.

He grimaced. “Really now, you don’t want to call anyone?”

“No.” She looked away. “Thank you.”

“Ah, I’ve done nothing.” He patted her shoulder. “Get some rest, Aki-chan, get some breakfast. I’m sure I’ll be back.”

After the detective left, Aki lifted her passport from the swivel tray, flipped open to the unsmiling photo, and figured that her whole misfit life would be so much brighter if she’d learned to giggle and frolic like all the other girls, come what may.



Sherpti returned to the station and trudged upstairs to his second floor desk, wishing that he was instead trudging home to his supple, plush recliner. He slumped into his warhorse chair and confronted a desktop overgrown with unmet responsibilities. Someone had carved a space and left a memo. Doctor Karen, serologist supreme, up and zesty with the dawn:

S-hat, FYI!

- Milton (O–)
- Hollander (AB+)
- Holldr shirt (O–)
- Akiko T. (B–)

...4ever Yr Grl, K.

4ever? 4sure, he’d never hear the end of it. Back last May, he and Karen had mingled for a drunken saucy evening, during which he’d impishly admitted that the whole Foreign Service thing was a lie and that the real reason for his ’82-’83 leave of absence had been to front a new-wave excursion known as “Sexhat & the Punch-Keys.” On lead vocals, timbales, and smoke machine, Sexhat.

Putting that aside (an impossibility: once a Sexhat, always a Sexhat) the memo's primary implication was no tease. Sherpti hadn't told Doug, but the front of Franklin Hollander's shirt was marked with blood not Hollander's own—Hollander's skin had been burnt, not broken. Karen must've called area hospitals to see if Wayne Milton had any records on file; presumably he did, and she'd matched his blood type to the blood on Hollander's shirt, then contrasted it with the other pertinent samples. Not ultimate proof that Milton had been pressed up against Hollander, but pretty dang strong, and it reinforced a theory germinating in Sherpti's mind.

Another thing Sherpti hadn't told Doug: hours ago, he'd requested undercover surveillance on Conifer Street Arms, Doug and Milton's mid-rise. If Milton skulked home, Sherpti wanted to know. When dropping Doug off, he'd looked around but hadn't seen any eyes—but by now, *somebody* had to be there, *somebody* around here had to take his requests seriously.

Akiko Takayanagi's boo-boo would heal up like new, good. Not so good, his wishy-washy detective work. He'd meant to give the girl more hassle but lost heart halfway through. Sloppy! He hadn't even questioned her ties to Hollander. No strain, he'd return later. She needed a few waking hours for the shock to drain.

When inspecting her passport, he'd found boarding-pass stubs tucked between the pages, and from these he'd learned that she was newly arrived in America, real new, just-off-the-jet new. First she'd crossed the mighty Pacific, Osaka to Seattle, and after clearing SeaTac customs she'd taken a connecting flight to Chicago, and then another to Philly. Scheduled Philadelphia arrival, 12:17 a.m., actual 12:48. From the airport, Franklin Hollander had picked her up—the short-term garage receipt found in his Bronco was stamped with a 1:17 a.m. exit. A short-term garage receipt, Mr. Hollander's final record on this mortal coil? How tragically quotidian.

If taken at her word, Akiko had missed the real action—Wayne Milton, gunshot, Hollander's kaputzing—by the dumb grace of being knocked unconscious. Concerning the mechanics of that knock, there was no evidence contradicting her story, no sign she'd been deliberately pushed or beaten. Plus, her contention that Hollander had uncorked the truck's radiator was matched by the decedent himself—or, more explicitly, by the collage of burns on his left arm and neck, the arm bearing the brunt.

Although, although. Sherpti was pretty sure that everyone who survived childhood knew that really hot things shouldn't be touched. For the coolant steam to burn Hollander as seriously as it had, that radiator must have been fiery enough to forge claymores on. Exactly why the man went and popped it,

that was a wonder. Maybe he'd wanted to impress his li'l Aki-chan by scoffing at danger, an impulse purely stupid but lamentably widespread. Still, Franklin Hollander had been a good quarter-century past juvenile, long past the age when one had to glory in peacock antics just to get some sugar.

Sherpti remembered a picture in last month's Playboy, one of Hugh Hefner wrapped in a shimmering silk robe the color of sapphires—his left hand fondling an ivory pipe, his right hand fondling two nude blondes. He was an epoch or two past juvenile, so what the hell.

Forget that. Sherpti turned his thoughts to the incident's keystone, that gray plastic case which had been lying split-open between Hollander's dying body and Akiko's unconscious one. Velcro hooks were glued to the underside of this case, and complementary fuzzy strips had been found beneath the driver's seat of Hollander's truck. Inside the case was custom foamwork: on one side, a shock-absorbing grid crafted to hold pistol rounds; on the other side, an eggshell-type enclosure contoured to hold a pistol. Weapon and ammunition in the same case, in a vehicle? Tsk-tsk, that's lawbreaking. Franklin Hollander was looking dumber and dumber. Not nice to speak ill of the dead, sorry.

At the scene, a handful of bullets had remained inside the upset case, clinging to the inners of that foam grid, though several more had fallen out and

scattered over the asphalt. Also found on the asphalt, a spent cartridge of the same caliber.

The gray plastic case, the cartridge, the bullets, the squashed round pried from the Bronco's tire rim—everything was getting M-scoped and X-rayed and T-bagged in the lab, and a preliminary report would soon flutter up to Sherpti's desk whether he wanted it or not. His desk already had enough crap on it, that was incontestable. Sherpti pounded his workspace, scattering a congregation of dinner mints. He grabbed one and popped it into his mouth. The mint's unsatisfying menthol flavor was unredeemed by the tasteless red jam in the middle.

From his jacket pocket he removed two photographs. Formerly they'd been stuck in Wayne Milton's bedroom drawer, but Sherpti had generously supplied them with a change of scenery. Master Milton graced both shots: the first had him sitting spread-eagle in an office chair, arms crossed and posture defiant. Around him were desks, computers, paper piles, office debris. Looked like a typical modern workplace, which made Milton's attire of lusty red boxers, and *only* lusty red boxers, seem rather outré. Upon the crotch of these boxers was some manner of mark or insignia. A bold yellow circle. Closer inspection with a magnifying glass revealed it to be a smiley face.

Hoo-boy. And Doug said this guy was straight? Sherpti hadn't come across these happy-dick shorts

while scouting through Milton's drawers, and he wondered if the kid was sporting them now, wherever he was.

The other photo was more normal: Milton in an alleyway, smoking a cigarette and looking artistically fulsome.

After wiping dust and fingerprints off the pictures, Sherpti got up and took them to the station's computer hub, where he tagged them for electronic scanning and department-wide distribution. Then he returned to his desk and contemplated breakfast, or the lack thereof. The nonsense phrase *hungry hungry hippo* popped into his head.

His nagging belly was matched by a nagging concern, that of the Informer Six news van infecting Doug and Milton's place so early. Exactly the wrong sort of stakeout! Informer Six might've gotten the heads-up from gossipy neighbors in the apartment building, or from a loose scanner transmission, or from a single specific source—hopefully not a single specific source. Doug did say that his gal Kevin had a doozy of a passive-aggressive streak. Maybe the weaselly sprat *had* squawked to the press despite Sherpti's threats. Hopefully not. Sherpti deeply disliked being proven wrong.

RIIING! RIIING! RiiiRiiRIIIIIING!

Bah, his desk phone. So loud, so infuriatingly loud. Funny, har-har, the sprinklers should go off with a ring like that. He grabbed the handset and

stuck it to his ear. Not that he wanted to chat with anyone, but it cut the fire bells.

“Sherpti.” It was his superior, Detective Lieutenant O’Grady. A dismaying portent. Lieutenant O’Grady was a hands-off boss until it came time to slap.

“Morning, L.T. What ill wind calls you here?”

O’Grady released a gushing mucosal blast. As usual, Sherpti was wowed by the man's kingly powers of nonverbal expression—today's issue sounded like a grizzly bear crapping out a hundred fajitas. After finishing his noise, O’Grady composed himself with a hoary sigh. “Tell me something, detective.”

“Sure, boss.”

“What the hell kind of name is Sherpti?” This was O’Grady's favorite question. He asked it twice a month, minimum.

“Amalgamated.” Last time he'd answered *covalent*.

“What?”

“Like I keep telling you,” Sherpti said, “my great-grandfather's name was Szczyпки. But the drunk micks in the sausage plant couldn't manage that, so he became ‘Skippy’ to some and ‘Shifty’ to the rest. Blend all these monikers together and *kapow*, Sherpti somehow comes out. Imagine, a family's proud heritage sunk to appease a mob of carousing wastrels.”

Lieutenant O’Grady groaned. “I hate you.”

“Hey, remember—it was long ago, back when people were weird and immigration officers couldn't spell.”

The lieutenant deepened his voice. “You released those boys. Goobie, Moogie, Loogie, whatever. The fruits.”

“They weren’t ripe enough, me lootie. Way too firm.”

“Sherpti, Sherpti, Sherpti.” O’Grady began bleating Sherpti’s name over and over, sounding much like a plush toy with a pull-string voicebox. “Sherpti, Sherpti.”

“Yes?” Sherpti tried to sound innocent.

“You requested a stakeout on Milton’s building?”

“Mm, in case Milton blunders back. What, no one’s there *yet*? Don?”

“He’s there now. What’s this I hear about drugs?”

“Drugs?” Sherpti regretted his nature, but couldn’t suppress it. “Oh yeah, drugs! Ten bucks a pop at the evidence locker, half-off with FOP card.”

A long dark pause. Then: “Tell me, did you happen to catch the TV news this morning? Informer Six explicitly?”

“Explicitly?” Informer Six? Figured. The van waiting at Doug’s had been from Informer Six. “You mean specifically?”

“You fucked up, Sherpti, yes you did.” The lieutenant’s voice was replete with anger, pleasure, and *j’accuse*.

“Sorry, D-Log, but I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sherpti snarled. “Been at the hospital. Been busy working.”

“Videotape’s in the media room. When you got the *time*, take a look. And if you wanna keep paying dues, you better get your fancy pals back in here. I’m making them your responsibility and I’m gonna hold you to it. Not only me, the *captain’s* gonna hold you to it.”

“I hear, I hear.”

“So get on it, for fuck’s sake.” *Click!* End of discussion.

Sherpti dropped the phone to the cradle. He could feel, radiating from his soul, a great aura of incompetence. But greater still was an aura of sleepiness, and while he was very curious about what extra-ordinary nonsense had made the Informer Six morning broadcast and why he was to blame, he was equally pining for a nap. He hadn’t slept the night, had barely dozed the previous one to boot, and after these shenanigans he was feeling damn tuppered.

Well, sleep had to wait. He should go watch that videotape. Also he should make some calls and learn more about Messrs. Milton and Hollander. Finally, when it could be postponed no longer, he’d indulge Lieutenant O’Grady’s recommendation to re-bag “the fruits.” Or just one fruit—Sherpti refused to bother with Kevin. Let someone else get him. The mere sight of Sherpti might bust the boy like a septic main. And if it turned out that Kevin *had* blabbed to the press in defiance of Sherpti’s orders, then it was best for Sherpti to keep his distance.

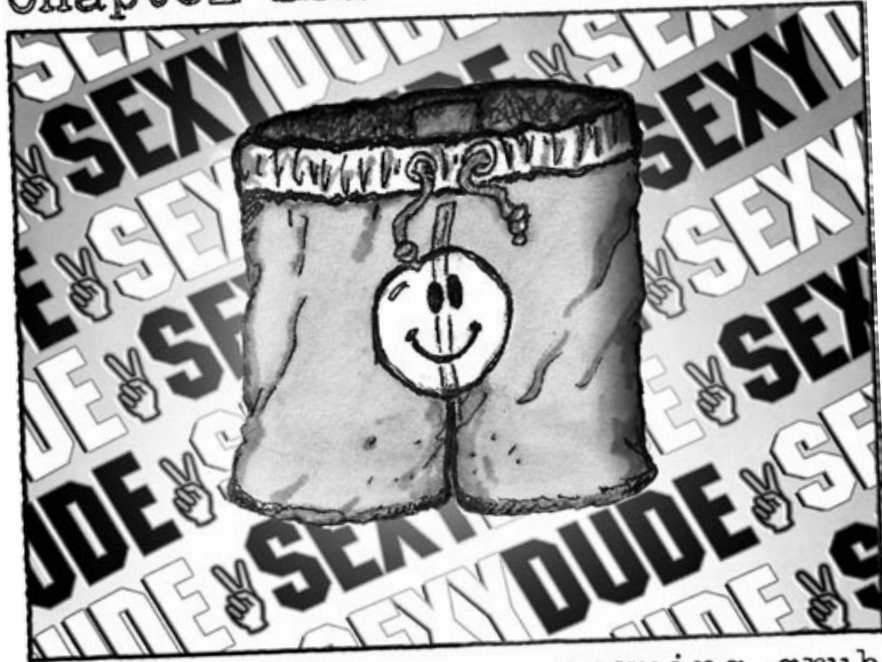
But Douglas Royko he didn't mind, Doug Royko was decent folk. So over the bathhouse and through the woodies to Doogie's house he'd go. In a couple hours. Whenever. Maybe he could synchronize it with lunch, maybe they could grab a pizza before going in for that second round of questioning. But it wouldn't be kindly ol' Detective Sherpti doing the interrogation this time. Lieutenant O'Grady would see to that, sure as a yak's crack. Doug would do well to stay off the peace pipe today.

Yawn. All these balls to juggle, and no room for a lovely siesta? Hogwash! While Spanish governmental ministries commissioned weighty dissertations on how a subsidized daily nap benefited both employee morale and efficacy, Sherpti found no need to footnote something innately good. Lions slept four hundred hours a day, lizards woke up once a year, happy dogs roamed endlessly in dreamland with hind legs sinfully splayed. Being nominally higher on the food chain, humans rightfully deserved to outsleep everything else, even the lazy king of the jungle. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, while very noble, was remiss in the absence of a napping resolution.

Sherpti couldn't see the World Trade Organization mandating global siestas (protest that, masked anarchy hosers!) or the United States bombing Silicon Valley to enforce lower productivity standards, or OSHA raiding offices, factories, and greasy spoons

with tranquilizer guns when high noon came 'round. But he could dream of such righteousness, which it very much was, righteous worldwide, especially when everything he wore or bought or touched came from sweatshops in China or Malaysia or Mexico, and all those kids needed their naps, damn it.

Chapter Ten



morning grub

AFTER LAST NIGHT'S BROKEN FLIRTATION WITH WAYNE OUTSIDE THE JIFF OFFICES, wherein she'd gotten stupid and he'd gotten spurned, Juliette had jogged home to her apartment. First, a cup of tea to fix the chills. Then she'd dropped to her bed, where she stared at the ceiling for an immature length of time before rolling over to stare at the wall. Her morning shift at the Bad Art Diner started at eight, and to prepare for it she forced herself into slumber and then into the shower. While dressing for work she kept an ear to the radio news, curious about the chance of rain—but the lead story demoted the weather report, and the weather, to utter insignificance.

Breathless, she listened: if what the radio said was true, then only two hours after she'd left him, Wayne had done—

Done *what*? Certainly not what they were implying.

In a panic, she called his apartment. Wayne, answer the phone, tell me my ears are mistaken. Doogie, answer, tell me they're not. After several rings she hung up. According to the radio, Doogie (the anchor withheld his name, calling him a "co-renter with Milton") had been questioned and released earlier this morning. Released, but gone where? Friend's place, boyfriend's place, Toby-Mart? A whole city of places Doogie could be. Again she called, to no answer. Perhaps Doogie *was* home, but refusing to answer? Possibly he'd unplugged the phone—Juliette imagined that the press might have gotten the number and cranked it nonstop. Could Doogie be hiding out, curtains down and door barred?

Whatever the chance of that, she had to go there and find out. Juliette wasn't too close with Doogie, nothing like her friendship with Wayne. But she found him cool enough, and they got along like good people do, and he was her only personal link to Wayne. She couldn't *not* go over there. She threw on a hooded jacket and scrambled outside. At half past seven the sky was moldy, the breeze cold. She kicked into a brisk jog and by seven-fifty was nearing Conifer Street Arms, Wayne and Doogie's apartment building. With displeasure she saw three news vans guarding

the entrance, each accessorized with bored-looking crewpeople leaning back or pacing about. To mask her frazzled state, she slowed to a walk and whipped up some poise.

A man with an orangeade tan and a trendy satchel emerged from the building and made it several yards down the sidewalk before getting intercepted by the news harriers: “S’cuse me sir, are you familiar with Wayne Milton or Doug Royko, they live in 3B of your building?”

“No,” said the orangeade man, “I don’t know them.”

“Are you aware of last night’s shooting?”

“What, here?”

“Tallon, around Spring Garden. But Wayne Milton might be involved, and Doug Royko was found using drugs.”

“Bully for them. I gotta get to work. Bye.”

Juliette watched the man stride off, trendy satchel swinging. Then she made for the building’s entrance, slipping by the newspeople and pausing at the familiar grid of doorbells catty-corner to the lobby door. Wayne and Doogie’s unit number was 3B, and Juliette wanted to hammer that button and wail into the intercom, but she was aware of being watched. From the corner of her eye she saw a news crewman circling behind, ostensibly having a smoke but clearly and crudely studying her. Beyond him hovered others, a few beginning to draw nearer. Then

the smoking crewman stepped close, too close, and Juliette didn’t think she could ring 3B covertly, not like this.

She turned to the invading crewman and affected a pissed-off tone. “Fuckin’ thing got no names on it, just numbers.”

The crewman puffed his cigarette. “Who you lookin’ for?”

“What, *you* know who lives here?” Juliette twisted herself to look furious, an easy play. “Y’got a list, do ya?”

“Whoa, don’t bite! I’m from the TV news.”

“I can see *that*.” She gestured to the other vans positioned nearby, logos decking their sides. “*All*’f you from the news.”

“Hmph, them others’re competition.” He waved a hand at the group behind him. “Copycats too, and damn late. Infy-Six got the scoop on *this* puppy.”

“Scoop what? What happened here?”

“Oh, here? Nothin’ yet, but it might.” He jabbed his cigarette towards the panel of doorbells. “So who you lookin’ for?”

“Just,” she said, thinking, “just this fucking guy, in 3B or 3D? I was hoping the chart’d have names on it—”

The crewman perked up. “3B? You lookin’ for a guy named Wayne Milton?”

“No. No. Lookin’ for Randy, Randy Braniff, he’s, oh...”

“Braniff, huh, like the airline?”

“Yeah, I guess, the asshole thought it funny stealing my fucking—” pause “—fucking bus pass. I was so wasted last night, didn’t know *what* was happening. He told me his address, wrote it down, y’know, *come over babe and get it*, the prick! But I passed out, woke up on the *toilet*, lost the address. Still I ’member all of it ’cept the last fucking letter, believe that? B or D.”

“In that case, I dunno,” the crewman said. “Hasta be D, I doubt it’s B, ’less there’s one more guy livin’ up there besides Milton and the homo buddy. We’d know if there was, we got sources on it—”

While he talked, Juliette pushed herself close to the wall, positioning her body to obscure the doorbell grid as best she could. “That’s right, it *was* 3D!” she cried, mashing her hand to the button but crooking a finger sideways to strike 3B instead. She yelled into the intercom: “Open up! It’s Juliette here, you *know* who I am! Don’t you *talk back* to me or you’re gonna be in trouble, just buzz me in now! We gotta clear up what happened last night. C’mon!”

She appeared to have blocked the crewman’s view, for he gave no sign of noticing her trick. And the jerk didn’t know her name, so Juliette had felt safe using it—and because Doogie *did* know her name, upon hearing it he might perceive the situation and tacitly buzz her in. But there was no response, no lock disengaging. Keeping up the act, she said, “Fucker’s hiding, I bet!”

The crewman snorted. “Sounds like a good idea to me.”

She blew out an exaggerated sigh. “Whatever. So tell me, why’re all you guys here, what’s hot about 3B?”

The crewman flicked his cigarette into the street. “Guy livin’ up there, Milton, he shot some other guy last night, out near Tallon, killed him I hear. Some foreign girl involved too, she got her head broke open. And now this Milton guy is missing, surprise! But I got his picture. The *right* picture, not like those fuckups back at the studio, swappin’ faces with the homo buddy. Where’s *he* got to, I wonder. I’d tape him if he showed—”

“What exactly happened, how’d this gunshot happen?”


“Hell if I know *’zactly*, that’s what we wanna find out. So I gotta sit here and stay sharp. If I see Milton comin’ down the street, sneakin’ home, I grab my camera an’ mike, get the asshole on tape pronto! If I ain’t fast enough I’ll miss my chance to pop out a question before *he*—” the crewman jerked a thumb back and to his right “—nabs ’em. No matter I do or don’t, it’ll be cool footage anyhow.”

The crewman wasn’t jerking his thumb at the competing news vans, Juliette saw, but to the far intersection or beyond. She looked down the street and saw a line of parked cars. “Who are you talking about?”

“Cop in that third car down. Undercover. Parked there ten, fifteen minutes ago, sittin’ pat and waitin’ for the same thing as us. We know he’s there, *he* knows we know, but he ain’t gonna hassle us ’cause he knows we’ll just come back. Not like this other cop who kicked me off before, the bastard. Tried to cite me, fr’what, obstructing an investigation? Acting bossy like he’s some big time G-man, whizbang excuse *me*—”

Juliette wasn’t listening. All these eyes unnerved her and she felt it would be smart to leave—especially because people from the other news vans were creeping nearer, cocking ears, eager to eavesdrop on something, anything.

“So, hey, your name’s Juliette? That’s a pretty name—” the crewman said in a voice newly moist, but she was gone.



“I can’t never go home, never even like *appear!* Pappy’d set Rot on me, that’s the least he’d do, an’ I can’t see my mother either, because that cocker Dagget—” Melvin grimaced at saying the name “—that cocker Dagget’s ’round her day and night. His fucking castle, huh, huh, castle o’cock—”

Jimmy said nothing and continued to poke at his runny eggs. Yellow goop, who wants this? He supposed he could sop it up with the dry toast that was stacked at the plate’s edge like a heap of charred tiles.

In retrospect, he should’ve gone with the tried and true. His whole life he’d been a hard-boiled dude and on occasion a scrambled dude, and always he’d been satisfied. Never before had he gone sunny-side up, and he’d ordered it for that reason alone. Try different things! Every day a new beginning! The prehistoric blobula oozing on his dish testified to the wisdom of his inhibitions, the egg-related ones at least.

“Jimmy, I can’t go nowhere!” Melvin howled. “I’m fuckin’ isolated here!” No more joy. No more celebrating Pappy’s defeat. Melvin’s concrete confidence had collapsed fully, his wild post-Pappy happiness demolished to a snuffling honking sadness.

A clock was mounted on the far wall, and hanging beside it was a pulsating, color-soaked painting of some freakazoid alien planet. Jimmy admired the artwork and then checked the time. About four hours had passed since the madness of Dandi Donuts and Plan P, and the outside world was becoming bluey-gray, and soon enough the sun would be lifting high. And this was good, Jimmy thought, so very good. It was good to be alive, good to be here at the Bad Art Diner. Last night Jimmy had stared at the off-white face of death. Last night he had tasted the plasticky flavor of nevermore.

Plan P had ended with that ripped-shirt nutbird punching out Melvin’s father, trashing his shiny pistol, and splitting the Dandi Donuts for lands unknown. Taking cue from the nutbird’s speedy

flight, Jimmy and Melvin had boosted out right after, leaving Pappy sprawled there, breathing heavy, just starting to stir. Into the darkness they'd run, Jimmy and Melvin, cash in their pockets and speed in their feet—well, not in Jimmy's feet. Broken glass from the destroyed March of Dimes gumball machine had been in Jimmy's feet. So next stop had been the 24-hour drugstore, thankfully only a brief slog away.

On limping into the place, the first thing Jimmy had noticed was a March of Dimes candy machine standing by the coupon rack. Remembering his promise to the smiling gumball baby on the destroyed Dandi Donuts one, he'd gone over and dropped in three dimes. The rest of his pocket-change was nickels and quarters and pennies and they wouldn't fit in the slot, though he'd tried. One didn't fuck with sacred oaths made in desperation.

They'd used ten dollars of Pappy's till-cash for tweezers, antiseptic, and gauze—and with these tools, Melvin had taken a shot at playing doctor. While Melvin was a handier medic than he had any right to be, the plucking of Jimmy's glassy feet had still stung like a ballbreaker. Nothing else to do then, and anyhow it was time for a treat, so they'd hit a Toby-Mart, always open. But it was way too nippy for a T-M Mushie, so they'd gotten sugar-rush cappuccino from the store's hot, humming incubator.

For a while they loitered outside the Toby-Mart, sucking on their soupy drinks. But after the same

cop passed three times, eyes on them, moving on became mandatory. Jumpy with excess energy, Melvin demanded a visit to the ice rink—the rink's back lot, that is, where the Zamboni dumped the snowy waste created by shaving and resurfacing the ice. Sometimes this waste was a dwindled scummy puddle, but not this time, boy-o-boy, this time it was a great crappy mound of grit and slush. Melvin made snowballs and snowmen and worked off his nervous pep while Jimmy crouched and shivered.

Eventually they'd come here to the Bad Art Diner, one of Philly's better hangouts. They'd grabbed this booth, kicked back, and ordered breakfast. For Jimmy, coffee and this dish of sunny-side upchuck. For Melvin, a chocolate milkshake and a plate of sausage. Like a piranha Melvin had gobbled the sausage, Jimmy barely catching a glimpse of the fragrant links, forget about a taste. The milkshake had vanished with similar speed and Melvin was now on his second.

“What th' fuck I do now, Jimmy,” Melvin chattered, actual water in his eyes, “I didn't mean nothing, nothing.”

Jimmy sat there with his sneaker linings stained red, the melting of Melvin mounting before him. His once-feared friend was honestly and tearfully debased, and gone were his prickled fronts: goodbye attitude, goodbye fury, a fond farewell to that special look. A permanent change, or the calm before the

storm? Jimmy was adrift within this new dynamic, an ass without a compass. He'd been meek around Melvin for so long that he'd lost his own voice. But from here on he would chart his own stars. He would grease his own wheel. His days of absorbing abuse had ended. No longer the leash or the lash! He hoped Melvin would understand his new sense of independence and resolve. Also he hoped Melvin would stop whining. Carping and complaining, Jimmy was used to. But this high-treble crap was embarrassing.

"Where'd I go?" Melvin cried. "Got no home, no home!"

Feh, this was crap—though freshly assertive and monolithic, Jimmy felt pained by Melvin's desperation. Like it or not, he'd have to step up. "Maybe you could stay at my house," he offered. "Momma doesn't much like you, but she's sure used to you."

Melvin sniffled and ran a finger down his milkshake glass.

"Check this," Jimmy said, forcing a cheery tone. "I got a sleeping bag, extra blankets, and maybe if you ask nice we can unfold the cot. Oh, and we just upgraded to digital cable, remember? You said that menu was awesome." Then he did something that yesterday would've been unthinkable: he gave an order. "Yo, Melvin, c'mon—snap the fuck out if it. We're alive, ain't we? We're sitting, we're breathing, we're, we're eatin'—"

"Don't fuckin' patronize," Melvin growled. He reared back and rubbed his eyes. "And I don't care about your cable. We never get to watch shit 'til real late, 'cause your fat-assed momma's always stuck on that fucking shopping show."

Mean but true. Jimmy's mother spent her evenings and weekends filling out a bushy brown recliner and watching her favorite channel, the American Savers Shopping Network. Jimmy didn't care for the ASS Network, but that recliner was a cozy cloud nine. Jimmy didn't care for Melvin's rudeness either, and decided to share the thought.

"Oh yeah?" he snarled. "Oh yeah? *Your* momma's trunk gets creamed by Dagget's purple twinkie."

Melvin's hands flew from the table and came up dukes. But then he relented. "I know it does, man, I know."

Jimmy was stunned but tried to hide it.

Melvin took his milkshake in both hands and jiggled it. Chocolate sloshed over the rim and gunked up his fingers. He lowered the shake, then wiped clean his right hand and held it out, setting the fingers tight and straight like a blade.

"Shit upon shit," he said. "Gimme a *fi*, Jimsy."

As in *semper*. Jimmy flattened his own hand and slapped it against Melvin's. Then they flipped back their wrists and made the Bunny Fingers. This was their old greeting from high school, before they'd both dropped out like loser imbeciles.

“I’m sorry,” Melvin said. “I mean, you been good to me, Jimmy, and I recognize. Remember those Friday nights, rollin’ down South in the C-Van? Remember those crazy girls?”

“Course I do.”

“Hell yeah, so do I, me on my permit and you, what, fourteen? Girls standin’ there and you’re like, ‘yo, Melvin, I think those chicks need to ride the C-Van,’ or words t’ that effect, so what’d I do? I lean out the window and define our style.”

“*Maan*,” Jimmy said, glad to see Melvin shake his low-down funk, “they were laughing so hard they almost tripped off the sidewalk, and that headcase in the ’Stang came this close to smackin’ em up—”

Melvin slapped his palms on the table’s edge. “Yeah he did! And then that real hot bitch—*sooo* uggin’ hot!—she looks up, and her tongue’s doing that slow curl, and she says to me, ‘Mor’fuck cutie, you must be cranked!’ All them else are making fun but I could tell she was sweatin’ to roll in the C-Van, sweatin’ in the subtle way.”

Jimmy could quibble with Melvin’s recollection, but whatever for? A funny buzzing, not unpleasant, had entered his forehead, and he felt that time was sliding behind them, sliding back to those better days, when he and Melvin would skip curfew on freezing winter midnights to hang at the park with a backpack of blankets, a thermos of Herb-ox, a bag of Hydrox. Noses running and muscles shaking

in the icy wind, the closest to camping they’d ever been, and all worth it for a few hours of bitching about *fuckin’ this* or *fuckin’ that*, about stupid teachers and stupid punks. One thing Jimmy could say for being in school, it gave you walls to bounce off. He scraped a fingernail over the sandpaper surface of his toast. “I don’t remember this subtle sweating.”

“That’s ’cuz it’s subtle. What the word means.”

“I do remember that cop gave us a ticket for takin’ a piss on the avenue, and then we got that other ticket for the fire zone, and then one for going the wrong way. And then one for—”

Melvin slurped his milkshake and chewed on the inside of his cheek. “Yeah, but who’s got the right to tell me how to drive?”

“I dunno, maybe the people who built the roads and gave you the permit?”

“*And* took it away, don’t forget. Didn’t stop me. Guess it was a supernatural coincidence, the C-Van crappin’ out almost right after, like it knew I wasn’t supposed to be driving.” Melvin gazed at the ceiling. “Hand of God.”

Jimmy sipped his coffee and remembered the C-Van, a red, rusty, woodgrain-stickered, first-generation minivan once owned by Melvin’s mother. At leaving Pappy she’d left it behind, the blue-book value a chuckle and a fart: stock wheels with the caps gone, the moon’s distance on the odometer, 2.5 speaker sound system featuring tone knob and

“N-finiT BasS.” The C-Van, christened on the day Melvin pried the letters “ARA” from the nameplate above the vehicle’s rear bumper, “DODGE CARAVAN” instantly reborn as “DODGE C VAN.” Further stylizing the ride was a mail-order tint kit that covered both passenger windows and 80% of the rear windshield, Melvin and Jimmy filling in the remainder with brown magic marker and packing tape.

After this feat of mean-streets customizing, they’d mamboed a whole cube of malted Appûl Spritz and downed it overnight in the C-Van’s carpeted cargo hold. The next morning had dawned with Jimmy and Melvin groaning atop this carpet in a befouled heap, and the afternoon boasted quality time with washrags, soapy water, and a bottle of ibuprofen lifted from Jimmy’s mother.

Was that right? Was that good? It was back then, Jimmy thought. And maybe some things were timeless. “Melvin?”

“Chicks.” Melvin was awash in memory. “Close my eyes sometimes, see those girls. Or just that one girl. Shit. What?”

“All that work makin’ the C-Van streetworthy,” Jimmy said sadly. “All that work and it’s gotta go explode. That’s *wrong*.”

“I hear that, I *hear* that.”

A plan was coming to Jimmy. A plan hadn’t come to Jimmy for a long, long time. He should catch it like the Big Kahuna. “Hey, what say we head up

Front, after the sun’s up more? Hit a few lots, check out a new ride. We see one we like, we buy it and take us a trip, you know?”

“A trip? Today? What, Jimsy, how we gonna do that?” Melvin stared at him with open disbelief. “With what fuckin’ money d’we buy a car? This joke cash from Pappy ain’t gonna last the week even.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy said, fanning himself with his hand, “but I need air.” Melvin’s pirate gun, formerly Dagget’s prized possession, was the central cog in Jimmy’s evolving plan. That thing was seriously old, seriously Antique Roadshow.

“You got some secret stash, Jimmy? Or maybe you hold up the sucker over there?” Melvin gestured to the diner’s register, behind which sat a big bald muscle-man, rubbing his stomach and scowling menacingly. “You point my pirate gun at that tanker, he’ll shove a hot spanikopita up your ass.”

“A hot what?”

“Some flaky pastry shit with spinach and phylum and stuff. Remember that story where the naked guy goes in the dungeon and whacks the Minotaur? Think it was named after his sword. You know, like, ‘Minotaur, I’m gonna cleave your snout with this big fucking Spanikopita, you barnyard bastard’ and then he goes to town and Medusa drops in like a stoneface killer...”

“Mm.” Jimmy wasn’t following Melvin’s story. He was instead figuring how best to present his idea. He

signaled to Melvin's pirate gun, which was under the table and inside the Marlboro duffel. "Dagget's gun, it's pretty old, right? Pretty fancy, too. It's got a real name, don't it? Somethin' *-boss*, somethin' *-bus*."

"Bl-bl-bluh," Melvin said, then sighed. "Blubberbuss."

"Naw." Jimmy shook his head. "You're makin' that up."

"No I'm not," Melvin said, raking fingers at his scalp. "Pirates used it, an' they, they shot whales with it...s'where the name came from. Back then it was the only gun with the, the power to shoot through the whale's blubber, to pierce it, 'cuz whales long ago were different than whales now, now they're all singing and family-oriented but back then they were these Moby Dick badasses all wrapped in blubber super-thick like armor. People had to fight 'em, and first they tried the ship cannons but they were too clumsy to aim, and smaller guns didn't have the kick..."

"Uhh, okay—" Jimmy cleared his throat "—we sell it. The thing's got bank for *some* kinda wheels, it hasta. C'mon, Melvin, think of it. New tag, pink sheet, the open road."

"Sell it? Sell Dagget's blubberbuss?" Melvin stuck out his palms. "Yo, it's the cocker's heirloom supreme. He'd kill my mother, or me, or *somebody*."

"Have it your way. Go visit him and make up."

"No, no, ah," Melvin said, his bluster failing,

"I was, I was gonna run by and throw it in the window."

Jimmy leaned forward. "Don't sound too confident, my man. I s'pose I'll go with you."

Melvin's voice became soft. "Really? You think?"

"Halfway. No farther than DeBlasio's."

"The funeral home?"

"Yup."

"Why there?" Melvin asked.

Jimmy spun a hand in the air. "I'll grab a *Jiff* from the box and keep a watch for you."

"I don't get it."

"You'd probably be coming back. Probably pretty fast."

Melvin closed his eyes. "Well, yeah."

"For embalming."

Eyes opened. "Agh, why you gotta do that to me?"

"I dunno, man." Jimmy narrowed his brow. "I dunno."

"Don't make me kneel, Jimsy. I said I was sorry for treatin' you bad. I'll say it again. Sorry." Melvin's arms were limp at his sides, his milkshake down to the last lick.

Jimmy propped an elbow on the table, leveled his wrist, and rested his chin on it. A thinker's pose. "The future, man, the future is out there."

Melvin grumbled, folded his arms, grumbled some more. Then he looked appraisingly at Jimmy. "Idea

boy,” he said, a half-smile touching his face. “Albert E. Jimmy, idea boy. Not like you, eh? Fine, what’s left to lose, let’s knock heads and work this out. Maybe we do need a vacation from this illaday shit.”

Jimmy leaned back and shrugged. “All I’m saying.”

“Oh.” Melvin’s nose twitched. “If we’re gonna journey, or even try to, my clothes’re all at home... and I can’t go back. Maybe Pappy’s still at the Dandi-D, but I ain’t gonna take that chance.”

“Not a problem,” Jimmy said. “Come over and borrow some of my bro’s old clothes. They’d be big enough.”

The kitchen door opened and out came the waitress. Jimmy watched as she went to the coffee station and grabbed a freshly brewed pot. Coffee, he wanted more coffee. Coffee, apple pie, and a new C-Van. God bless America.

The waitress came by with the pot. “More coffee?”

Jimmy nodded, his eyes to her shapely bosom. Shapely. A nice word for a bosom. Smart, exquisite, a little bit historical. *Ma’am, you bear a shapely bosom and you bear it distinctively*, he’d say.

Oh! she’d reply, peepers aglow. *What a gentleman you are, dear boy. Could you be the keeper of my sacred flame?*

“SHANA” did badge her shapely bosom, and seeing her name filled Jimmy with a great warmth

that nearly bade him sing, *Shana, my flaxen Shana! Over fen and tussock and swale I trod to you, not knowing what these things are yet trod upon them I do. At harsh peril I deliver and cast my heart into your Crack of Doom.*

“I’m gettin’ off shift soon,” Shana said. She refilled Jimmy’s coffee and slid a check to the table. “So here’s your check—I gotta close my tables, ring you up. Doesn’t mean you have to leave, though.” She gestured to the check. “You want, I can take it to the register.”

Melvin studied the numbers, then pulled out a twenty and gave it to her. She took the money and check and went to get change. Melvin looked at Jimmy and asked, “Total was ten sixty-two, what kinda tip is that?”

Shapely Shana deserved the full fifteen, Jimmy thought. “Like...um...one fifty, one seventy-five, two bucks?”


“Huh.” Melvin hunched in concentration. “But we ain’t going anywhere, not for a while, ’least I don’t *want* to. So, like, whoever replaces her should get a tip too.” He picked up his milkshake glass and licked the rim. “If we give this waitress two bucks but give the next one nothing—that ain’t fair, ’cause that next waitress is gonna be refillin’ your coffee and my water and stuff. Maybe we split the tip in half! A buck for this chick and a buck for the next. Fifty cents if it’s a dude.”

“But Shana took the orders *and* brought the food,” Jimmy protested. “She should get more than a buck. How ’bout two bucks for *each* chick. We got the cash, and more on the way. This’d be like a good luck proclamation, a new day’s start.”

“Fuckin’ four dollars!” Melvin reached over and pretended to slap Jimmy. “You tool!” Then he laughed. “Fine. Two bucks for Shannon and two for the next. Fifty cents if it’s a dude.”

“Shana,” Jimmy said. “Can’t you read right?”

“Figured.” Melvin grabbed his water glass and downed the contents in a single gulp. “Tool.”



Juliette got to the Bad Art Diner twenty-five minutes late. Her co-worker Shana had done an overnight and was hanging on sourly, waiting to be relieved—but when she saw Juliette’s face, she hurried to her with concern. Alvaro, Juliette’s favorite among the line cooks, was sitting in a booth reading *Al Día*; he also hurried to her with concern.

“Julie,” Shana said, “what happened, you okay?”

“Jettie?” Alvaro said, using his nickname for her. “What is it? You got a problem?”

Juliette didn’t want to talk, but all this damn concern deserved and demanded an explanation. First she apologized. “Sorry I’m late, Shana. Hey, Al. Tommy’s in? He’s pissed, ain’t he. I don’t think I can take a lecture right now.”

“Don’t worry,” Shana said. “He’s been on the john for the last half-hour. Couldn’t resist Alfie’s *el primero* cheesy-hash.”

Owner Tommy was huge, muscled, but also woe-fully challenged in his ability to digest dairy. Juliette should’ve known he was stuck on the pot: Alvaro wouldn’t usually dare to hang in the dining room and read the paper. Tommy didn’t like his waitresses to read it on the clock, either, but—

“Shana, any papers around?” she said.

Shana pointed to an empty booth. “Over there, guy left his *Keynote*. New *Jiff*’s in too, look behind the counter.”

Juliette ran to this morning’s *Philadelphia Keynote*, zipped through the headlines, tore it open to the second, third, fourth page. No Wayne. She guessed his troubles had happened too late for the *Keynote* to catch. She lunged behind the counter and grabbed the new *Jiff*. No mention of Wayne, except of course a small-print credit in the masthead under “Production.”

“Julie!” Shana, behind her. “Tell me what’s wrong!”

“Jettie!” Alvaro as well. “We got to know!”

Juliette dropped the *Jiff* and turned around. “You guys know Wayne, that friend of mine...” Once she started talking she couldn’t stop, and she told them all she knew, all her worries.

“Ack, it’s not a dude.”

“Two bucks?”

“I promised, didn’t I? Mm-mm, I guess it’s worth it—just *look* at that, Jimmy. Makes me wanna get another milkshake. Banana this time. Banana says somethin’ about a man.”

“She’s alright.”

“Alright? That’s it? Alright?”

“She’s pretty and all, but not really my type...”

“Type? You got a *type*? When’d you get that? Far as I know, you’ve got puppy-eyes for half the town. Forever I know you and I never heard this type. Spill it, Jellybean, tell me your *type*.”

“T-that old movie, really stupid...*The Goonies*? That funny-looking chick with the attitude, I dunno, kinda cool—”

“Yo, that is *sad*. A girl from one of your brother’s dusty-ass videotapes. Flick came out before we were even born so you’re crushin’ on a chick old enough to be your momma! Maybe you can write her and she’ll adopt you and you can get buck wild. Then when she’s real crabbed up you can stash her in a tube and keep on rockin’. No guilt, she’ll be Alzheimered by then.”

“Melvin, she’s not *that* old.”

“Older’n you and me put together I bet!”

“Pfft, who’s the one rented *Nell* for the nude scene?”

Her countenance unsmiling, her movement cheerless, a cruel bafflement filling her head and sinuses: like this Juliette chugged through the rote of waitressing, unable to find comfort in motion. An hour went by, one single hour, and already she was losing her mind. Couldn’t think right.

Big kudos for small favors, the place wasn’t busy this morning. A few regulars had been in and out already, but traffic was lighter than usual. Though bad for tips and bad for Tommy, Juliette took it as positive; she was in no shape to tend a crowd.

She elbowed through the kitchen door and stuck an order ticket to the rack above the grill. Then she leaned against a chrome closet dented from a thousand previous leanings and rolled her shoulders to relieve a growing tension. Fatigue brought her sliding down the metal and she had to catch herself from falling to the floor.

The short-order trio of Alvaro, Chocho, and Mo was curiously subdued, heads down and mouths shut. Their dampened spirits were maybe due to her tale of Wayne (which she’d only told to Alvaro, but he might’ve passed it on) though it could just as easily be, and likely was, something else. The kitchen radio was tuned to Gleem 97, “Philly’s Paramount Flava Purveya,” and Juliette nodded to the three cooks and spun the dial from hip-hop to news. Alvaro looked up from cleaning his grill and gave her a smile. The

news had nothing but the same shit she'd already heard, so she switched the station back to Gleem 97.

Alvaro cocked his head to her. "Jettie, Jettie, not very good about your boy. What you do now?"

"No idea, Al."

"Hey, Jettie, c'mon, you okay? Maybe he all right."

She pressed a palm to her temple. "I hope he is."

"Yeah. You two talk enough, I know. Many times, I come out and see him and you by the counter, eh, your one foot going tap-tap. Jettie is *muy paciente*, *bastante romántica*, how I think about you. Him, *desvanecida*, maybe. Why I'm sad for you, for my girl."

Juliette looked away. "Oh..."

Alvaro wagged his head towards Mo and Chocho, who were spanking pork on the adjacent grill. "We always laugh at him, he's coming in a year or more. Very much, he loves my cooking!" Alvaro laughed. "*But* we know you have a boyfriend, living away in Harrisburg?"

"Alvaro! Alright, okay?"

"Sorry. Here, your boy, sometimes I *watch*. He has this look, this look for you. None of my business, I know. But now this. Jettie, I hope it works out for good."

"Thanks, Al," she said, then went to the back of the kitchen and used the wall phone to call Wayne's place. No Wayne, no Doogie, no answer. She called her own number to check for messages. One from

Shana ("Hey you, wake up!") but nothing more. She rang the offices of *Jiff*, where a day-shift guy expressed fatigue: "All I can *say's* what I keep *sayin'*, he left 'round one inna morning. S'all. We. Know."

Tommy entered the kitchen and saw her hanging up the receiver. "Julie," he said, "things are okay, yes?"

She nodded. "Yep."

"You say so, you say so. I don—" His eyes swirled. "Skata!" He sped to the bathroom. Ah, the power of cheese.

She left the kitchen and sat at the counter. There were only eight patrons and none were calling on her, and of that eight just three were drinking coffee, and she'd refilled their cups about ten minutes back. With no diner matter pressing, she considered that *Philadelphia Keynote* lying within reach. Also nearby was the stupid *Jiff*, but that would be too depressing to read right now. She dragged over the *Keynote* and paged through it. Middle East, election preview, Middle East, football report, Middle East, gay marriage, pumpkin-eating contest.

Buried towards the back, she found a lifestyle story on the "Recycle Man," a spry fellow whose life's devotion was finding second, third, fourth uses for everything in his path, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral, though after three divorces, not familial. "All three ex-wives nurse a fondness for the Recycle Man," Juliette read, "but the pressures of principle

can force any bond to the breaking point. To quote his second wife Paula, ‘I don’t care how good the fish bite, some [expletive] things are off the [expletive] menu. Who’d want to eat that [expletive] catch?’”

Juliette closed the *Keynote* and wished for a drug. Dear God, it’s me, Juliette. Don’t hate me, but may I bum a smoke?

At the other end of the counter, a grizzled man was slogging through a plate of scrapple—taking one bite, then a slurp of coffee, then a puff on a cigarette. The kind of man who sighs a lot and has nothing to say when asked why. In a corner booth, three students were sharing breathless disbelief at what some *he’s-so-craaaazy* friend had done at a *soooo-fucking-insane* party last night. Another booth could barely contain the effervescence of a couple playing cute.

And of course she couldn’t discount the two dorks camping at a back table. They’d been enjoying the Bad Art’s hospitality for a good while now, courtesy of Shana first and now Juliette herself, and they seemed constitutionally disinclined to move along. The larger of the dorks, a hefty boy in an ugly, too-tight sweater, was a mad camel. He’d ordered a banana shake from her and just crushed it, and since then he’d been downing water, gulp after gulp, and bugging her whenever his cup runnethed dry. After the ninth refill, Juliette had gotten wise enough to leave him the whole pitcher. Much

simpler, unless the camel forgot his manners and drained it directly.

The smaller dork didn’t share his buddy’s appetite for water—instead he was pounding coffee, and Juliette had refilled his cup four times already (four being the unposted limit, but how many cups had Shana had poured before Juliette’s arrival?) Also, he was a scribbler. About a half-hour ago he’d talked a pen from her with the charming line “yo, you got a pen I could, like, borrow, kinda?” and already he’d filled the back of his placemat with elaborate drawings. Now he was canvassing the front. Walking by on a refill round, Juliette had seen that the kid’s work was actually of some merit. Not so much the subject matter, minivans with rally tires and racing aeros, but the angles and proportions were first-rate.

Doodle, doodle, Wayne loved to doodle, too. But he wasn’t doodling now, wherever he was. Of that Juliette was certain. Mostly certain. He was alive, she knew he was, the alternative belief was unsustainable. He was hiding somewhere, or running somewhere, or trying to fix whatever awful mess he’d blundered into, or doing all of that at once.

The door chimes rang, followed by the slapping of footsteps, and Juliette turned to see a common annoyance prancing into the diner. Great. She’d wanted to hear the radio news, but she certainly hadn’t wanted to *see* it. Here it came nevertheless, personified by Mike Bell, WINF1030-AM’s roving reporter,

a man fleet and chipper, apple-cheeked and elfin. Now he was trotting towards her, and Tommy was out of the john and crying hello: “Ay, Michael!”

Ay, Michael, ay. Though the reporter was a familiar enough sight at the Bad Art, his vigorous goofiness never failed to strike Juliette anew. A tape recorder—no, *the* tape recorder, the official logo-pasted “WINF1030 NewsRadio StreeTalk with Mike Bell!” tape recorder—thumped against Bell’s hip as he approached. It was tethered to his body by a red canvas strap that crossed his chest and waist like a seat belt. Mike Bell had megawatts of energy and tiny shoulders, so all his hopping and scrambling necessitated a secure harness for his gear. Squeezed in Bell’s delicate hands was a microphone with a plump orange head; draped over him (as always, regardless of weather) was a cheery blue rain slicker. With these joyful colors and his messy finger-combed hair, Mike Bell more resembled a bulky child at the school bus stop than a man entrusted with journalistic responsibilities.

“Julie,” Tommy called out, “get the man a coffee.”

“The charity!” Mike Bell declared, shoving his grin too close to Juliette’s frown. “I’d *love* a cup of coffee.”

She stepped back. “To go?”

Bell didn’t answer, but began fiddling one-handed with the knobs on his StreeTalk tape recorder. With

his other hand, he poked his orange mike at her mouth. Or where he thought her mouth should be. His eyes, and with it his feel for spatial relations, were turned to the array of meters and controls atop the tape recorder. With Juliette being taller and on chunker-dunker heels, the microphone jabbed her in the windpipe.

Bell twisted a dial and tapped a button. “Scream into this, Julie. I gotta set the level.”

“Bell...” She was feeling more than a bit testy.

“Oh, okay, forget it. I’ll scream myself if I don’t get some hot *soo*-matra, I am a weary man!”

Juliette pushed Bell’s microphone away from her neck and walked to the coffee station. Three pots were hot on the burners, two of coffee and one of plain water. The first pot of coffee was crisp, full and proud. The second was its sad, sludgy, bog-stink cousin, a loamy ripple of expired brack at the bottom. Naturally she chose the second pot, cutting it with a splash of water, if only to lighten the viscosity. Then it was back to Mike Bell with cup and saucer in hand.

She placed the gift before him. He had his lips lowered into the orange bosom of his microphone, apparently setting the level with only himself and a Tom Jones number: “Ohhm, it’s not un-uuu-sual to lofff someone...”

At the clink of ceramic on counter, he stopped singing and looked up. His fingers left the tape

recorder to find the handle of the coffee cup. Eyes closed, he took a sip and licked his lips.

“Thick and smoky,” he growled into the mic. “I gots me a cup o’ smog, baby.” After a few more swallows he lowered the cup and cleared his throat. He flicked a lever on the tape recorder and gave a thumbs-up to nobody or everybody. The level was set and ready, reflected by the stern rise of his upturned chin, by his hard look of duty. Also known as the flinty glare of the bad actor, but Juliette kept her mouth shut.

Bell made for the corner and took from his pocket a folded piece of paper. He opened it, read whatever was on it, and began taping himself. He’d moved out of Juliette’s easy earshot, and in spite of herself she crept closer to hear what he was saying.

The reporter was in performance mode, his vocals carnivalesque and conspiratorial: “...the *po*-lice have put out a bolo for *Mil*-ton, and I’m sure that this *drag*-net is working every possible angle to make sense of this deeply strange incident. I’m here at the Bad Art *Di*-ner, a cornerstone neighborhood eatery for the bo-*hee*-mian in everyone.

“Now, Wayne Milton was known to visit here quite often—will he *ever* be back? Will we *ever* know the real story? Let’s get some reaction from the crowd.” He clicked off the tape and looked around: “Crowd, my ass.”

Juliette backed up and tried to look bored as Bell

returned to the counter. He grabbed his coffee cup and gulped down what remained, then stepped close to her.

“Who first?” he said. “You, my dear?”

She edged back. “No.”

“Y’know, Julie, I got it on good authority that this Milton ate here a lot. A crew from our TV sister-station shook down some softie pal of his. Told us Milton’s always coming here to hit on a certain waitress.” A grin on Bell’s face. “I wonder.”

What softie pal? Doogie? Juliette forced herself to remain still. Doogie was Wayne’s roommate and friend, so of course he knew about Wayne’s habitual visits to the Bad Art—but would he leak this tidbit to the news? Would he tattle?

Sure, Juliette didn’t know Doogie all that well, but Wayne esteemed him an honorable guy, and no way would an honorable guy squawk to the press about a friend’s personal life. In fairness, though, Wayne had been coming around for so long, and with such persistence, that it would be expected for Doogie to have a view on the matter, an opinion on his roommate’s everyday delusion. Maybe he’d told a friend or a lover, thinking it harmless gossip; and maybe that friend or lover was loose-lipped.

The TV crewman Juliette had encountered at Conifer Street Arms had been clueless, but Mike Bell seemed another breed, casually pegging the link between her and Wayne. No—Bell was only

implying this link, not stating it. She suspected that his knowledge comprised rumors and hints, and by crafty suggestion he was hoping to trick her into talking. Well, she wasn't about to confirm or deny anything. She wouldn't be *that* sheepish.

"Bell," she said, "I don't talk customers, okay?"

The reporter puckered his cheeks, hummed a discouraged note, and said, "Oh, fine. I'll hit up the room, and then Tommy—and *then*, Miz Julie, I'm gonna hassle you until something quotable pops out. And I wager it will." With a bow, he sucked up a pint of air and sprang over to the two dorks by the jukebox, the water-guzzling camel and the coffee-guzzling minivan doodler. Bell stood before their table in his indigo raincoat, short and blue like a mailbox. His finger flipped the microphone to life. The dorks opposed him with faces dull and blank.

"Hello, Mike Bell, WINF1030 NewsRadio's StreeTalk. Mind if I ask some o-pinions of you?"

The skinnier dork, minivan doodler, dropped his pen to the placemat and yawned. "O-kay."

Bell held out the microphone and deepened his radio cadence. "Thank you sir! Let's start fresh and new—you've heard about this *Mil-ton* case, this strange—*deeply* strange—shooting of late last night, taking place only, oh, seven, eight *hours* ago? Who is this Wayne Milton, what's his motive? And what about the foreigner, is this an international incident? Cops're hush-hush, but why? And d'ya know that

this Mr. Milton could have just yesterday been sitting *right* where you're sitting now? Scuttlebutt is he loved coming here, all the time." At that, he tossed a wink back to Juliette.

Funny enough, Juliette thought, this past week was the one week Wayne *hadn't* been coming to the diner.

The skinny dork sat silent for a moment, then yawned again. He looked at his doodles and said, "No idea."

"No idea? No idea about what?"

"I got no idea what you're talking about."

"Apologies. Same for your friend here?" The microphone swung to the bigger dork, the thirsty camel. "No idea either?"

"Yo, nobody's ever interviewed me before," the bigger dork said. "This gonna go on the radio?"

Mike Bell nodded. "There's a chance of that, yep."

"Nice!" The bigger dork cleared his throat and leaned into the microphone's orange head. "I wanna give a shout-out to that hot piece makin' hoagies at the Toby-Mart down Ore—"


Bell jammed the microphone's *off* switch. "No! No shout-outs! Every lovin' day one of you clowns tries for a shout-out. StreeTalk doesn't *do* shout-outs. Period. StreeTalk is about local stories and local reactions, get it? StreeTalk is about the news affecting you and me, get it? StreeTalk is *not* a public-access

bullhorn for you to whoot-whoop your homies or whatever. Get it?”

“Dude,” the bigger dork said, “I never even heard of you and your, Stree, uh, Stree-Talk before now, and yo, I been around. But I get your point and I agree to disagree, but only ’cuz I’m trying to be respectful and peaceful, not rude and ignorant insulting strangers like myself and Jimmy. My mother didn’t teach me manners neither, but that don’t mean I can’t etiquette myself, follow?”

“Hey,” the skinny dork added, “I think you wanna tape that last part. That’s a classy o-pinion.”

Bell nodded. “Who knew Emily Post had idiot grandkids?”



Melvin didn’t like this radio guy. Melvin didn’t care about this radio guy. But Melvin both liked and cared about water. In the wonderful world of restaurants, water was free! And ice was free! Melvin didn’t know all the details, but he knew that the water came from the sky, fell on the reservoir, got pumped into tall mushroomy towers, and zig-zagged through a zillion pipes before finally spurting from the tap into the pitcher that filled his squatty glass. With ice. Free! Melvin hadn’t seen that many reservoirs up close, maybe one, which in fact looked like a big stinky pond where kids spit in and bums piss around. But the water in the diner was clear and

tasty. Miracles of science!

His glass was empty, and the pitcher the waitress had left was empty, and all the ice was crunched and swallowed, and still he was thirsty. Jimmy’s coffee cup was dry, too. One more shot of water and one more splash of joe wouldn’t bankrupt the place, right? They were putting out a double-action tip, after all.

Jimmy was bent over his placemat, ignoring the radio turd, working core detail into a fine rendering of the C-Van, Marque II. Melvin watched Jimmy’s ballpoint stab and roll and wished he could draw shit too. He *used* to draw shit, with crayons and stuff, but his age five style had looked exactly i-fuckin’-dential to his age ten style, making him the butt of a billion jokes. So he’d given up the art, though not the appreciation. He leaned forward to stretch his spine, and as his weight shifted, the vinyl upholstery reluctantly detached from his sleepy butt. Pins and needles up his ass, they’d been sitting here a long time.

“So you guys haven’t heard of last night’s mystery murder?” The radio turd was speaking again? Fuck him and his smirk and his undue attitude. Melvin didn’t know Emily Post but knew an insult when he heard one.

“*Mystery Murder*,” Bell continued. “That’s one of the TV taglines. *Foul Play Or Fatal Mistake?* That’s another. Zero points for creative, but so it goes. All

morning they've been running the story, hot and jolly—first on Informer Six, our sister on the box, though the other stations picked it up soon after. Of course it's on the radio, too, much more cool and concise. Oh, what d'you care, I doubt the news even reaches your demographic backwater."

Jimmy grunted without looking up, but Melvin was ruffled to say, "You're kickin' my intellect 'cuz I don't dig the news? Your news got nothing I need. Why should I care about traffic or weather or if the fuckin' stocks are goin' upside or downwards? Why should I care about this Mystery Murder crap? A guy got shot? Far's I know that's a daily thing, big whoop."

"Rather lathered, aren't we." Bell looked around the diner. "Tsk, who else?" At the counter sat an old scuzz, and Bell looked at him, shook his head, and muttered, "Frankenfuck." Several booths away sat a happy couple, merrily squishing together on the same side of the table. Bell watched them coo and poke.

"Check out the lovebirds," he said. "Guess I'll go intrude." He turned to leave, but an instant later jerked up a forefinger and swiveled back. "Wait. Like I said, this Wayne Milton ate here a lot. Maybe you do too." Bell took a photo from his slicker and dropped it on the table. "Got this e-mailed from the cops. They were *so* very pissy after that snafu with the roommate's mug." He clicked a fingernail to the image and smirked. "Lovely photo, aye? That

Jiff place must be a wild and wooly work environment! Hey-*yah*, maybe not so wooly. Boys, attention please?"

The photo lay between Melvin's empty water glass and Jimmy's empty coffee cup. Jimmy didn't pay it any mind and kept drawing, but Melvin bent close and stared at it. Then he kicked Jimmy under the table.

"Ouch!" Jimmy jerked up, knocking his coffee cup sideways and jamming his pen through the placemat. "What!"

Oops, Melvin had kicked too hard. "Sorry, man," he said, and motioned to the photo. Jimmy clapped his pen to the table, righted his cup, and looked. He let out a tiny yip and regarded Melvin with a stare red and bulbous like wet tomatoes.

Mike Bell whistled a low note. "Why the fuss, boys? Know the pretty fellow?"

"Uh, no," Melvin said, kneading the rim of his empty water glass. He'd wanted a refill before, and now he really really wanted it. "Just that red underwear is fucked up, like, fucked up, a'spificly with that yellow stain on his balls, or whatever that is."

"Yeah, yeah," Jimmy added, "those boxers, he's half-naked in somebody's office."

"You don't recognize him?"

"Shit no," Melvin said. "Don't hang with freaks like that, Radio Shack." He saw the curly-haired waitress coming near. Howdy, hotness! Melvin

wanted to know her name but she was tagless. No fair! Jimmy's girl had worn a tag. He waved and pointed to his empty pitcher. "Yo, can I—" he began, then rethought the phrasing. "I'd like some more water if that's all right?"

She stopped before him and frowned. Then she leaned in, grabbed the pitcher—and saw the photo. Her movements halted, except for her frown, which began to shudder.

"Hey, Julie!" Bell scissored his fingers around the photo, whisked it up, and waved it before her. "Take a look. This your boy or what, huh? C'mon, gimme some words."

That picture! Juliette knew that picture. In fact she herself had a copy of it, received several months ago as a gift of sorts:

"Clark—the golden boy—wears cherry-colored boxers with a yellow freakin' happy face on the crotch?" Wayne exclaimed. "And you continue to date him?"

"So what?" she'd said defensively. "It's cute."

"No, Julie, it is *not* cute. I refuse to stand by while you bed a smiling cock. Dump him now, or I'm gonna call the governor and get him canned for perversion."

"Clark doesn't work for the governor, he works for a representative. And I'm not reminding you

which one. You're just jealous 'cause you're too damn repressed to have any fun."

Wayne tilted up his nose and snorted. "That's what you think. Come tomorrow, you'll be eating those words."

Strained and pained, choked and bothered, that's how the waitress looked. Melvin's forehead tingled and he sensed drama coming, hopefully the entertaining kind.

Bell lofted his microphone to the lady's face. "Is he your boy, this Milton? He tip you good? Love lemon meringue pie? Hang out with dirty rotten ne'er-do-wells? C'mon, I know you got the juice. Waitresses know everything and you know even more! Share the dirt, girl!" Big, big grin.

"Bell, give it up," the waitress said. "*Now*. I'm not in the mood." Melvin could see her quivering.

Of course Bell could also see the quivers, and he studied her face and said, "I can tell, I can tell you know something good. It's my business to tell! Out, girl, out with it, you can talk to—"

The waitress was still holding that empty water pitcher, her grip tight-knuckled on the handle, and suddenly she swept her arm up and out—and the pitcher became a blur, a streak, a comet crashing into the radio man's lunky brain. Kaboom! The sexy

smackdown came so quick Melvin could hardly see the details, and he *wanted* to see the details, he loved a sexy smackdown.

“Fuck off!” the waitress yelled, as Bell fell into the next booth and rolled under the table like a punky rat, shielding his face with the flaps of his blue slicker. Then the waitress slumped down next to Melvin and dropped the empty pitcher on his lap. She began knocking her head on the table and talking under her breath: “Shit, shit, *shit*. Mm, mm, *fuck*.”

Melvin took the pitcher off his lap and placed it on the table. Then he shimmied over to give the waitress more room to curse and bonk her head. Jimmy twisted around, stuck his head into the next booth, peered down at the defeated radio pussy. Melvin stood and looked too. The joker was mewling stupidly, his knees on the floor and his face planted into the brown booth seat. Melvin thought it appropriate that Bell’s face was buried into a place meant for asses, a place that must’ve cushioned thousands of asses over the years.

The microphone had flown from Bell’s hand and was slung over the booth divider, dangling from its cord. Melvin wanted to reach for it, but before he could make a go, a huge hand lowered from on high and engulfed the mic as if squeezing a toothpick. The nails and fingers of this hand were dabbed with dried paint or speckled polish or something funny

like that, a girly touch on a mean grip. Watching this beastful paw flex and grapple, Melvin wondered how its owner jacked off without crippling his wanker. He drew back his gaze to take in the whole man and realized it was the same meaty bald bruiser who’d been scowling by the register. Big Man come to set things straight?

The man placed the microphone on the table. “Julie,” he said, his voice more firm than angry, “what is going on!”

The waitress turned to him, her face like the face of a little girl who just saw her perfect precious kitty get devoured by a twenty-foot snaggletoothed Commodo Dragon that recently escaped from the stanky pooty-clogged sewer. Gold star for Melvin, patron saint of simile! He hadn’t flunked *every* class in school.

“Sorry, Tommy,” she said. “I—I shouldn’t have. Sorry.”

“Jee-sus!” Bell crawled to a sitting position. Tears filled his eyes, and a red bump above his brow gave his forehead the shine of a stoplight. “You little bitch!”

The waitress drove her hands against the table and shot to a stance. “Little bitch? I’m taller than you, short stuff.”

The big man, Tommy, gestured for her to calm down. Then he inspected Bell’s smacked-up head. “Julie. You did this?”

“I—I’m sorry. I think I meant to hit the mic, I mean, to shut him up. Oh, Tommy, I don’t know what came over me.”

Bell swaggered to a stance and gnashed his teeth. He grabbed his microphone off the table and thrust it at the waitress as if it were a magical wand of power. “Whatta hell’s with you? Some Amazon PMS shit? I’m just tryin’ to do my job—”

“Michael,” Tommy said, his face growing knots, “I comp you free meals for a month. Two months.” He gave the waitress a sad look. “We take care of this problem. Let’s go to the back.”

The waitress returned the sad look but said nothing. Tommy sighed, dipped his bald dome, and began pushing her towards the kitchen. “Come, let’s go.” Before they reached the kitchen door, Tommy stopped and turned back to Melvin and Jimmy. “Two sad shits, get out. You’ve been here long enough.”

What gives! *They* hadn’t caused the upswing in violence. Melvin looked at Jimmy and Jimmy looked at Melvin. Facing Tommy, they rose their middle fingers in near-unison, Melvin’s bird taking a slight lead. The dude wanted instigation, the dude would get instigation.

“You’d like to play?” Tommy said, taking his hand from the waitress’s shoulder. He went over to the cashier’s desk, reached behind it, and pulled out a Louisville Slugger wrapped in twisted and hairy electrical tape. “You’d like my games?”

Middle fingers collapsed. Melvin grabbed his Marlboro duffel and jumped to his feet, Jimmy ejected from the booth in a blurry spasm, and together they bounded down the aisle before this hulk could shove his nasty spanikopita up both their asses. Right before the diner’s exit, Melvin spun around, pumped his fist in the air, and tried to deliver a killer cinematic kiss-off.

“Craboo!” he slobbered, failing utterly. Then he and Jimmy escaped the Bad Art Diner, bell-chimes clashing as they breezed out the door and into the street, Melvin’s hefty pirate blubberbuss hugged like money in his arms.



FEARFUL, COLD, CRAVING THE DAY SO SLOW TO BREAK, Wayne cowered in the last row of the Trailhound bus, his body against the cabin's rightward wall, his face behind a screen of news-print. The bus was crowded but he had this starboard pair of seats to himself, a stroke of luck worth many desperate thanks. Behind him, back east, the new sun drove higher and peeled away a bleak night. Before him, due west, a pitchy muck clung to the coming road.

The Trailhound coach had left the Philadelphia depot at forty-two after six, and the city limits were surpassed by seven. The outside world scrolled by at highway speed, a landscape of motion-blurred rail posts, faraway hills, headlights whipping the morning fog. Windchills trod the tinted glass while moments and monuments raked by, the cabin humming and creaking with engine revolutions, bouncing shocks, travelers' mumbles.

Not loud but neither quiet, not black but never bright, to Wayne everything felt baffled and damp, his yawns rumbling his eardrums. He struggled to stay alert, to keep awake until the dawn could lift his drowsy cloak of shadow. New sun, new sun, hurry up and get it shining! No excuses, no dawdles, unfold your rays and lay that golden egg! But mewling and carping didn't accelerate Apollo's chariot, so Wayne turned from the window and—for the sixth time—read pages 7D and 8D of this morning's *Philadelphia Keynote*, wherein a guy called Recycle Man proclaimed his love of "earthworming," which sounded kinky but referred to human compost creation.

Since the depot, Wayne had been shielding himself with the newspaper; he'd boarded the bus with nose to the page, faking total immersion in his reading. Though a fine protective cover, this particular copy of the *Keynote* failed as a literary diversion, mainly because it was missing every section but D, *lifeStyle*. Today's *lifeStyle* featured twenty column inches of

story and twenty column feet of Delaware booze ads, entrapment as good business for both merchants and cops.

At least he wasn't hiding behind the new issue of *Jiff*. The sight of that rag would wound him stupidly, make him miss his job, his old life. Sure, that old life was no farther gone than last night, but it already felt a thousand leagues drowned.

Rousing snores crossed the aisle and breached Wayne's inky barricade. These snores had been a continuous presence from the bus journey's start, and periodically Wayne would lower his guard to survey their source. While Wayne had both seats to the right of the aisle, he didn't own the whole row: an old man was sleeping across from him, using the left pair of seats as a pallet. At gate nine of the depot, Wayne had climbed aboard the bus, rushed to the back, and found him sawing away, body wallowed across both bottom cushions and face creased like a sheet of paper first crumpled then hurriedly smoothed out. He was Asian, but any guess to ethnicity was beyond Wayne, and consciously so. Wayne had met people who claimed the ability to peg specific Asian nationality via a subject's facial, bodily, or sartorial nuance. Usually the claim was delivered in triumphant style, as if asinine generalizing was a rarefied mark of worldly sophistication. Wayne had also known people who called every Asian "Chinese," and that didn't come off any better.

The old man's snores were their own language, how they would soar and dive, how they foundered and diminished only to again skyrocket. People in the next row up would turn and grumble at any prolonged surge, and Wayne feared these moments. As these malcontents glanced back at the snoring nuisance, their gaze might hop across the aisle. *Who's that rat behind the paper?* they might wonder. *Who's that funny moke? Guilty stink, he got. Some freaky wrongness.*

If they did see his face, would it matter? The TV news had him looking like Doogie. Odds were, though, another channel had gotten his face right. And because he was at the back of the bus, the toilet was a few feet behind. Nobody had used it yet, but eventually someone would be unable to wait for a rest stop, and they'd pass by him, right up close, and notice—

Notice what, he'd gotten away clean, nobody was gonna tag him as *Wayne Milton, Floundering Criminal*. This paranoia would undo him. He folded up the *Keynote* and dropped it on the empty seat beside him. His shoulders and arms ached from holding the paper an hour upright, and his bruised right hand was sore from gripping the pages.

To loosen up, he stretched out his arms and swiveled his neck. The movement soothed his back but angered the long scab across his chest. He pulled on the fabric of his shirt—the Trailhound tee he'd

bought from Marcietta at the Philly depot—and fanned it over his chest until the itch lessened.

Philadelphia had been left behind, every moment more, yet relief paid no visit. The miles traveled and the miles to come, like a creeping weed they circled his body and put roots in his mind. He was being sickened, irreversibly altered, and his second-guessing nature flowered anew with happy taunts.

You did kill someone, you know.

— No! Hollander killed himself when he jumped at me.

Who pointed the gun?

— I just wanted him to listen. It went so fast!

Great tactic! Sure got his attention, nice job.

— Fuck off, okay?

Sure, sure. Get some rest, tough guy, you'll need it.

Rest? He deserved no rest. Any sleep would land like a sucker punch. His body was hopelessly tumble-down, his brain fractured and overclocked. As for the few lucid thoughts he had left, they skittered about like mercury critters, and he needed some way to trap them before they broke down and dissolved. He needed a pen, a pencil, a wheelbarrow to collect his stranded figments.

His short-sleeved arms were cold and rough, spawning wistful thoughts of his lost jacket. Warm air piped from the side vents and protected the cabin from the frigid world outside, but still he felt sheeted by chills. He held his hands over the vent but the

heat swam past his fingers, leaving the briefest trace. A few minutes later the vent quit blowing.

Wayne pressed his palms into the grooves, searching the metal for retained warmth. He tensed his muscles and was rewarded with a buzzing rush that quickly failed. Daylight was building by hidden increments, and he lay his head across the headrest, looked out the window, and fell asleep unplanned. Minutes later, sunbeams tore through the mist, staved past the window tint, and smacked against his face. Nap dashed, he woke up with hands to his eyes and neck wrenched in aversion, shivering in a cradle of brown and beige upholstery.

He was no shrewd survivor. He was a reformed wag, a minor spirit, a casual dreamer who'd never managed to thicken his skin. A brain spinning in a mockery of meditation, a body thin but soft. How would he get by, someone like him?



Miles passed. Small towns were momentarily visited. A few people got off, a few more got on. Like this the bus advanced, and Wayne was in a daze, and time had no precision. Then he heard the driver's voice peeling from speakers: "Hello! It's comin' up on ten-thirty, and right now we're stoppin' for a stretch and a snack. There's a King Chix where you can get yourself a sandwich, but don't trust their coffee, get it at the general store next door. There's a reason

they ain't called King Coffee. Hee-ey, here's a morning joke. What d'ya call a frog parked in a fire zone?"

Nobody cared to answer.

"Toad!"

A few people chuckled, some grunted, most stayed silent. Across the aisle from Wayne, the snoring old Asian man continued snoring. Wayne sat up and rubbed his neck; he smoothed down his hair, squeezed his nose, popped his ears. The bus swung off the highway, came to a fork in the road, and turned left.

Here was a small town, a local scene, and Wayne scanned it through the window, tipping his head back as the royal aerie of King Chix came soaring into view. Perched atop a skyward post, the famed iconic fowl beckoned to hungry wayfarers, though with a compromised majesty: this incarnation of King Chix was equal parts regal and mongrel, his gilded trimming cracked and old, his feathers sooty and dilapidated. Staked to the ground below the King's weathered roost, a wooden sign for the general store.

People began pulling on seatbacks and straining to their feet as the Trailhound jostled into the unpaved parking lot. Air brakes whinnied, the bus halted, and the cabin door opened with a hiss and a clank.

Wayne stood up, crouched, stood again, flopped back down. His knees popped and his balance was off. But then he had an energizing thought: the general store was sure to have cigarettes! And he had

eleven dollars and eighty-six cents! Quite enough for cigarettes! Something sweet to drink, too. But smokes foremost. Prioritize to survive.

The bus driver invoked the law of the stop. "Fifteen minutes, no more. Fifteen minutes and we're off."

Wayne hesitated before venturing from his seat. This wasn't Philadelphia but he was no less wary of exposure. Neck hot and head down, he walked to the front of the cabin and inched down the stairs. On landfall he paused and scraped the toes of his shoes across the gravel, waiting for a hidden lawman to rush up and arrest him. Didn't happen. He kicked at the dirt, then crossed the lot and furtively entered the general store.



Hands in pockets, Percy slipped through the general store's aisles feeling hyper-coordinated and absolutely frisky. He sidestepped and slalomed around fellow travelers who were planted glumly in the way, their eyes oscillating between commonplace chips and whitebread nachos, their faces like sunflowers yearning towards grease, not light. A topiary of Trailhound greaseflowers! *Ka-ching!* Consider yourself coined.

What to get? Canned Vienna sausages with a handy pull-tab lid? Percy passed them by, but not before gliding a finger along the illustrated label, paying

tribute to his father's favorite (and nasty) snack. Hot fries and pepper jerky lined the next aisle, but the setting wasn't right—he did love the spice, but not while traveling. Wisdom of experience. He rounded the corner, the open flap of his jacket whapping a cardboard Marlboro cowboy in the crotch, and came aface with a superbly stacked Little Debbie rack.

Debbie girl! Percy ogled her luxurious rack like nothing and nobody else mattered. Chocolate coconut moon pie, butterscotch-frosted devil's cake, caramel-coated peanut wafer bar, and more, more, more, a creme-filled cornucopia of undeniable goodness. Stuck on the rear of each package was a federally mandated nutrition label shamelessly spilling fatalistic statistics. Measured by this tattooed backside, Little Debbie needed a shitload of liposuction. But she was fine, she was syrup and honey, and Percy was smitten.

"You undeniable *vixen*," he whispered, hands reaching towards the plastic-wrapped cakes. A corrugated cutout of Little Debbie herself, rosy-cheeked and crudely nailed to a wooden board behind the display rack, watched with twinkling bedroom eyes as he pawed and fondled. Soon Percy's hands were laden with two fruit pies, one moon cookie, and three distinct variants of crunchy-creme wafer bar. Satisfied, he went to stand in line.

The guy in line in front of him, what *was* he holding? Was that a bottle of strawberry-flavored

Hoo-Hoo? The guy was going to buy it and...and actually *drink* it? Now, Percy would never refuse a good swig of Hoo-Hoo, provided it was cold enough—but strictly in chocolate flavor, which was of a milky-brown hue and agreeable delectation. But *strawberry* Hoo-Hoo, for shame! In color it managed only a freakish parody of its namesake's plump redness; it shone like lipstick phosphor and the flavor approached honeyed battery acid. It might mix well with scotch, but such a cocktail was gratuitously pimpish. All said, strawberry Hoo-Hoo was a most worthless beverage, a disgrace to any cooler's dignity, a disgrace to its own bottle.

Perhaps Percy was a telepath, his Hoo-Hoo aspersions strong enough to transmit: as if prompted, the guy lifted the sorry bottle and turned it around and around; from each angle he studied the purple slop within. Percy could see his face in profile, a face rapidly traveling from dispassion to dismay. Pouting now, the guy lowered the bottle and observed the queue behind him, which (Percy included) had grown nine itinerants deep. He wiped his forehead and again regarded the strawberry Hoo-Hoo, his expression soggy with heartbreak.

This was like a solo one-act, *The Disillusionment of Cap'n Hoo-Hoo*, and Percy watched contentedly—until the titular Cap'n Hoo-Hoo snuck a glance backwards, Percy's attention evidently having tactile weight. The Cap'n wouldn't meet Percy's eyes, but

it was clear that he did *not* appreciate his unique and fulfilling role as Percy's theatrical entertainment.

Percy felt like he should speak. "Strawberry Hoo-Hoo," he said, gesturing to the vile drink. "Yum."

The guy turned fully around. "What?" His voice was distant, as if he were his own ventriloquist, and a bad one at that.

"Strawberry Hoo-Hoo. What's in your hand."

"I know that. I thought I grabbed a chocolate one. Guess I wasn't really looking. Fuck it."

Pretty dim, this Cap'n Hoo-Hoo. Who could confuse the two flavors? A drunken colorblind mangy mutt could differentiate. "F'you wanna go swap it, I'll hold your spot in line."

"Oh!" The guy looked shocked. "Be right back." He broke from the line and went to the cooler at the rear of the store.

Percy checked his watch. About eight minutes 'til the bus voyaged onward. He surveyed the line and counted four people in front of him. Within this number was a familiar fat man—he and Percy were intimates of circumstance, seatmates of divergent and conflicting girth. Departing Philly, Percy had been lucky to have a window berth with nobody beside, roomy and relaxing, but at a suburban stop this parade float had blown in and crash-landed on the aisle seat. Forthwith, the relative slimness of Percy's hips had been deeply exploited by the invader's voracious

ass—an ass so awesomely expansive, Percy had first lost an eighth of his seat, then a quarter, then a third! The man's butt had kept growing and Percy's seat had kept shrinking! Zounds!

Hadn't helped that the man would spread his meatball legs like the wings of a proud California condor, or that, in his struggle to open a "Sup-r-Snak" potato-chip bag, he'd accidentally jackhammered an elbow into Percy's crotch and declined to apologize for potentially terminating the Morrison bloodline right then and there. Percy peered up to see what the man was buying. Bless me, three more "Sup-r-Snak" potato-chip bags! A fearful itch entered Percy's manhood.

The man attained the counter and tossed down his fusillade of crotch-destroyers. As they were being rung up, Cap'n Hoo-Hoo returned and stepped in front of Percy. Now the Cap'n's drink was a pleasant healthy chocolate, and also he'd picked up some new items on his circuit: in addition to the Hoo-Hoo, he was holding a smallish notebook and a green mechanical pencil.

The pencil was the disposable kind, nothing fancy, about a half-dozen rods inside it. Percy knew the specs because he himself had a lifetime supply of these pencils, same brand and style. A few years ago he'd bought four gross from a wholesaler (that being the minimum order, but when broken down,

the per-unit price had been almost disturbing in its cheapness.) Pencils galore! He'd be bequeathing them to his great-grandkids, luck willing.

"Much obliged," Cap'n Hoo-Hoo told Percy, sounding more together than before.

"Aye-aye, Cap'n," Percy said with a quick nod.

Such official address appeared to flummox the Cap'n, who grunted and kept silent until his turn at the register. Head down, he stepped to the cashier and pushed forth his drink, notebook, and pencil. "These, please, and a pack of Mitterrand Lights."

The cashier looked at him. "ID?" she asked.

"I don't—" the Cap'n quailed "—don't have it. No wallet."

"Sorry then," she said. "No can do."

Fingers curled and shoulder blades tilted inwards. "*Of course* I'm over eighteen, look at me!"

The woman released a well-practiced sigh.

"Twenty-four, I'm twenty-four..." His plea faltered. "You have to believe me." He slumped and grabbed at his hair.

"Look, I *can* sympathize. I do believe you. But fight the manager, not me. You're a plant, then my butt's out the door."

"Me? A plant? Comin' off a bus? C'mon—" Cap'n Hoo-Hoo was losing grip, his voice rising to something unmistakably hostile. Percy tapped the nicotine fiend on the shoulder. He craned around, face glowing with angry oils. "Wh, wha—urm?"

"Settle down, Nicodemo," Percy said. "Lady's got no choice." Then, feeling superbly charitable, he tipped his head and patted himself on the chest. "You just, eh...you just be cool."

Somewhere deep a candle shone, as Cap'n Hoo-Hoo appeared to catch the ball; his grimace slackened and he turned back to the cashier. "S-sorry. Forget it, forget the smokes." The woman shrugged, then rang up and bagged his goods. He paid, took the bag. Before leaving the shop, he gave Percy a beseeching look.

Percy ignored the needy physiognomy. Don't worry, junkie-doo, you'll get yours. Countless times Percy's father had dispatched his son hither and yon for smokes, even back when this son was barely grown to reach the counter. Shopkeepers sometimes playing the wit, "Shame you got stunted so bad, big man," but always supplying in the end. Different times.

As Percy lined up his Little Debbies on the counter, the cashier sat on her stool and watched him. Seeing her face up close, Percy felt the surfacing of a rapport, the source unclear. He nodded to his assortment of cakes and said with a noble smile, "Also, please, a pack of Mitterrand Lights?"

The woman didn't respond verbally. She widened her eyes and tracked them up and down his features. Her forehead wrinkled and straightened, then wrinkled and straightened again. Percy wondered what he'd done to inspire these motions.

“Mm-mm, the smile’s what did it,” she said, answering his unspoken question. She tapped her temple and grinned. “Could it really be—Percival?”

It really could be, it sure was, but how...? Percy straightened up, drew closer, studied her face. Recognition of a biometric sort came, evoked by familiar cheekbones. “Kaitlyn?”

She swept her head in a circle. “None other.”

“Kaitlyn! What you doin’ here, you were—you used to be—you were at the Eagle Plaza off Breezewood! How many years since I seen you? And Lordy, where’d the rest of you go?”

“Cheeky as I remember,” Kaitlyn said with mock-affront, then laughed. “It’s been three years, at least! How you been? Still on the road, huh?”

“Sort of.” Percy shrugged. “Bound on the ’Hound.”

“Takin’ a trip? Aw—” she gave a light frown “—that mean you’re by yourself, your daddy’s not around?”

Though accustomed to the subject, Percy flinched. “Heart attack.” Didn’t want to say it, hated inviting sympathy, but what could he tell but the truth?

“Oh.” A quiet breath. “I’m so sorry, honey.”

He relaxed. “Thanks. You’re doing all right?”

“Yeah,” Kaitlyn said, eyes downcast. “I’ve been good, I’ve been pretty good.”

“Well, you certainly *look* good,” Percy said. “Not that you weren’t comely before—” he lifted his

hands, palms open “—but dear me, you’re rather fine now. What’s your husband think? Da...Danny, right?”

Kaitlyn looked up. “Denny, honey. Oh, Denny. He’d rather me *be* a tank top than wear ’em. He skipped out a year ago.” She glanced over Percy and raised a placating hand to the restive line at his back. “Said he didn’t like me turning heads. Foolish man thought it better I turned stomachs.”

“Why so hard on yourself! Y’never turned no stomachs—”

“Yah, I got a sweet face?” Kaitlyn said with a snort. She took a cigarette pack from an overhead shelf and beeped it through the scanner, followed by the row of Little Debbies. Percy picked up the cigarettes. Mitterrands. Not his father’s brand—Percy Sr. had been a Hedges man. Now hedges sprouted overtop him.

“Okay, dear, nine-sixteen,” Kaitlyn said.


Nine-sixteen, how about that! It had been a while since Percy had taken notice of cigarette prices, and over that time they’d evidently metastasized two hundred percent. One single pack cost as much as ten Little Debbies, an accurate parity in some ways. Twenty smokes or ten Debbies: as a daily allowance, either’d kill you, and heaven protect those who inhaled both. Percy flipped open his wallet and paid.

Kaitlyn bagged the goods, tossed in some matches, and held out the plastic sack. Percy slipped a hand

through the carry-loops, his fingertips gracing the skin of Kaitlyn's palm with angelic slightness. Free and buoyant went his heart, and he was taken with the sense that fate would from here on be kind, that his questing was right and true—and that lovely Isabelle was anticipating tonight's doorbell with a nervous smile and yellow flowers in her black hair. "Was good to see you, Kaitlyn," he said and grinned, "you pretty thing."

She laughed and beckoned to the next customer. "Get back to your bus, rascal. Come see me again sometime."

Percy placed a hand to his heart. "With luck, I will." He walked away and pushed through the general store's placard-painted door. Back to God's country, these lands between cities. Once he'd traveled them well. Hambone, hambone, I'm missing you. But not enough to write.



Wayne stood outside, sullen in the late-morning sunlight, scowling at the ice locker by the general store's entrance. On its hull, a lavender penguin in a Santa cap reposed against a large cube of ice. Above this, the word ICE was done in capitals, badly drawn stalactites dangling off the serifs of each letter. Surrounding it all were outsized snowflakes, each one looking the same. The design made Wayne feel cold,

something he didn't need help doing. He looked up. Clouds were verging from the southeast and soon they'd oppose the sun, but not yet, and it was still bright. Not warm, just bright. A cigarette would overwhelm the chill—where was his hero with the Mitterrands?

He walked to a low concrete parking barrier, knelt down, and sat on it, dropping his general-store bag beside him. The bus was a hundred feet off and waiting; he shut his eyes and listened to its idling engine chorus with the idling engines of resting tractor-trailers. Almost time to reboard, but he wanted a drag of tobacco to complement the rest stop's hazy bouquet of diesel fumes. He breathed through his nose, in, out, in, out—

A foot prodded his side. "Yo, Cap'n Hoo-Hoo, what's this? You've decided to settle down here?"

Wayne opened his eyes. He was on his back, his butt propped over the parking barrier like a keystone in an arch, his head resting in pebbles and dirt. Candy wrappers and crushed butts filled his sideways vision. His injured chest beat heavy with blood and his sore hand was knotted and curled. Matches and a pack of Mitterrands fell onto his chest, sending a filmy itch through the scabbed lesion behind his Trailhound t-shirt.

The man who'd dropped the cigarettes folded his arms. "If you *are* thinkin' to settle down here, allow me to dissuade you. You wouldn't want this particular

dirt lot. The plumbing's bad and the schools suck. And with all the transients, not a good neighborhood to put down roots." He motioned to the bus. "You are from the bus, aren't you."

"How'd you know, the bus is full of people, how—"

"Your shirt. Says Trailhound. And you mentioned it in the store. No short-term memory, eh? Ge'up, ge'up, we got a date that won't dally."

Wayne took the cigarette pack off his chest and gazed doe-eyed at its beauty. Royal blue with white trim, "Mitterrand" scribed across the top in a fittingly Lautrecian typeface, "Lights" scripted below it. He put the pack in his jeans pocket, then with his left hand pushed himself standing.

"Thanks," he said, raking his fingers through his hair, shaking out dirt and pebbles. "How long was I out?"

"My time, a minute. Your time, who knows. Don't forget your stuff." The man pointed to the plastic bag at Wayne's feet.

Wayne grabbed the bag and looked inside, fuzzy on what he'd purchased. Pencil, notebook, chocolate Hoo-Hoo. Nice, though nothing surpassed the fresh smokes in his pocket. But there was no time for a drag, not with the bus stamping at the dirt like a giant chromium bull. He withdrew five dollars from his diminishing stash and offered it to the man. "Five bucks, right?"

The man hummed in agreement and pocketed the money, and together they headed towards the bus. As they walked, Wayne studied the man through peripheral vision. He looked older than Wayne but not by much; he was black, with skin on the darker side of the African-American spectrum; he was a couple inches taller than Wayne but no stouter. He wore an army-green canvas jacket, an American flag embroidered on the shoulder facing Wayne. Wayne kept logging details until his corner glance met the man's corner glance and they both averted eyeballs.

Half smiling, the man gestured to Wayne's Trailhound t-shirt, to the poker-playing dogs upon it. "You work for Trailhound?"

Wayne shook his head.

"You're a motorcoach fan? A bus nut?"

"No."

"You cold?"

Wayne nodded. "Yeh."

The man was silent for a moment, then said, "Bus's pretty crowded, don't you think?"

"Hm?" Wayne kept squeezing the cigarettes in his jeans pocket—every step towards the bus was a step away from balmy nicotine. With about thirty feet left to cover before the bus door, there was theoretically time to sneak a heady puff-puff. He could tear off the shrinkwrap and box-top with one brutal swipe, torch the bottom of the box with the whole pack of matches, and suck on all twenty filter-tips

at once. Then he could faint from oxygen deficiency, likely setting himself aflame in his collapse; and as he lay in a smoldering heap, disgusted angels would descend and circle him, sharpening their harps and talking trash.

Was the bus about to leave *right this instant*? Even a minute was enough time for a smoke, certainly! Sixty seconds of escape, sixty whole seconds! A minute spent smoking would be the best minute since the invention of minutes—

“Bus,” the man said. “Crowded. Guy sitting next to me’s got thighs like pontoons.”

“Pontoons? Like a seaplane, on a seaplane.”

“Yes, like on a seaplane.” The man frowned. “In the unlikely event of a water landing, he’d come in handy.”

At reaching the bus door, Wayne grabbed the rail and pulled himself up the first step, flinching as he did. Careless, to use his right hand for that. He released the rail and turned around. “Thanks again for the smokes.”

The man spoke a phrase Wayne didn’t catch, *my pen* something, *my pen rye*, followed by “—say, any open seats where you are?”

Wayne climbed further into the cabin and looked to the back. His row, the perfect last, remained empty on the right side, and on the left was the sleeping old Asian guy, his feet jutting into the aisle. Several other seats were vacant, too, but only be-

cause their occupants were still busy at the rest stop. “There’s open seats here and there, a bunch...”

“*Now* there is,” the man said, “but look thataways, where a gilet-eyed throng unfurls from the chicken coop, expecting the right of return.”

A quick glance towards the King Chix certified the man’s hammy pronouncement. “Look,” Wayne said, “if people’re still coming back I got time for a smoke.”

“No ya don’t,” said a voice. Wayne turned and saw the bus driver, also watching the returning passengers. He raised an eyebrow and honked the horn to hurry their pace.

“Tch.” Wayne patted his cigarettes. At least he had the pack, which from his pocket exuded a physical consolation. If not for the man behind him, he’d be missing even that. He faced the man and said with regret, “There, um, there is a spot next to me, though the guy across the aisle snores like a boar.”

“Great! Noisy pig beats sweaty blob, no contest.”

Wayne walked to the back of the cabin, his heart jittery as he passed row after row of strangers. Perhaps these people *had* seen his face, perhaps the other news channels had shown his picture and not mistakenly Doogie’s? Might someone holler, might someone yell? But nobody did, few glancing up. He reached the last row and slid to the right-side window.

His new seatmate followed close behind, dropping his backpack to the floor and settling in the aisle

seat. In the confines of the bus, Wayne could smell his cologne, which was woody, spicy, and excessively applied.

“That’s the boar?” the man said, pointing to the sleeping old man across the aisle. “Awful quiet boar.”

“He’s low-key now,” Wayne said, “but that’ll change.”

“Mm.” The man stretched his legs into the aisle. “So where you going? P-burgh, Cleveland, Chitown? Someplace between?”

Wayne tensed. “Er, er—” he began, but couldn’t go on.

The man waited, eyebrows crimped.

“Cleve—” Wayne managed to eke out, “—land.”

“Me too! That means we’ll be sharing each other’s company for, oh, seven hours, give’r take. I don’t want to spend all that time next to some cat called ‘hey,’ and you probably don’t either. So—” the man extended his right hand “—I’m Percy.”

“Way—” Wayne clamped shut his mouth. His hand froze quivering right before Percy’s. Caution! Though his face might be clean, his name had been all over the news.

“Whey?”

“Whey, Wheya, Wheyant.” Ignoring the unpleasant twinge in his fingers, he shook Percy’s hand very hard, very confidently. “*Whey*-ant. My name. Wheyant.”

For a few seconds Percy was still. Then he

blinked a few times and said, “That, like, some old great-great-grandfather’s name? Antebellum or heral-dic or anachronistic...”

“No, I’m the only Wheyant in my family.”

“Never in my life heard that name. And I’ve heard plenty that never made the baby-name book, at least not on this planet.” Percy grinned. “Knock knock.”

“Knock knock?”

“C’mon, man,” Percy implored, “knock knock.”

Wayne kneaded his brow. “Ah, who’s there?”

“Wheyant.”

Wayne scowled, but took the bait. “Wheyant who?”

“Wheyant yer momma name you normal?”

Wayne grimaced, imagining seven hours of this.

Across the aisle, a crackling snore broke the old man’s silence, and Wayne and Percy turned to look.

“Hello *sir*,” Percy said, then returned his attention to Wayne. “About your name, no offense meant. Wouldya like half of a, let’s see...” He sifted through his general-store bag and drew out a colorful package. “A peanut-crunch fluff bar?”

Feeling more ill than hungry, Wayne opened his mouth to refuse. Then his eyes zeroed in on the treat—*target acquired!*—and lasered the image straight to his stomach, which champed and bucked like a noxious stallion. It hadn’t been aching long since his last meal, *couldn’t* have been. Fourteen, fifteen

hours ago? Before work yesterday, a hoagie, Italian? He couldn't recall. Some sort of sandwich, obviously unmemorable.

He swallowed back acid and accepted Percy's offer. "Sure, thanks."

"Complements of me and Little Debbie," Percy said, snapping apart the candied pastry and giving Wayne a piece.

Wayne took a bite of the treat and nearly fainted. Stupendously, absurdly delicious, that was the only way to describe the wonders of this peanut-crunch fluff bar. He looked at the pastry, studied its composition, shook his head. Amazing.

By now the bus was well-stuffed, all passengers reseated, foraging expeditions complete. The door closed with a pneumatic squeal; the cabin walls rattled as the vehicle clunked into gear and began rolling forward. Wayne took another bite of the peanut-crunch fluff bar. Again, amazing! Baffled by such delectation and gripped by defiant exultation, he turned to Percy, wishing to express wonder and gratitude—and saw that Percy had hooked headphones around his neck and clipped a tape player to his belt.

A tape player, not a CD player? Maybe it had a radio function, most tape players did. But they were a hundred miles outside Philly now, maybe more. How far could radio signals reach?

He must have been gazing at the tape player with

an unusual intensity, because Percy lifted an eyebrow and said, "Feeling a little...fixated, Wheyant?"

"No, no—"

"Never seen a walkman before?"

Wayne's voice was hoarse. "Does that—is there—does that have a radio on it?"

"Sure does."

"But we're too far away to get Philly stations, right..."

Percy tapped a finger to the walkman. "By now, yeah, 'less you want the big AM newscasters. They might carry."

"Really?" If Wayne could tune up WINF1030, the leading Philadelphia news station, he'd know the deal back home.

"Stations like 1030, 1120, they got the heavy juice," Percy said with a comfortable confidence. "Fifty kilowatts, that's some signal—I've picked up 1030 in Virginia, even past that, and clear too. All depends on weather, atmosphere, what kinda antenna's on your vehicle. Sometimes the signal's better at night, but—"

Wayne's twitching fingers wanted to rip the radio from Percy's hands. Trying not to sound rabid, he said, "Ya think, d'yathink—" he paused to pacify his tongue "—do you think I could borrow that walkman? I need to, I'd *like* to check something—"

"Huh. I s'pose you can." Percy took the walkman from his belt and the phones from his neck. He

handed them to Wayne. “So long you don’t tune up some frothy peckerwood.”

“Thanks!” Wayne took the walkman, snapped on the headphones, pressed the AM switch. He worked the tuning dial, nudging it between 1020 and 1040 on the gauge. At first it seemed that Percy was wrong—Wayne could hear nothing but squeals and flutters. Then he lifted the walkman eye-level, and WINF1030 NewsRadio spilled into his ears. The static returned when he lowered the walkman. He placed it on his shoulder and the transmission was acceptably clear.

Sports scores, a mattress advertisement, traffic, and then, *dit-dit-didit, dit-dit-didit*, top stories! Wayne bit his lip, ground his teeth, dug fingernails into palms.

The blows came and went at a speedy pace: the radio anchor outlined Franklin Hollander’s death and the reports of a gunshot; he told of the missing gun, of Wayne Milton missing along with it, implications encouraged. Overall details remaining “sketchy,” but please “tune in later.” A “co-renter of Milton’s apartment” had been questioned by police and then let go. The police, when pressed, would say only that the cause of Hollander’s death was “under investigation.”

Wayne figured that “under investigation” meant the medical examiner hadn’t yet released a report, though Wayne didn’t see how there could be much room for debate, not when the cause of death was a patently obvious bullet wound.

Then the anchor plugged the station’s website: “Log on to WINF1030.com or Informer6.com and see Milton’s sexy smiley shorts!” Wayne listened in bewilderment. Were they talking about those joke boxers he had? How? Why? Not like they had anything to do with his situation, or with the news. Understood, *news* was a flexible concept, and one that would eagerly accommodate smiley-crotch boxers. He’d only worn them once—okay, twice—and purely for ironic intent. Did the cops rip through his drawers and find ’em somehow? Strange intrusions.

The radio did provide some honest comfort. If the report was true, Doogie had been picked up by the cops and afterwards let go. The anchor made no mention of drugs or that mixed-up mug shot broadcast to all Greater Philadelphia, and Wayne took this as a good sign. If serious misfortune had attacked Doogie, presumably in the guise of narcotics charges or vigilante action, the news would mention or allude to it. At minimum they’d blurb it, they’d have to. Equally comforting and deeply heartwarming: towards the end of the story, the anchorman had noted that the injured Asian woman was no longer unconscious, her status upgraded from stable to good. Wayne felt terribly and unreasonably grateful to the anchorman for this gift to his impoverished conscience. He should send the guy a fruit basket.


The remaining news concerned explosions in Jerusalem, an unusually weak consumer-confidence

index going into the holiday season, and a terse apology for the indefinite postponement of a segment called “Street Talk.” Wayne Milton, piddling night composer, splitting the news dime with the eternal and raucous Holy Land. Incredible. He returned the radio to Percy. “Thanks.”

“That was fast,” Percy said.

Wayne nodded, feeling winded though he’d hardly moved a muscle. “Just had to check something.” He closed his eyes and cradled his head in his hands.

“Okay, man, if you need—” Percy stopped talking when he saw that his traveling companion was instantly, profoundly asleep.



Wayne woke up before realizing he’d gone under, and for a moment didn’t know who or where he was. He covered his face until panic drained and surroundings returned—the drone of the bus engine, the cool of the windowpane, the faint warmth and cologne-stink of Percy, the snoring of the old man across the aisle. The smell of himself, of oil and sweat. A dusty taste in his mouth, a salty taste on his lips.

He rubbed the wells of his eyes; the skin around them was painted with sticky clots. He moved his feet and they hit something that crinkled. The plastic bag from the general store. He bent down and pulled out his chocolate Hoo-Hoo. Thirsty, thirsty, mouth wants liquid. He opened the bottle and took a swig.

The drink was sweet, even sweeter than the Little Debbie cake, sweet enough to quiver his body. Then he remembered his plan. After capping and putting back the bottle, he took out the notebook and pencil he’d bought. This notebook was small, but key. It would be his memory and also his future. Every moment he recalled would be marked, every thought that advanced a resolution would be saved. He’d write down all he could, and from between the lines an answer would emerge. Through narrative he would reclaim himself. A good idea, at least on paper.

“Last will and testament?” he printed along the top of the first sheet. Not a good start. He crossed out the word *last* and replaced it with *first*. One short phrase and already his fingers ached—his right hand still wasn’t up to detail work, all these hours after socking Pappy at the Dandi Donuts. Suck it up! To discourage prying eyes, namely Percy’s, he lifted his knees and bent his head close to the notebook. A praying-mantis pose. He stared at the page and waited for the next line to come. It didn’t. He waited more. It didn’t. Waited more, nope—

“What ya trying to write there?” Percy asked. “On the Road with Wheyant?”

Wayne tightened his mantis pose and squinted at Percy. “On the road with who?”

“You. Wheyant.” Percy chuffed. “Get it together.”

“Right!” Cramps hammered Wayne’s gut. “I’m just writing stuff, nothing much.”

“Stuff?” Percy said brightly. “Good luck with it.”

“Yeah.” Wayne’s fingers twinged and tightened.

Percy took a mechanical pencil from behind his ear and tapped its point against a crossword magazine on his lap. “I’m getting the sense that today really isn’t your day.”

Wayne closed his notebook and unfolded his body. “If it is or isn’t, what’s it to anyone?”

“Ouch!” Percy said, leaning away. “I know when I’m not wanted.” He turned from Wayne and focused on his crossword magazine. “Excuse me kindly, I have a puzzle to humiliate.”

It helped not at all, Percy granting him privacy: Wayne had lost the will to work. He stuck his pencil into the notebook’s spine and tucked the notebook under his leg; he faced the window and watched the mile markers blow by. Then he turned from the window and glanced sidelong at Percy, who looked rather intense in his puzzling, comically so, slashing with his pencil as if the crossword were underbrush to be cleared.

Wayne saw that Percy’s pencil essentially matched his own. *The human brain sees coincidences as patterns, and patterns imply design, but this is a fallacy.* A line from something Wayne had read, a primer on numerology’s pyrite appeal. How endearing and predictable, his brain remembering claptrap but denying him any crucial or practical knowledge.

Percy underlined a crossword clue and flattened his lips. “Hmf.” Then he flashed Wayne a pixie’s smirk. “Hey, *Whey*-ant! Five-letter word for an exotic, legendary water dweller.”

Wayne scratched his head, which didn’t help his thinking so much as it greased his fingers. He recalled a painting at the Bad Art Diner. “How about, umm...the Kraken?”

“Five letters! Kraken is six.” Percy traced ghost letters down a column of boxes. “Try something that ends with U.”

Wayne shrugged. “Shamu.”

Percy chuckled and rolled his eyes. “Most unlikely.”

“Zhiyu?” somebody suggested, then yawned. Wayne darted a look across the aisle and saw that the sleeping old Asian man was no longer sleeping. After finishing his yawn, the man swung down his feet, wriggled upright, and folded his arms.

“Zhiyu, chiru, qiuyu, toodle-oo,” he said, then yawned again. “You boys should read the Shanhaijing, you’d know what I mean. They just did a new translation—it’s a beauty, woodblocks and all, so you got no excuse to be ignorant.”

Percy shook his head. “Shang-hai-jing?”

“Cha, that’s a hotel.” The old man crossed his arms and adopted a pedantic scowl. “I said *Shan*-haijing. Mountains and rivers of the historical world. Favorite

book when I was a kid. *Forever* ago and I remember like yesterday. Thoroughly odd.” He laughed. “Yes, thoroughly odd.”

“Zu-zu, shew-shew, yoo-yoo, shamu,” Percy mused. “Don’t think either of you got the answer I need.” He twirled his pencil like a baton, then stuck it behind his ear and nodded to the old man. “Got a name, Thoroughly Odd?”

“Johnnie. Or Weiguang, if you’re into authenticity.” The man gave a half-smile. “Name’s just a construct, so I say.”

“So you say, but do you believe?” Percy said in a lofty voice. Then he grinned and reached a hand across the aisle. “Well met, Johnnie.” After they’d shaken, Percy gestured to Wayne and said, “*Somebody* here thinks you snore like a wild boar. Personally it reminded me of giant turtles mating.”

“Kids,” Johnnie scoffed. “At my age, you can’t help some things.”

“Age? Nothin’ to do with age.” Percy wagged a thumb at Wayne. “Wheyant himself just woke up twenty minutes ago. Between the two of you, was like a logging contest in here, me in the middle hoping the bolts don’t vibrate off the bus.”

“Wheyant?” Johnnie said, letting the name dangle in the air. “*Whey-ant?* What kind of name is *that?*”

“French,” Wayne stated after a difficult pause. This got a blank unyielding stare from both Percy and Johnnie, so he added, “Canadian.” Didn’t help.

His cloaking-device newspaper was stashed under his seat, and he craved to pull it out and engulf his head within, for all the good that would do.

Johnnie finally nodded. “*Bonjour.*”

“*Mais naturellement,*” Percy said, tapping his lip with the end of his pencil, “a name’s just a construct, *n’est-ce pas?*”

Shudders pelted Wayne’s back and his injured chest squirmed. A pretender could hope for insipid or incurious company, but he had neither. Wayne’s eyes trembled, his sinews jogged, his nostrils and earlobes glistened with tickles. He firmly suppressed these defeatist urges and masked his face with neutrality. The ancient art of subterfuge required a certain fortitude.

Chapter Twelve



blue plunder

WHAMMING A WATER PITCHER INTO THE HEAD OF A MEWLY CRYBABY was a stupid thing to do. If the mewly crybaby happened to be a media personage, it was an even stupider thing to do. And though Mike Bell was a totally inconsequential and monumentally minor media personage, his star nevertheless twinkled an order of magnitude above Juliette's own.

So call her stupid, and call her fired. Juliette walked out of the Bad Art Diner in black polyester pants she needn't wear anymore, knowing she would never again hear the door's chin-chinny chimes sing their chin-chinny song. And she, aware of how little drama this warranted, would not fret or pout. Soon her bills would be due and still she would not fret or pout. Eventually the collection agencies would swarm her like hounds on a lame fox and even then no yelp would she surrender.

She zipped her jacket, hopped off the diner's stoop, and strode to the corner, where she stood at the sidewalk's edge with her back straight and shoulders balanced. A cool breeze glancing her face, she raised her hands above her head, locked her fingers together, and stretched her arms until the muscles shook.

The wind tossed about some newly fallen leaves, and she lowered her arms and watched the autumnal chaff blow across the street. Then she looked to the sky. After swelling brightly the morning had checked itself, and above her lay a mesh of blue heaven and gray clouds. Where the sun broke through it was fair and warm; otherwise it was cold and dull.

The two dorks that Tommy had booted from the diner were sitting on the curb nearby, a worn duffel between them. Juliette regarded the boys with a mixture of distaste and curiosity—distaste, because she figured she knew their type, and curiosity, because it appeared they'd been waiting for her to come out.

Maybe she should've used the back exit.

The bigger dork—the thirsty camel in the ugly sweater—was studying her intently. “Yo, hey,” he said, voice limp and cheeks ruddy, “didja get canned?”

“What the fuck *you* think, brain-child?” she snapped.

Both dorks flinched, and she felt a pang of guilt. “Sorry, boys,” she said. “Rough morning.”

The bigger dork's cheeks flushed further, and he breathed deeply and said, “I'm, I'ma, Melvin.”

Juliette nodded. “Great.”

Melvin gestured to his companion. “He's Jimmy.”

“Look, Melvin,” she said, “look, Jimmy, hello and goodbye. I'd love to chat, but that'd be a lie.”

“Wait,” Melvin blurted, no longer timid, “I wanna ask you something! Gimme a sec to get up the words, uh, Julie, right?”

“Juliette to you.” She crossed her arms. “I'm going to the Toby-Mart for a pack of cigarettes. Whatever question you got, it's gonna wait 'til I get smoke in my lungs. Never *officially* quit, na'I didn't. Wasn't no damn statute passed.”

Melvin leapt to his feet and stretched a hand to Jimmy. “C'mon, man, get up. Let's go with her. Sun's out, s'not so cold now, we can get a T. M. Mushie this time.”

Juliette didn't know which was more inconceivable: the thought that she'd accord any time to

these morons, or the idea that a T. M. Mushie could compel anyone to do anything. Toby-Mart served up five different “flavors” of its signature slushy treat, each one dyed a different fruity glow but all sharing the same basic taste—detergent swirled with spit and soda syrup.

“Alright, alright.” Jimmy grabbed Melvin's outstretched hand and pulled himself standing. “I gotcha.”

Juliette looked at the boys' duffel bag, a washed-up Marlboro-logoed thing, one of those pathetic prizes the tobacco cartels used to award to people who collected eight million dollars of *Marlboro Moolah*, *Salem Snatch*, *Kool Krugerrands*, whatever. When Melvin hoisted the bag and slung it on, Juliette could see that serious cargo was zipped inside—the duffel hung from Melvin's shoulder with ponderous gravity, the weight tugging his body askew, the bag's beleaguered carry-strap taut and straining.

Both boys kept their faces averted from hers, like they were too abashed to endure her attention, like she was some elevated magistrate to their pennywhistle urchins. When she rolled a glance heavenward and stalked off, they hustled to catch up. As a triangle they spanned the sidewalk, Juliette in vanguard and the boys bringing up the rear.

Juliette stopped and swung around. “*What* do you want?”

Melvin looked confused. “I thought I told you—”

Juliette sighed. “Yah, yah.” Again she found herself studying Melvin’s duffel. The carry-strap was hooked to metal rings embedded in the bag’s nylon skin, and one of the rings was coming loose, tearing through the fabric. Stressed by the heavy load, it might rip free with a good jerk. It might rip free at Melvin’s next step. “That ring for the strap,” she said, pointing. “Gonna tear through any moment.”

Melvin found the loose ring and worsened the damage by pulling on it. “Damn. Lookie that.”

“What you got in there?” Juliette asked. Not like she cared, but the hefty contents were pushing an odd relief against the duffel’s fabric: a wide column spreading to a fat triangle, nubs and crags along the length. A musical instrument, that’s what it might be, something heavy and brass. Or a secret more amiss?

When Melvin didn’t answer her, Jimmy spoke up. “One crazy-ass surprise,” he said, wagging his head.

Melvin growled and cut him a dismissive glance.

Jimmy stuck out his tongue. “Aw, just messin’.”

Melvin shook his head and said to Juliette, “Nothin’ in the bag, forget that fool.”

“C’mon,” Juliette said, “open up and show the girl.” She felt compelled to agitate the kid. “Crazy-ass surprise, huh?”

Helplessness rankled Melvin’s face. “*Daah*, fine. Hold on.” He backed against a wall, crouched low, and set down the bag. Then he waited until the side-

walk was clear of passers-by before waving her over. “Quick, before more people come ’round.”

Juliette went and knelt beside him. Jimmy moved to shield them from observation, taking a wide stance in front of her, Melvin, and the duffel. Such conspicuous obfuscation heightened Juliette’s expectations, but expectations of what? Glowing rocks stamped with a hammer and sickle? Looted wonders of ancient Ur? Embryonic stem cell lines?

Melvin gave the duffel’s zipper a hasty yank—much too hasty, it turned out. Without parting even a single clasped link, the metal slider jumped off its toothy track and sailed into a sewer opening. “Fuck!” Melvin howled. “My zipper!”

Jimmy squashed a finger to his lips. “Sssh! People coming!”

“Shit fucking zipper!” Melvin sounded very irritated.

“Not just people! Cop! Cop!”

Juliette turned to see Officer Crook stepping briskly towards them, looking snappy in blue. She knew Crook. A decent guy, tipped well, spoke politely. And you didn’t forget a cop named Crook. Had he gone into law enforcement to launder ancestral shame from his family tapestry? Of course the surname could represent a shepherd’s staff, the badge of some hearty hiker guiding a flocculent mass o’er a medieval Saxon greensward, but it could also signify that Officer Crook’s forebears were the ones nicking

the sheep. Juliette stood and stepped around Jimmy to offer a greeting, as Crook had recognized her and was moving in to do the same.

“Hey-lo, officer,” she said with a wave.

Crook stopped before her. “Julie, how’re ya doing?”

“Doing okay. Y’self?”

“It’s always something. Was actually heading towards a nice plate of eggs. You off already?” Crook pointed in the direction of the Bad Art Diner, a block and a half behind her.

“No, no...” Her face tightened and she looked away.

“Not working today?” He eyed her black pants and clogs.

“I, I was,” she said, kicking at the ground. “But you won’t see me there anymore.”

“Oh?” Crook folded his arms. “You quit? Couldn’t have been fired—” Seeing the affirmation in her face, he growled, “Why you? What is Tommy *thinkin’*—”

“I dented Mike Bell’s face with a water pitcher.”

The officer pursed his lips and impersonated Bell’s voice. “Ten-Thirty *Streeee*Talk? That Mike Bell?”

Juliette nodded.

“He didn’t, y’know—?” Crook gestured the act of copping a feel. “Did he?”

She shook her head. “No, it’s okay, it’s nothing like that.”

Behind her Melvin was crouched and petrified, his back to the wall and the duffel before him. Jimmy was likewise immobile, rigorously maintaining his wide-legged guardian stance. They were cast in carbonate, they were performance art, they were uncoiled robots rusticulating. Crook looked past Juliette to study this diorama of general culpability. The two boys wouldn’t return his gaze, preferring instead to stare spellbound at a fire hydrant.

“You guys witness this famous smackeroo?” Crook asked.

Jimmy spoke to the hydrant. “Yup.”

Melvin also addressed the hydrant. “Uh-huh.”

Crook turned to Juliette. “Friends of yours?”

Juliette shook her head. “No.”

The policeman stepped closer to the boys and waved a hand in the air, a certain authority overwhelming the casual motion. “Now I *don’t* mean to pry,” he said, not unkindly, “but are you two doin’ all right?”

No answer.

Crook’s eyes went to the Marlboro-branded duffel. “A nice bag you got,” he deadpanned, focusing on Melvin. “That yours, my friend? It’s cool, real cool. Either you kids even old enough to smoke? How it’s beat to hell, you find it dumpster-diving?”

Silence from Melvin, statuesque in a gargoyle squat. Crook’s face hardened. “Do we have a communication problem?”

Silence yielded to noise. “S’mmy, s’mmy, it’s my bag,” Melvin sputtered. “Nun’n innit, nothin’ in it...”

The policeman wrinkled his forehead. “Huh? Did I ask?”

Jimmy shot Melvin a contorted look, a look Juliette read as *shut up you freakin’ moron!*

Again Melvin spoke. “No, never mind, nope, nothing.”

“Nothing?” Crook said, a frown spiking the corners of his mouth. He pointed to the duffel. “But look at that big bulge. There’s clearly *something* in there.” Then, turning to Juliette: “Do you know what it is?”

She was tempted to quip that it was one crazy-ass surprise, but buried the impulse and said, “Nope.”

Crook knelt down and ran a hand along the top of the bag, feeling out the contours of whatever it contained. His eyes went quizzical and his mouth flexed in concentration. He looked to Melvin and then to Jimmy. “Hmph. Where’s the zipper?”

“In the sewer,” Jimmy gurgled, wilting under Crook’s glare.

“Oh? Then how do you open it?”

“You can’t!” Melvin shrieked. “It’s uninopenable!”

Crook gripped the duffel’s fabric with both hands, placing one on each side of the absent zipper’s track.

“Well, boys, I doubt that,” he said, and smoothly pulled the two halves apart like opening a sandwich bag—and then his jaw fell and eyes popped wide. “Holy shit, it—it *is* what I thought!”

Juliette peered over Crook’s shoulder to see a hel-lacious gun, some old-world shitkicker, fat and opulent. Pool balls, soup cans, fallen limbs, this sucker was big enough to throw it all.

“This is yours?” Crook jabbed a finger at Melvin’s face.

“Ye-yeah,” Melvin quavered. “Mine. All mine.”

“It, like, was his father’s heirloom, you know?” Jimmy peeped, squatting to be eye-level with Melvin and the cop. Now the three of them were hunkered before the open duffel like campers by a fire. Jimmy elbowed Melvin and said, “Poor old stiff, but what can you do? Left you the heirloom.”

Officer Crook reached into the duffel and slid his hands under the weapon. He lifted it from the bag, hugged it to his chest, and rose to a stance. “*This is yours?*” he repeated.

Melvin gazed up at the policeman and cleared his throat. “It’s dag, dag—” he swallowed and gasped, apparently having trouble speaking his thought “—da, dad’s heirloom.” Then he stood up and pocketed his hands. “Yo, uh, we didn’t mean to spaz up or act all scared. I know it’s a gun, I know it’s illegal to carry it ’round. But we didn’t do nothing with it. It don’t really fire anyway, an’ whatever kinda bullet you put in there, I dunno...”

“But,” the officer said, transfixed by the gun and sounding lost, “t’ be carting ’round something like this, like, like *this*—”

“We, we were looking to sell it,” Jimmy said, springing up and flipping his eyes between Melvin and Crook. “Bad vibes from the past, static on the will, y’know—”

Officer Crook didn’t appear to be listening to Jimmy, although he surely was listening to something: his ear was pressed against the broad side of Melvin’s gun, to the smoothly milled lip of its polished centerpiece. His fingers, meanwhile, were twisting back a wrought-iron serpent that turned on a spring-loaded pivot. When Crook released the serpent, it lunged and struck its mouth on a shallow iron cup set below it. The policeman was deriving much joy from this whacking together of clinky bits. He drew back the serpent and released it again and again. *Twist, snap! Twist, snap! Twiiiist, snap!*

“This flintlock is pristine!” Crook lowered the weapon from his ear. “Smooth as butter! Do you know what you got here?”

Melvin nodded. “A pirate b-blubberbuss.”

“Sheesh.” Crook stroked the weapon’s fat barrel. “Your father left this, *this*, to you and you don’t know shi—” he caught himself “—nothin’ about it, do you?”

By now they’d attracted a small audience, a knot of people mumbling and pointing from a few yards away. Juliette glared at them until they moved on. Crook and Melvin, oblivious to the larger world, continued their munitions debriefing.

“—*blunder-buss, blunder-buss,*” Melvin was saying.

Crook spoke with his gaze locked on the weapon. “Right. Primitive in function but beautiful in design, like so much of the era. This one’s special—early 1700s, Turkish make, pre-percussion flintlock, gold inlays, nearly corrosion-free. Some blunt trauma on the muzzle’s bottom, but nothing that’s a deal-killer. Your father was a generous man.”

“Mmf.” Melvin’s lips shimmied between grin and sneer. “You got no idea.”

“You’re going to sell it, you said...” Crook’s voice took on a different tone. “I might buy, if we can work out a deal.”

“Faa...” Melvin driveled. “Yaa...”

“Kid?”

Melvin shut his dangling mouth and grabbed at the back of his neck, squeezing and pushing and chopping at it. “J-just a neck pull, Mr. Officer. Happens sometimes. Congenetical.”

Crook’s eyes crossed. “Oh.” He cleared his face and nodded. “So—what’s it worth to you?”

Melvin began chewing his lip and counting his fingers. He furrowed his forehead and breathed out heavily, exuding carbon dioxide and naiveté in equal measure. Jimmy, whatever *his* acumen, recognized Melvin’s distress and intervened: he tugged Melvin’s sleeve and drew him into a huddle several feet away. Their whispers were too faint to eavesdrop, but

Juliette could see Jimmy jerking his thumb upwards, then Melvin waggling his hand laterally, then Jimmy making clenching gestures, then Melvin pumping a fist into his palm.

After a minute of this, Melvin straightened up, stepped forth, and faced Crook. “Twenty thousand.”

“What!” Crook blurted, the blunderbuss pressed close to his silver-shielded chest.

After glancing back to Jimmy, who bent a brow in response, Melvin tried again. “Ten thousand.”

“Ten!” Crook scoffed.

“Five?” Melvin ventured.

“One,” Crook stated.

Melvin slouched down and batted sorrowful eyes. “Four?”

“One.”

“Three?” Melvin’s voice shivered with hope.

Crook paused, but held firm. “One!”

Melvin folded his arms. “Two.”

The policeman turned the blunderbuss over and around, ogling every facet. His eyes crawled upon its finery, his nostrils twitched, his Adam’s apple bobbed. “Fifteen hundred.”

Melvin walked up to him. “Please, officer, gimme the gun back. Please. This collector in Old City’s promised us two at the minimum, two as a *floor*, yeah, and a chance for more.”

“Yup,” Jimmy chimed in. “Two, floor, mebbe more.”

Crook rocked the blunderbuss in the uniform-blue cradle of his arms. “Fifteen hundred.” He sighed. “Cash.”

Melvin’s mouth twitched and he looked to his friend. “What about it, Jimmy?”

“I think,” Jimmy said, “I think that’s pretty fair, yeah.”

“Fair?” Officer Crook smiled. “Yes it is.” He gently passed the blunderbuss to Melvin. “Pack it back up for me, I’ll take the bag, too.” Melvin knelt down and returned the weapon to the Marlboro duffel. Zipperless, the bag couldn’t close right, but Melvin knotted its carry-strap around the opening to secure it as best he could. Then he began doing a sort of rain dance around Jimmy, who in contrast was standing immobile, moored by enchantment, a huge dopey grin on his face.

Crook pulled a cell phone from his belt, thumbed a button, and stepped away to hold a conversation. He wasn’t sufficiently distant to go completely unheard, and though Juliette couldn’t make out all of his words, pitiful pleading was evident:

“—the last one, I mean it—”

“—it’s history, Rose, please. Huh? *I’m* history? Aww—”

“—but it’s a *deal*, I’m saying. An *investment*. Ottoman Empire!—”

“—alright, Thanksgiving at *your* parents. What? Christmas too? Rooose—”

“—fine, fine, got it. I’ll help him with math tonight—”

“—and, *and*, I’ll sell the bike. First I gotta fix it up—”

“—thank you, I mean it. Love ya, girl. Bye-bye.”

Crook clipped the phone to his belt and returned. “Whoa, it’s good, let’s do this while I still can. My bank’s a few blocks down. Cashier’s check is fine, I assume?”

Melvin stopped his rain dance. “Fine like candy.”

“Can I have it now?”

“Enjoy, man.” Melvin gave Officer Crook the bag-wrapped blunderbuss and broke into a grin even dopier than Jimmy’s.

Juliette didn’t share this compulsion to smile. Today was shadowed by fear, not shiny with glee. But when Crook and the boys headed to the bank, she decided to tag along. She was debating whether to ask the cop about Wayne, a debate queered by good ol’ distrust of authority, despite the authority being in this case kinda friendly and demonstrably good-natured. Crook might have information, but he’d also demand to know why she was asking. Of that Juliette was sure, that’s just what cops *did*. And also, did the police consider Wayne a suspect, a killer, or were they seeking him without prejudice? Intent made all the difference, but how to uncover it?

After several minutes’ walk, they arrived at the glass doors of a Provenance Bank branch. The blue

Provenance banner was draped over the bank’s old sign, Integrity Bank, which itself was a plaque bolted over the bank’s original name, PhilaTrust. Crook walked inside, tipping his cap to the old security gentleman on a folding chair in the lobby; the guy didn’t tip back on account of being hatless and asleep. Melvin and Jimmy stayed outside, watching through thickly posterred windows (“Loan Sale!”) as the policeman began moving up the queue.

Juliette stood a few paces from Melvin and Jimmy, her thoughts a disjointed volley. She looked through the bank window and saw Officer Crook stepping to the counter, the Marlboro duffel lodged in his arms, the carry-strap leashed around his neck. While this fancy weapon made the cop moony and boozy, she knew he was otherwise sharp. Yet there must exist a clever and innocuous way to pick his brain, there *must*. Verbal trickery might backfire. Even so, it could be worth the risk—

Melvin turned from the window and tapped her on the shoulder. “Yo.”

Reverie snapped, she spun to Melvin and briefly considered decking him. He missed her flash of anger and said, “While we’re just waiting, can I ask you that question I wanted to ask you?”

She cocked her hand to her hip. “Fine. Ask away.”

“Why’d you crash that radio fucker?”

That was the big question? Oh...yes. It was a big question, for the answer involved Wayne. And what

did Wayne involve? Friendship, disloyalty, worry, fear. A late-night shooting. And now a complete vanishing. Gone, missing, two million pairs of eyes in the metro area and none catching Wayne Milton.

Melvin pressed on: “Was it ’cause of that guy in the picture? The guy in the boxers? You know him?”

She took a step back. “Yes...”

“Shit, Jimmy,” Melvin said to his friend, “she knows the crazy dude who cracked Pappy! And *she* cracked the radio guy!” He thrust a finger at her. “Both of you be cracking *everybody’s* head all over the place!”

Juliette stepped forward and grabbed the collar of Melvin’s sweater with both hands. Clenching her fingers into fists, she twisted the fabric until its weave threatened to split. “What the fuck are you talking about! I don’t know you, and you don’t know Wayne, and he ain’t any kind of head-cracking thug!” She released her grip and backed off.

Melvin straightened his collar and rubbed his throat. He placed a hand to his heart and panted, “Mercy, mercy.”

“How do you know Wayne!”

Melvin shrunk from her glare and shambled to a safe distance. “Don’t wanna talk to you no more, you’re mean.”

“Tell me!” Juliette demanded. Then she lowered her voice, searched her heart for a friendly tone, found it. “I need to—”

“Hey!” Jimmy warned. “Man’s coming back.”

Melvin brightened but cast her a wary glance. Crook exited Provenance Bank and walked over to them, a check dancing between the fingers of his left hand.

“Melvin,” he said, offering the payment. “A dubious pleasure to do business with you.”

“Boss-man!” Melvin plucked the precious slip from the officer’s hand. “Doobies all the way.” He stared at the check, squinted at the backside, held it to the sky, read the watermarks, smelled the paper. Then he passed it to Jimmy.

Jimmy’s eyes gleamed as he ran a fingertip along the check’s sacred inscriptions. He gave a wordless purr and returned the check to Melvin.

“Juliette.” Crook spoke her name, a gentle look on his face. “I’ve gotta run.”

Juliette had calmed down from before—she no longer felt like choking Melvin, and her ears had stopped thumping with blood. “Duty calls?” she asked Crook, choosing to keep silent about Wayne.

“Yep. You know, the department’s always on the lookout.”

“I know.”

“You’d kick ass as a cop.”

She gave a thumbs-up. “Aw, thanks.”

Officer Crook swiveled away and clipped heels down the street, the blunderbuss snug in his arms. After watching him go, Melvin gawked at the check

with an even greater wonder, as if he expected it to dissolve like a mirage.

Juliette held out her hand. “May I see that, please?”

“Uh.” Melvin sucked in his chin and turned to Jimmy, who shrugged and made a *dunno* face. “Why?”

“You wanna be sure it’s clean, right? You gotta check all the routing and transit numbers. Make sure they’re properly reciprocal. So let me see.”

Now Melvin and Jimmy were both making *dunno* faces, and Melvin softly said, “O-okay?”

She pulled the check from Melvin’s loosened grasp and, while pretending to investigate the numbers, backstepped several yards from the two boys. If her gamble went bust, she wanted the chance to run. “Funny thing, a check,” she said. “So important, yet so, so, *susceptible*, you know?”

“Yo, what she doing?” Melvin rattled to Jimmy.

“A check is made of paper,” Juliette explained as if speaking to dopey pre-schoolers who consistently eat the plastic alphabet set rather than spell with it, “and paper is made from what, Melvin?” She slipped a hand into her pants pocket.

Melvin looked deeply troubled. “This a trick question?”

“Simple question, not trick or tricky.”

“Paper, paper is...paper’s from a tree, right?”

“Right.” Juliette’s hand left her pocket, fingers

tight around her brass lighter. She snuck a thumbnail under its cap. “Wood pulp and glue. Forms a very flammable union.”

Melvin dropped his jaw. “No! You wouldn’t!”

“I can flick this like lightning,” she boasted, holding the half-cocked lighter against the check. “I got a killer scream, too, so don’t think of anything funny now. We straight on that?”

“Chill, lady,” Melvin pleaded. “We’re straight on that. We’re straight, right, Jimmy?”

Jimmy swung his head up and down. “Oh yes we are.”

“W-what did we ever do to you?” Melvin said. “What you want from us?”

“What do I want?” she scoffed. “What do I want? I want to know everything you know about Wayne. Now.”

Melvin pressed his hands to his temples. “Wayne? That his name? The boxer dude? The crazy gun dude?”

“Crazy gun dude?” Juliette thumbed the lighter’s cap fully open. “Show some respect. He’s a friend of mine.”

Melvin looked so hellishly wound, the soft glance of a falling leaf would shatter his mortal fiber. “Hu-hu-huh.”

“Yo, lady,” Jimmy said, his voice searching to defuse, “I mean, uh, Juliette.”

She nodded. “Nice.”

“Loosen up, man, you were asking for this,” Jimmy told Melvin, then turned back to Juliette. “Wayne, that’s his name?”

“Yes.” Juliette closed the lighter. “Now can we talk like civilized people?”

“Isn’t that hard?” Melvin asked, dismay larding the words.

She pocketed the lighter and walked up to Jimmy, check held out. “Yeah, it is. One of the hardest things in the world.”


Jimmy took the check and passed it to Melvin. The angry veins along Melvin’s neck and forehead deflated, and he squeezed his chest and asked, “Harder than bowling three hundred?”

Juliette considered this, then said, “Definitely.”

“You ever bowl a three hundred?”

“Broke two hundred once.”

“Like I said already.” Melvin folded his arms and bumped a shoulder against Jimmy. “Cool as shit.”



Doogie’s pal Bruce was a fine host, and, true to his word, he really did bake an angelic quiche, light and fluffy like Doogie’d never known. As a mood-lifter it had limited efficacy, but happiness was too high an expectation; if excellent quiche could heal the world, excellent quiche would heal the world.

Biding time at Bruce’s apartment, hidden and safe from news vans and rigmarole, Doogie tried to

reach Kevin by calling his land line. The call went to voice-mail but Doogie couldn’t bear to leave a message. He dialed Kevin’s mobile and was stupid enough to be surprised when a rinkydink hip-hop ringtone came jingling from Kevin’s Torotex bomber jacket, which was across the room and attractively draped over Bruce’s kitchen chair. Booya-booya, that’s right, he had Kevin’s cell phone! Nose wrinkling, he set about searching the call logs and address books for perfidy. Within the logs, he discovered a bonanza of achingly vacuous text-message chats involving some clown named *spydermonkie*.

SPYDERMONKIE: W00T W00T U DER? ESSMONK INDA KR13!

ALPINE_SLUSH: WU ESS! W00T 2U2 BRAWA. WHS KR13 U 6N?

Several times more he called Kevin’s land line, truly intending but repeatedly declining to leave a message. Only evilness, and evilness alone, would gather on his tongue, and he wouldn’t let it out. Why was Kevin beyond reach? Was he using his land line for the Internet? Could he be talking and not picking up the call waiting? Had he unplugged the phone to better indulge his reaming complex with a scrofulous Informer Six crewboy?

Carp and cry and Bobby Bly! Put a stopper in it! *So what* if he’d spied Kevin and a bright-eyed gofer flunky sharing hashy browns and Egg McMuffs? Didn’t mean dickplay, no, it didn’t mean anything. Doogie was eating Bruce’s quiche without the slightest intention of eating Bruce. Shouldn’t Kevin

deserve the same regard and the same respect? Fooley, why not.

Whatever Kevin's business, it would be discovered in due time. Far more worrisome was Wayne's perilous condition, but what could Doogie do but pray for his safety? What could he do but sip coffee, munch quiche, and search for news on Bruce's television? Bruce didn't have cable and the reception was crap, so Doogie flipped among the three clearest channels. Twice he missed the big story, both times by seconds:

Click! "—and that's the latest on the shooting. Now let's check the weather."

Click! "—and Milton has not been found. We'll return after these messages."

The third time was the charm, and on channel six—Informer Six, Philly's HomeTownSource—Doogie managed to catch the whole segment. First a live shot of his apartment building, Conifer Street Arms (broadcast from one of those dratted vans parked right outside it), followed by a theatrical narrative about the death of Franklin Hollander and the hypothetically dastardly deeds of Wayne Milton. The news anchor made no real accusations, solemnly intoning that their information had come from a source "close to the police." Shits ahoy! Kevin had been close to the police, point-blank vomit range in fact.

Before displaying a photograph of Wayne, the news anchor prefaced it with a curt statement: "Due

to a technical error, earlier pictures of Milton were inaccurate. We can assure you that this one is not."

Then came the photo—and not just any photo, Doogie saw, but Wayne's antic glamour shot at the *Jiff* offices! With him in his red boxers—*cum*—smiley crotch! However had the news gotten hold of *that* picture? As far as Doogie knew, only two copies existed. Wayne had one and so did Juliette. Had the news vans gone and chomped her, and was she the type to cave? Though making no bets, Doogie believed Juliette would be stern and strong and unforthcoming, even if she and Wayne were currently on the outs, or on the outer outs of never been in, or however they considered themselves. The blame lay elsewhere. Prime suspect, Detective Sherpti, rum-mager of Wayne's room.

After the news signed off, Doogie flopped crosswise on the couch and stole catnaps, while helpful host Bruce hopped outside at quarter-hour intervals to reconnoiter Doogie's apartment building. Each time he returned with discouraging news: "Commander Doogie! Multiple vans remain at intercept position. Recommend you stay at camp and eat more quiche."

Eventually Doogie grew tired of quiche, no matter how celestial. He was grateful and thanked Bruce for the hospitality, saying he'd love to stay longer—but with stomach full and vim restored, he knew that the time for boldness had come. Steely bands of

resolve twined his every fiber. No more would he be barred from his only home by sharky media voyeurs in cargo vans, their engines wastefully idling. Time to kick off and assert his bad self! Flesh and mind so fortified, he pulled on Kevin's Torotex jacket and stepped out Bruce's sage-toned door.

"Watch yourself, now," Bruce said, joining Doogie outside and looking down the alley.

Doogie shrugged. "I will."

"Give my regards to Kevin, should you see him," Bruce said. "That *is* a nice jacket." They exchanged waves, and Bruce went inside and closed the door.

Doogie slid along the alley wall until the opening to the street. He prepped himself for conflict and poked out his head. But when he sighted the barricade of vans guarding Conifer Street Arms—tenacious blighters!—his eagerness for confrontation flushed away. Alternate plans? The sun had fully risen, and its rays were nice, very nice, though the spotty clouds often snuffed them out. He could try intruding on Kevin again, but maybe he'd postpone that visit until his mood was placid and pretty. None-time soon would that happen, so what to do until then, how to be useful?

Juliette! That's it, he should talk to Juliette.

Easier said than done. Doogie didn't have her number and only vaguely knew her apartment's whereabouts. She was Wayne's obsession, not his. Her info might be in Wayne's room, in some pile or

drawer or under the bed. But also it might not, and with the media besieging home base, Doogie decided to head to the Bad Art Diner. Either Juliette would be on shift, or someone there could help him find her, or at least give her a proxy call should Doogie not be trusted (he didn't frequent the Bad Art nearly enough to be known.)

Doogie traveled with fast, purposeful strides—Douglas Royko on the ball and rolling—and upon reaching the diner he jumped inside, accosted the counter, and asked for Juliette. The busboy gave an uneasy shrug, and a waitress gave a uneasy shrug, and then this big bald fingerpainter guy stepped up and said that Juliette was "no more working here."

What? As of when? But the big man wouldn't expound, and got hissy and nasty when Doogie asked for Juliette's phone number. Doogie's natural charm, a trait he lionized and cultivated, could finesse nothing from the cranky galoot. When Doogie explained why he needed to contact Juliette (mutual friend in crisis!) the man said she already knew about Wayne.

"You say you are roommate? What, I don't know this is true. Your ID I see, but I don't know his address so how do I know it matches? No, I won't look it up. I think you try to trick me."

Doogie slunk out the diner with his confusion amplified and his confidence broken. Another plan scrapped, but he wouldn't allow dismay to dawn. He

would be practical. He would go to the hardware store and buy implements to fix his door. He had a specific store in mind, the only one he knew offhand. While he'd never been inside, he'd walked by its steel-netted, tool-clogged windows many a time.

Really, he hadn't been inside any hardware store for a tidy spell, but that didn't connote ignorance of the realm. Back when he'd been a little kid and beholden to everyone's else's weird itinerary, his dad would toss him into the shotgun seat of the baby-blue Club Wagon and motor from town to town, scouring countless hardware stores and multiple zip codes in the heroic quest for the rarefied Eternal Lightbulb, whose mythic globe encircled the ultra-thickened tungsten coil that burned nine hundred times longer than the wispy filaments of the generic bulbs at the corner market. Normal folk kept journals of thoughts and dreams; Doogie's father had kept logbooks of wattage.

Sigh. Doogie was still young, but his flashbacks were already sepia. When he reached the hardware store and pushed open its door, a harsh clatter resounded: nailed to the door's top, in lieu of pretty chimes, was a pendant leather strap studded with ball bearings. As the door swung, these bearings whipped against its face. Yowza, tough.

Foul-minded, he wandered around the place. Nothing doing, just destructive implements. Saws, chisels, groovers, beaters, wrenchers, severers, garrot-

ers, cleavers. A regular School of the Americas, and Doogie was non-plussed.

But then he found himself in the bulk-goods aisle, which—to his shock—delighted his darkened spirits more than Bruce's angelic quiche ever could. Such a glittery spread! Was this the aisle Daddy had always kept him from, back when he'd been that vulnerable, orally fixated child? Buckets and bins of screw things, bolt things, twisty things, knobby things, gear things. A dragon's horde of flossy widgets, many only pennies to the piece! An unknown, latent lust was rising in Doogie, for he had to fend off the compulsion to roister through each engorged bucket; he had to soothe the bestial urge to pour jingling floods of shiny metal bits into the conveniently supplied brown bags and then dash screaming down the street, tossing wingnuts and washers and brads like confetti. These desires he'd never enact, but he couldn't deny that there was something seductive about these little fasteners, something about the promise of an orderly world. This promise had no putative correlation with addlepatented ravings, yet he felt it all the same...irony, was this irony?

After some hot-handed scouting, he found the screws to fit his door—they *looked* the right size, and this wasn't some complex engineering he was doing. Eleven cents per screw, full-featured screws with needled points *and* beveled heads. Next he found the corresponding door hinges, at a buck-fifty each. He

needed two hinges and six screws per hinge. Quite a deal! For five bucks and a minor squirt of elbow grease, his door would be whole again. Scuffed, muffed, but valiant and indomitable. Much like Doogie himself.

He took a brown bag and, denying widgetary temptation, gathered only the door necessities. Then he went to the checkout. But the cashier was absent, a *People* magazine lying open by the register. Had nature called?

Doogie leaned over the counter, looked past the register, checked left and right and down. No cashier. He turned around. “*Yohfug!*” he sputtered at the sight of a hairy man charging up to him brandishing a gnarled iron crowbar.

The man’s logo-branded bib marked him as the cashier, and his flipping tongue littered spit as he yelled, “Cizznarest! Cizznarest!” The price tag on the crowbar’s talon danced and spun.

Doogie reflexively shielded his face with his bag of hardware, but quickly dropped it at realizing that a blow might drive twelve screws (with needled points and beveled heads!) through his skull. “Citizen’s arrest? Me? Why!”

“G-got you, I got you,” the cashier said through chattering teeth. “Don’t t-try to shoot or nothing!”

“Shoot!” Doogie cried. “Shoot who? With what?”

“Shoot me with gun! You’re Milton! I seen you on the news this morning!”

“Milton?” Doogie was baffled. “Wayne Milton?”

“Yeah!” the cashier said. “You’re him!”

Guy needed glasses, definitely. “No I’m not!”

“His twin?”

Forget glasses, the guy needed a brain. “No!”

“You’re lying!” the cashier insisted. “You was on the early news this morning, s’where I seen your face, I know it!”

Doogie slunk back against the counter and nearly collapsed. “Fuckin’ what you say, I’m Doug Royko, not Wayne Milton.”

The cashier shook his head in dissent, but a fresh confusion crinkled his mutton chops. “Prove y’are, show me some ID!”

Doogie ripped out his wallet and flipped it open before the cashier’s face, hoping the man wouldn’t somehow recognize the address as being the exact same as Wayne’s.

The cashier stared at the plastic-sleeved driver’s license long enough for Doogie to visualize multiple forms of blunt trauma. Then he lowered the crowbar and went, “Fuh.” He stepped back into the aisle and hung the crowbar on a shelf peg.

Doogie composed himself, calmed his tooting heart, and picked up his bag of screws and hinges.

The cashier settled behind the counter and sponged his sweaty forehead with a shirt-cuff. “My mistake,” he said, then gestured to Doogie’s bag of hardware. “On the house, okay.”

“I’ll pay.”

“C’mon, guy, take it. I’m too tuckered to argue.”

“Thanks,” Doogie said, pushing the word through clamped jaws. He turned to leave.

“Wait! You really ain’t Milton?”

Hadn’t they just cleared that up? “Nope.”

“Shoo,” the cashier breathed, then scratched his chops and said, “Maybe you want that crowbar for your walk home. You two look exactly identical.”

Doogie almost blurted, *of course we don’t, Magoon, I’m much more handsome*, but realized it might be unwise to reveal such familiarity with Wayne. The news program he’d seen at Bruce’s house, what had it said? *Due to a technical error, earlier pictures of Milton were inaccurate*. Was this what they’d meant?

“Shit luck for me, I guess,” he said. “Think I’ll be okay without the billy club.”

“All right.” The cashier shrugged and picked up his *People* magazine. “Watch your back.”

Doogie muttered a farewell and went to the exit, hardware bag in hand. Hand on the door, he paused to convince himself that a posse of torch-hoisting citizens couldn’t possibly be waiting outside. When he eased onto the sidewalk, nobody pounced and rolled him, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t eventually.

It had grown quite cloudy, and windy too, but this was tolerable beneath the beautiful tent of Kevin’s Torotex bomber jacket, which by now

Doogie was thinking of as his own. Tacky, tacky. But it was such a splendid coat, warm and thick and deeply dramatic. He’d have to get one of his own someday—but sadly, it was time to give this one back, time to stomp over to Kevin’s place and see how the diphthong was doing. Or who he was doing. Diphthong. That Informer Six goober couldn’t still be there, not all these hours later.

Even discounting Kevin’s potential infidelities—a hard charge to keep—Doogie didn’t envy himself the trip. He grimaced at the thought of running into Kevin’s animal housemates, what with their thrombosed piercings, brandings, and droppings. But he was no wimp, he could deal with the sickness. And jacket or no, he needed to go: he had a litany of questions for Kevin, not all of them saucy. Doogie’s intuition wasn’t worth a cherry on a penny slot, but still he sensed that Kevin’s Informer Six breakfast dalliance might have, in some odd fashion, fomented this recent crowbar-waving, mouth-foaming unpleasantness. A legless allegation, but one worth making. Hope you liked your breakfast, dear, ’cuz lunch was gonna be a big fat interrogation sandwich with a pickle on the side. No substitutions!



Interrogation didn’t come easy to Juliette. After coaxing, yanking, extorting, pouting, she’d gotten nothing from Melvin and Jimmy but a squirming

heap of nonsense. Plan D, Plan P, a cruel and vengeful “pappy,” her harmless Wayne morphing into a G.I. Joe doll complete with amazing wind-up fist action.

“This is totally unbelievable,” she cried. “Start over, *start over!* What’s with this Dagget again?”

“I smashed in his gun cabinet,” Melvin said. “Got the blunderbuss, activated Plan P.”

“Uh-huh. And Plan P was where—” Juliette gripped her fingers to her forehead “—ah, Wayne *really* had a gun? I can’t—” So hard to imagine, but the news said it, and these boys saw it, and Wayne wasn’t around to debunk it. But Wayne with a gun! A vegan with a veal chop! A Mormon with a martini! Juliette with health insurance! After subtracting rent and food she couldn’t even hack COBRA, and that was supposed to be *cheap*? Like how—

“Hell yeah!” Melvin said. “Back at the Dandi-D, your Wayne was wavin’ it around, a real gun, not classical like mine, and he looked *pissed*. Crazy in the face. Scary! You remember, don’t you, Jimmy? That crazy face?”

Jimmy glanced up from nibbling on his fingers. “Crazy, yeah, completely mental.”

“Pistol at my head,” Melvin insisted. “At my head!”

Juliette’s fingers became claws. “I don’t believe that.”

“Fine.” Melvin sailed a hand through the air. “*Near* my head. Still scary as fuck.”

She hissed loudly. “If I’m not mistaken, weren’t you the one who started this scary gunplay?”

Jimmy tilted his head to Melvin and gave a single nod, slight but definitive.

Melvin sucked air through flared nostrils and cleared his throat. “Huh, huh, fine—but it’s okay, right, ’cause then your guy goes duke! After Pappy grabs the pistol, dead-set to shoot me, your Wayne gets all martial and knuckles ’im down. Might’ve even saved my life!” Melvin’s tone became contrite. “Sure, Plan P sucked, I know I fucked up, but nobody got hurt but Pappy, who had it coming.”

At this, Jimmy tugged up his pant legs and pointed to his red-rimmed socks and sneaker linings. Melvin kinked his brow and said, “Nobody got hurt real bad, I mean.”

“You don’t know that!” Juliette yelled at him. “You don’t know what happened next! Nobody does! Where the fuck *is* Wayne, where is he, huh? Missing! Even fucking Doogie ain’t there, I call and call, nobody’s there, nothing at all...”

“Doogie?” Melvin said slowly. “*Doo-gie*? Who’s that?”

Juliette didn’t respond: a sudden weird despair had stilled her. A man had died last night, and a woman had been flat on the street with her head cracked open, and neither person’s fate had earned so much as an absently sorry shrug from her. Shameful, yes—but a shame that soon faded like the

blush from a slap, to be overwhelmed by concern for Wayne, her friend.

“Juliette?” Jimmy asked after a silence.

“Mm, just thinking about the dead guy. Franklin Hollander.” That was the name she’d heard on the radio news.

“Oh.” Jimmy frowned, looked at Melvin.

Melvin puckered his chin. “How it goes. Mad world anyways.” Then some idea brightened his face, and he pulled a mess of money from his pocket, peeled off two one-dollar bills, and offered them to Juliette. “Two bucks!”

She could see that. “What for?”

“Your tip!” Melvin flattened his hands around the bills and pumped his arms as if swimming the breaststroke. “For the water and coffee and stuff. Take it!”

“This money come from where I think it does?”

Melvin and Jimmy bit their respective bottom lips.

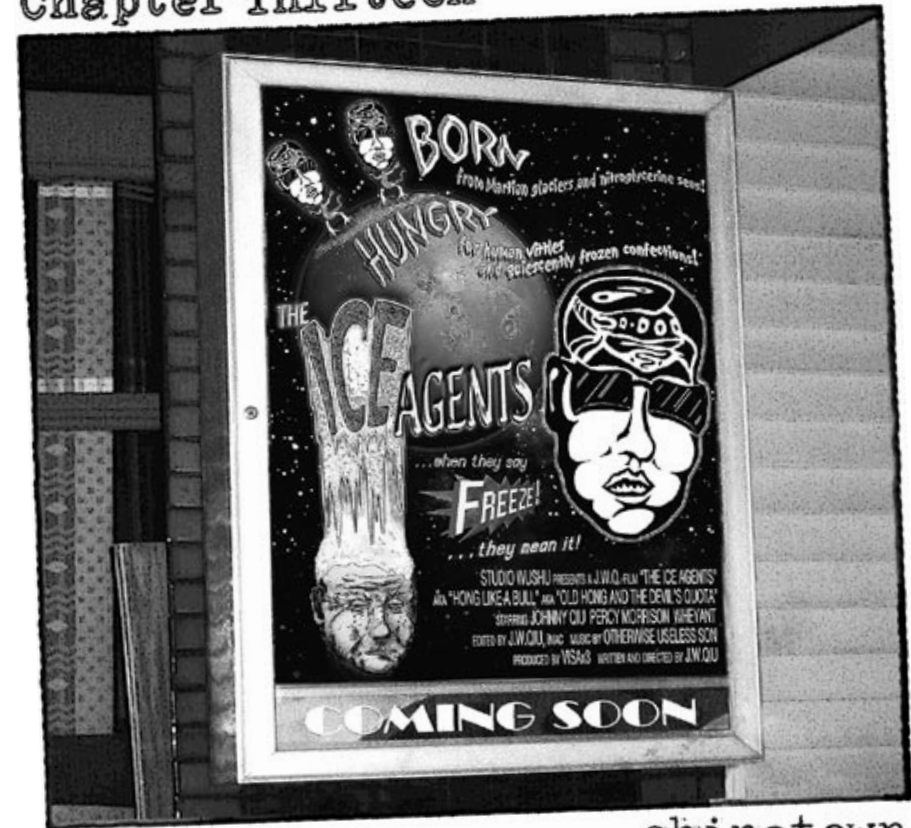
“Yeah.” Juliette took Melvin’s cash-giving hands and pushed them away. “I thought so.”

Melvin stamped his feet and shook the pair of bills. “But, but *all* money’s got the devil’s taint!”

“Devil’s taint I can deal with,” Juliette said. “Your taint I’d rather avoid.”

Jimmy smirked at Melvin. “Almost a compliment, man.”

Chapter Thirteen



chinatown

A TRANSPOSITION FROM THE TURNPIKE, BUT TO WHERE? No more bus, no more motion. Exit Percy, exit Johnnie. On a Chinatown corner Wayne stands alone, time undefined. The sun is high, bright, strikingly artificial: a mirage of empty rays, a break from physical law. No building casts a shadow, no warmth attends the light, and neither warp nor crack offends the sidewalk, each clean slab polished to a buttery silk.

Guarding the street is a high gate of red-drenched wood, one pillar rising from Wayne's corner, the other ascending from the corner opposite. Wrapping the pillars and running the beams are wormlike dragons stroked in metallic lute, their bodies like the sea at sunrise. Living icons with beetle eyes and lava snouts, along the wood they twine and shift.

Wayne steps away from the gate, unwilling to pass beneath or remain near it. Where there be dragons, best to find detours. Apart from the squirming wyrms, this Chinatown is flat and depopulated: no awnings flapping, no exhaust fans blowing, no smog of spice and grease from noodle shops and duck joints. Absent people, voices, flavor, or breeze, there hovers a sense of mission.

Dragons to his back, Wayne makes for the block's far end and stands at the intersection. The traffic light changes. *Walk*. He does. Traveling through Chinatown, then leaving Chinatown, then moving towards the locus of last night. Towards the broken truck. Towards the broken life. He must follow this track like a slot car in a slot. At any deviation he will stall and lie inert. He passes block after block without the sensation of feet hitting ground, the sidewalk moving him like a mag-lev...

A throat clears and the transport stops. Stranger to the left! Wayne swivels to see who it is. In a recessed entranceway leans Franklin Hollander, bearing no fatal wound, looking fearsomely hale in slacks and a plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He steps from

the entranceway and folds his arms, the muscles bulging. He levels eyes at Wayne, disgust in his expression.

A slim coupe purrs up to the curb. Wayne turns from Franklin Hollander to look at it. Looking at it is all he can do; its windows are tinted so darkly that looking *in* it is futile. The car's silver muffler is wide enough to nest small mammals, and bolted to the trunk is a triple-planed wing of boomerang planks and barbed fins. The paint job from hood to tail is a yellow instigation, flecked with sparkles and gouged by aerodynamic cavities.

When the driver's window zips down, Wayne can hear music coming from the stereo system. Not really *music*, not a tune, just some dance club commodity jerking to a lifeless meter. The car sits very low and Wayne hunches for a better look through the open window. A girl is at the wheel. She taps a button on the dashboard and the metrical beat terminates. "You?" Wayne says. The last time he saw this person, she was limp and leaking blood on the street. She looks younger now, younger and vibrant.

A blue purse is on her lap, and from inside it she plucks a stick of gum wrapped in green paper. "Hi, Wayne! Never got to thank you for the jacket. My mom's got it at the cleaners, so don't fret about the blood. Want a Kiss Mint?"

Franklin Hollander approaches the car. He is angry. "Fuck it all, that's *my* Kiss Mint."

The girl wags the gum in a *no-no* way and extends it to Wayne. “Wayne’s nicer to me,” she says.

It’s expected of him, so Wayne takes the Kiss Mint from her hand. She smiles and settles back in her seat. Wayne looks to Franklin Hollander and sees clenched fists.

“Oh, Wayne, don’t mind him.” The girl’s voice is gentle and buoyant. “He’s a jealous ghost.”

Wayne turns to her, confused and concerned. Peripheral vision snaps a flash of plaid and his neck gets wrenched aside by Franklin Hollander’s sucker punch. The Kiss Mint falls to the sidewalk, as does he. Sloppy kaleidoscopes and gunpowder pinwheels command his vision and swell his head. When the sparkles fade, he opens his eyes to find himself sprawled and scared. Above him looms Franklin Hollander, brutal and lofty, his foot swinging back for a gut blow. Wayne crumples into a protective curl, and Hollander sidesteps, pivots, and aims a kick at his head. Right before it comes Wayne flings up his arms to shield his face—

“Hey!” Percy cried, shoving Wayne against the window of the bus. “What you’re asking for!”

Wayne shrugged himself off the glass, his left elbow tingling with the memory of impact. “Yo—!”

“I’m talking here with Johnnie—” Percy gestured to the old Chinese man across the aisle, the *Shanghaiing* guy “—and outta nowhere, *bam!* Flyin’ elbow hits my face!”

Johnnie leaned closer, hanging over the aisle with an amused look that grated Wayne’s temper. “You doin’ okay, kid?” the old man said. “Demons in your dreams?”

Wayne breathed out and examined his elbow. A small bruise was forming on the skin, and he faced Percy and grimaced in apology. “Sorry, sorry.”

Percy inspected his jaw, working his fingers around gums and bone. “Thank God I got sturdy teeth.”

“You *sure* you doin’ okay?” Johnnie asked.

“Yes!” Wayne insisted against the obvious evidence.

Johnnie tittered, then resumed the conversation he’d been having with Percy. “You gotta like John Sayles, you gotta. Unless you’re a schmuck. You know who I’m saying?”

Still rubbing his jaw, Percy said, “Sure I do. Man gives Joe Morton crazy alien feet, how can I forget?”

“Mm.” Johnnie folded his hands. “What else is good, what else—*Roxanne!* Sharp script, give it credit. Awful soundtrack, so bad some scenes’ll turn ya green. Green! Hulk smash. You’ve seen *The Wedding Banquet*? Tell me you have, *tell me* you have—”

Percy turned to Wayne. “Your schizo ambush interrupted our filmic confab. Johnnie here happens to be a silly ass—”

“Cinéaste!” Johnnie protested.

“What I said.” Percy cocked a thumb at Johnnie and turned to Wayne. “Rejoice, Wheyant, you ain’t

the only psycho in the house. Johnnie here says he's spent the last couple weeks on the bus and nowhere else. No destination, just ridin' around from state to state, switching routes willy-nilly to, huh, 'maximize his experience.'" Percy made exaggerated sniffing sounds. "Four weeks of rambling! Four weeks of the same clothes!"

Johnnie raised his arm and patted the pit. "Want to compete?" he said. "*You* stink like a musk ox in the morning."

"*I* got a destination, *I* got a lady to meet, a fine lady who appreciates a dash of spritz *pour homme*." Percy stretched out the neck of his sweater and sniffed down it, then scrunched his eyes as if finding onions. "You might have a point."

"A lady to meet, a lady!" Johnnie grew panicked. "Gotta call *my* lady, my old lady. Been two days, just slipped my mind." He tore a cellular phone from a small pack that Wayne hadn't noticed and said, "Only got juice for a short call, thank god." Then he hissed, shook the phone, waited a few moments. "Tch, there's no tower in the heartland, I'll do it later. Get yelled at anyhow." He returned the phone to his pack.

"How d'ya recharge that cell on the road, bus man?" Percy asked. "Got a crank in that pack?"

"Nah," Johnnie said. "I got a little charger, juices it up in a half-hour. When there's a layover 'tween legs or route changes, I plug into an outlet, whatever depot I'm at."

"Clever," Percy said, and turned to Wayne. "We wanted to play a game, but decided to wait until you woke up." He snorted and poked at the swelling along his chin. "Now you're up."

"Game?" Wayne said. "What game?"

"The *why the heck you on the bus* game."

Wayne recoiled. "Me?"

Percy flapped his hands in mock panic. "Not just *you*, you paranoid wonder, all of us. Johnnie goes first 'cuz he got a secret screenplay. S'why he's been bussing around for weeks—says he's researching the, a-*hem*, symbols and vibes of motorcoach voyaging. Not only is he a silly ass, he's also some kind of filmmaker."

This remark animated Johnnie. He pointed his forefingers in the air and swirled them. "Filmmaker *extraordinaire!*"

Percy wagged his head. "Do pardon, I forgot the useless adjective. C'mon, out with the script."

Fingers still swirling, Johnnie began a salesman's chant: "First off, the hero. Old Chinese guy. Not too foxy, but good-hearted. He's working cleanup at a Brooklyn sweatshop, bad outfit, a complete tinderbox deathtrap. L&I's got greasy palms and nothing seems to change—but one fateful evening the sweatshop gets raided by the immigration cops, the new-wavers, the ice agents! Our hero flees into the night with nothing but his wits and his life savings—all cash, naturally. And see, the wits and the cash don't

amount t' too much, which upsizes the underdog factor."

Wayne squeezed his brow. "Why was he carrying his life savings arou—"

Johnnie swatted down the question. "Cuz if he ever puts it down someone'll steal it, him living on the seedy fringe of society! Now—nowhere to go, no place to hide—he runs to the bus station and uses all his money for a six-month bus pass."

Percy intervened and told Wayne, "Johnnie's *got* one of these passes, a one-month type, he showed it to me with wrongheaded pride. S'posedly it lets you ride all the routes you want until it expires. Jump bus to bus, go anywhere. Since the buses never stop running, it's like a freewheelin' motel, minus scatted sheets and crabs. Good for those into dirty wanderlust."

Johnnie clapped his hands. "Nice elaboration, kid, thanks a lot. So our guy—Old Hong, that's his name—he gets this pass and grabs the first bus out. Doesn't know where it's going or anything. Weeks go by, months go by, Hong's riding buses, shifting routes, running scared. Eventually he's hit every state that can be hit, but *still* he's afraid to leave the anonymous safety of the highway."

"Why?" Wayne asked, feeling a certain kinship.

"Because of the immigration guys, the ice agents, what else! Hong's so traumatized, he's thinking they're everywhere, with GPS receivers and track-

ing beacons and high-tech Sino-detector equipment. *That's* why he can't leave the insular world of the bus. Then, what do you know! A beautiful woman comes aboard and drops her pretty tush beside him."

Percy slapped his knees. "Now *here's* a story."

"This woman!" Johnnie exclaimed. "She's got a heart of pure gold—no, the purest platinum!—and she's sitting there with Old Hong, and they get to talking about life and the past. Hong shows her a sexy picture of him in the Red Army duds, back in the day, so young and strong."

"Wait," Wayne said, "he happened to be carrying that picture *and* his life savings when he ran into the nigh—"

"Yes," Johnnie barked, cutting off Wayne's comment. "And this pure-hearted woman, this sexy smart lady, she's going cross-country on the bus, traveling for a while. After a few days of talking, laughing, sharing, she begins to fall for Old Hong. His exile from what he once was, his youthful heroism and later banishment, his eternal and ancient sense of pride and humility. His story—told in gritty flashbacks—his story inspires her! And arouses her."

"No!" Percy burst out. "Damn you, no!"

"Yes!" Johnnie avowed. "But she *herself* is really an undercover agent, taking the bus to her new border patrol assignment in the tiny California town of Jacumba!" Johnnie beamed a hungry smile at his two-man audience.

“Oh,” Wayne replied.

“Oh?” Johnnie mocked, then frowned. “Oh.”

After a moment he recovered and said, “What does she do? Never before had she thought of her prey as *humans*, just illegal entities! But her law-and-order worldview, her cookies-and-cream worldview, it gets shattered by her feelings for Old Hong, and she realizes her cherished objectivity is not so objective or righteous when touched by the warm breath of humanity!”

“Sounds like *Les Miserables*,” Wayne stated, unwilling to again say “oh,” despite it being his dominant thought.

Johnnie’s mouth formed a happy trapezoid.

“Thanks! Wasn’t my inspiration *per se*, but I see the classy pattern.”

“So the agent kills herself.”

“Of course not!” Johnnie exclaimed. “Why would you ever think that?”

“Because he’s named Wheyant,” Percy said. “No suicidal coda? Then tell us what happens next.”

“I’m still working on it,” Johnnie said, focusing on Percy. “But it’ll be hot, real hot.”

Percy leaned back in his seat. “So, Johnnie, who’s gonna take up the great dramatic role of Old Hong? Not too many wizened Chinese thespians working in Hollywood these days.”

Johnnie grinned. “*Le flick, c’est moi!* Writer, producer, director—and romantic lead! Please, Cate

Blanchett, return my call?” He rubbed his hands together and grimaced. “I’ve even been practicing my broken English, how’s that for irony. Thirty years ago I had fan-*tastic* broken English. Now I got busted Mandarin.”

“This movie,” Wayne said. “It has a name?”

“Yes, listen, it’s like milk in the mouth,” Johnnie crowed. “*Old Hong and the Devil’s Quota*. Ooh!”

“Too wordy, bus man,” Percy said. “Try *Hong Like a Bull*.”

Johnnie crossed his arms. “You’re mad, man.”

“You know what they say about madness and genius,” Percy teased, tapping a finger to his temple. “They’re but a step apart.”

Slumped against the window, fingers pressed to the sputtering heat vent, Wayne held back a surge of tears. “Then why is madness so much easier to reach?”

Percy linked his hands behind his head and leaned back, elbows pointing in the air. “Good question, brother.”

Johnnie reached over and gripped the top of Percy’s seat. “The *Shanhaijing* talks about this certain fish—head of a dog and tail of a carp, cries out like a human child. You eat this fish and it cures whatever madness you’ve got. Lots of Omega-3, I guess...”

“Obviously *you’ve* never eaten it,” Percy said.

“Obviously *you* weren’t raised to respect your elders.”

“Hey, I respect what I should, and that includes your madcap movie. However you do it, it won’t be any less than singular.”

“Huh! Tell you what, you do my P.R.”

“Five percent of gross and I’m yours.” Percy made a show of stretching his neck. “So far, so weird. Which brings us to round two: why the heck is *Percy* on this bus?”

“Hear hear,” piped Johnnie. “Try not to send both of us—” he gestured to himself and to Wayne “—back to sleep, okay?”

Percy gave a sitting curtsy. “If you got an appetite for love, my tale will surely scintillate.”

Johnnie drummed on his thighs, Wayne shifted the aspect of his slump, and Percy began his story. “Walls,” he said. “Four walls, impassable and toxic, a quartet of dusty white. Tall and cold they stood, tall and cold these walls, and they delimited the dreams of a certain lonely man, a simple man, just as a quartet of foul Horsemen once assailed the hopes of bygone souls.”

“Art film,” Johnnie scoffed.

Percy dismissed him with a wave. “Picture this lonely man, feel his despair as the poisoned walls conspire to draw ever inward, ever upon him. Then imagine a secret unearthed, a secret that began with the talking of a single drum and evolved into a web of worldly span. Some call it the *Internet*.”

Johnnie pursed his lips and said, “Cha, *that*.”

Percy ignored him. “Fueled by this powerful revelation, the lonely man defied the walls by crafting a computer as his vessel. Then he snuck a cord from this vessel to a weakness in the walls, their Achilles Heel—a phone jack! What would he behold? Would the datastream revive his panorama, or was it naught but a tin can on string? He booted up and set his soul for adventure.

“Oceans of information he saw, and across them he rowed. But islands of comfort were few, and the florid bustle of what the skippers call *content* became less and less distinct. Soon he was lost in featureless currents, the passing of leagues dulling his hopes. No more a clarion, these hopes, they spluttered now like a flooded foghorn. Morose and heartsick, the man curled up between the bolsters of his rowboat. His oars slipped their brackets and were borne away. He slept, saddened but wiser, dreaming of the journey’s beginning, when the music was good and vibrant. The boat drifted on.”

Johnnie plucked at his lip. “Now the third reel?”

Glaring at Johnnie, Percy clenched his hands as if choking an invisible neck. Then he relaxed and went on: “How long this drift the man knew not, and the ocean’s darkness weighed upon his slumber. But then a frightful shudder racked the rowboat as its hull ground over a coraled shoal. The man flew awake! Rising before him were the silver bluffs of an island, stars capping its crest. He pounced from his boat and

swam to a beach of gentle sand ringed by fertile jungle.

“The island was small, but surpassing all the world in beauty, and the man wept at this beauty, crying *Gloria, Gloria!* Then he heard a rustling behind a thicket of fronds, and from these fronds a coconut sailed out and knocked him on his backside.

“*Gloria’s on the next island over, dimwit, a female voice sweetly hollered. I’m Isabelle!*” Percy sang this name through a beaming grin. He flopped back in his seat, laughing. “Isabelle, Isabelle, she’s got the wonder-workin’ power.”

Eyebrow arched, Johnnie twirled a finger around his temple and pointed to Percy. “Genius or madness? I vote madness.”

Wayne smiled, he couldn’t help it. “You met a girl named Isabelle on the ’net and you’re on the way to see her.”

Percy sniffed and said, “Sure, Wheyant, suck all the hard-fought theatre right outta my life.”

Wayne shook his head. “No, I enjoyed it. You’re good.”

“Aw, thanks!” Percy sounded so pleased, Wayne feared a hug.

“But,” Wayne asked, “does she really sweetly holler?”

“Um,” Percy said in a half-mumble, “I’ve never heard her voice actually.”

Johnnie made his cuckoo gesture again. “Oh, come *on.*”

“Nope. All messaging, e-mail, typing. Words.”

“How ya know she’s even a she!” Johnnie protested.

“I got pictures, and I know her. I *know* she’s true.”

Love-blindness. Wayne understood that. “You... you *do* have her phone number at least?”

Percy shook his head. “Uh-uh.”

“If you’re *right now* coming to see her, shouldn’t you—”

“Look, Wheyant, look, bus man,” Percy said with a crackle of agitation, “stop it with the seeds-of-doubt shit. So, okay, I’ve never heard her voice before, but when I do, she’ll be standing right in front of me, and we’ll be able to read each other’s faces, and it’ll be altogether fuckin’ fine.”

“But—”

Percy sighed, dropped his forehead to his palm. “I...I’ve never asked for her phone number. And I can admit it, I’m a little scared to talk to her. Typing on the computer, you got more time to think. It’s just, just built-in that way.”

“Like how?” Johnnie asked, his forehead showing extra wrinkles. “Never used those instant-messenger programs, though the wife does. Mercury-something.”

“Close, it’s called Mercurine, and it works like this, see—” Percy ran his fingers along his legs and

through the air as he talked “—Isabelle writes me a message, computer goes *ding*, I read it and rack my brain for a perfect reply. And when I’m typing up this reply, it doesn’t actually get sent out until I finish the message and click the ‘send’ button, right. Same process for her, for anyone.” He paused, breathed, continued. “Takes longer to type than to talk of course, fr’most of us I guess, me for sure—and because you get the ability to double-check what you’ve written before you send it out, the expectation is you *will* double-check it. Gives you another moment to think.

“What it means, I can build up some great lines and say exactly what I want to, or damn close. Something witty, sweet, true, something silly, satiric, cute. On the phone, two people talking, you can’t do that, you gotta whip out the first thick remark that comes to your head—or you have dead air. Big problem. Dead air! And ’cause of this pressure to keep the mouth flapping, you got a much greater chance of saying stupid shit you never intended. No double-checking there.”

Wayne nodded, but Johnnie looked skeptical and said, “Afraid of talking? You got no problem talkin’ here, lovebug.”

“*Being* with people is different,” Percy said. “Arms waving, faces changing, voices in stereo. On the phone, you’ve got this piece of plastic stuck to your ear, this disembodied yap, and you don’t have the person’s face to work with, can’t see their reac-

tion, can’t play off and enjoy their expressions. And *storytelling* is completely different—that’s a conversation, too, but between performer and audience. Useless over the phone. Nobody wants to be stuck to the receiver, listening to *Percy’s Iliad*.”

“A chatterbox who hates telephones,” Johnnie mused. “There’s a script there, somewhere.”

“Hey, besides, she never asked for *my* phone, and I wasn’t gonna impose, and I don’t have long distance anyway, and—oh, enough! She knows I’ll be there tonight, that’s what matters.” Percy flattened his hands in finality, then wrapped an arm around Wayne’s shoulder. “Time for round three—”

Johnnie cut in and finished the phrase: “—why is *Wheyant* on this loony-bin bus?”

The moment of dread. The scab across Wayne’s chest started twitching, and he bit his lip and tried to enforce equilibrium. “I’ll...uh...I’ll pass for now.”

His companions glared.

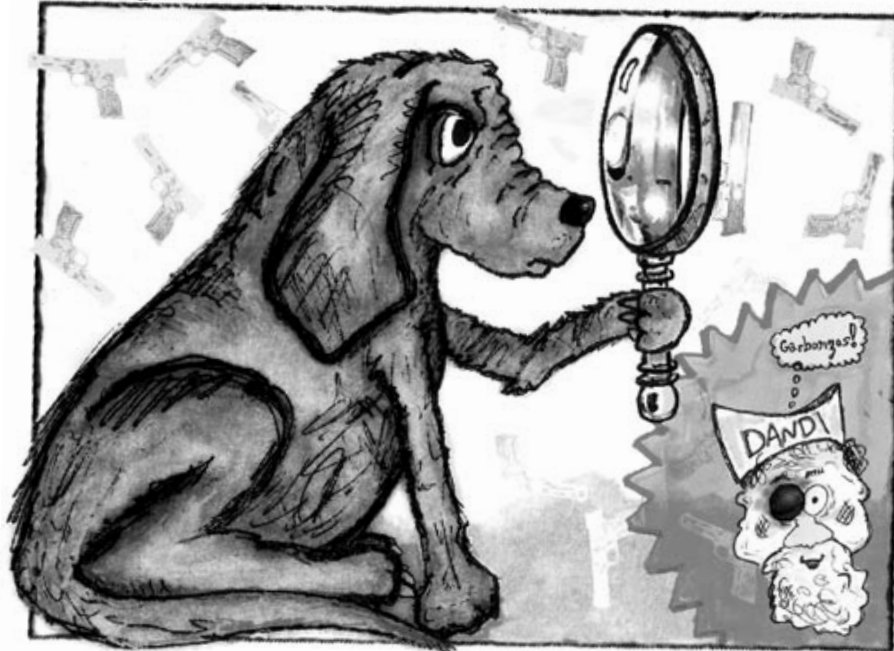
“No you won’t!” Percy withdrew his arm from Wayne’s shoulder. “You owe us—no, you owe *me* for that punch in the jaw!”

“Please! A time-out, okay, a pause. We, we still got what, four hours to go before Cleveland? Longer?”

Johnnie spun a finger around his temple and this time pointed to Wayne. Percy shook his head and then his fist.

“Fine, we’ll grant you a reprieve,” Percy said, then added with a cockeyed smile, “you felon, you.”

Chapter Fourteen



the
Sherpti Way

LOLLING ABOUT UNCONSCIOUSLY in his battered gray roller chair that had long lost its wheels and could no longer roll, Detective Sherpti dreamed a dream of an unflappable dick in classy duds, a shamus renowned for an irrepressibly blazing brilliance, a canny criminologist revered worldwide for his signature investigative methodology—an incredible ethos known simply as the Sherpti Way.

Currently, the Sherpti Way was quantifying a very loud and persistent ringing noise. *Telephone*, it deduced, *dusky beige plastic case, steel bottom with rubber friction pads, 1987 date of manufacture, 15-button keypad with illuminated line-select and hold switches, three-foot handset cord of coiled type (possible foreign origin); unapproved auditory hardware onboard; ringing, very loud, ringing, ringing, get your ass up already.*

The detective clambered awake. It had to be his boss again, Lieutenant “Cheery” O’Grady, who was *a) probably pissed at Sherpti’s lassitude in fetching the fruits, Doug and Kevin, b) certainly pissed that Sherpti hadn’t rocketed to action at a superior’s command, and c) exhaustively pissed that Sherpti had casually fallen asleep in his old pokey chair and stayed that way for—hold on, check the watch—okay, for a couple hours too long. Wasn’t even morning anymore.*

Ring! Riiing! Riiinghhh! RIII-ka-ka-ka-ka-NNG!

Excited by the vehement ringing, the phone’s handset rattled against its cradle. Sherpti resolved to steal some earmuffs from the range before napping next time. That, and to find the jerk who’d thought it funny to install a supplemental amplifier inside his phone, an amplifier with the volume screw welded to the maximum level. Fuckin’ elves around here? Didn’t think so. Where’d he misplace his requisition forms...

RING-ta-ta-ta, errrrRRRRRING!

Who could blame him for falling asleep? He’d been reading a forensics report on the bullet found in

the wheel rim of Frank Hollander's Bronco. Did that sound interesting? No, it did not. There it was, dull upon his desk. Pure barbiturate.

Rooooinggggh! RooooOOONGH!

No worries, the afternoon was young. Still a *Gandhi*-and-a-half away from evening. Plenty of time to get shit done. He could visit Doug, survey his door-fixing progress or prowess, coach him for his upcoming cage match with Cheery O'Grady, then drag him to that very same bout. Also on the slate: that Informer Six videotape, the recording of the early-morning newscast which he'd been, as yet, too slack to review.

RIII—he acquiesced and brought the phone to his ear.

"Peter Sherpti?" A man's voice, very coarse.

"Speaking." It wasn't O'Grady. Huzzah.

The man coughed thrice in peppery bursts. "It's Gus."

Sherpti struggled for a reference, and in the murk of his laggard mind could find only one. "Gus? Donut Gus?"

He knew Gus. Longtime counter guy at a South Philly Dandi Donuts, grumpy coot. Sherpti sometimes hit the joint when keeping overnight hours, got a large coffee and a Boston creme. Gus liked to talk to him, liked shooting shit with a "lawman." Sex fantasies were Gus's favorite topic of discussion, lesbians and Catholic schoolgirls being the favorite

thrust of these fantasies. Total class act, the guy. Service with a smile, if *service* happened to be synonymous with *pervert*.

Consider a few weeks ago, when Sherpti had zombie-stalked in near three a.m. for some custard n' caffeine and was forced to endure a twenty-minute exultation on the blatant sexual enticements of jailbait pop singers with plaid microskirts and precociously pendulous garbonzos. Gus was nothing if not a fan of adolescent sex-mongering. Garbonzos!

Why was he calling? What did this jizz monkey want?

"You wanna come down here, like soon?" Gus said.

"What about?"

"The Hollander thing."

"I'll be there in ten," Sherpti said and hung up, his mood doing a U-turn. A lead had dropped into his lap! Sherpti's mind conjured up a gross and disgusting picture of Gus sitting on his lap. Then Sherpti imagined himself wearing a Santa suit. Bah, humbug! In revulsion he kicked his chair back, forgetting it had no wheels left, and consequently flipped end-over-end when the contraption's stout rear legs dug into the carpet and vaulted him floor-side.

He ignored the chorus of donkey laughter from across the room. Splayed and discombobulated he might be—but when it came to chasing a lead, all

others were curly schoolboys while he was the Dean. Recess was over! The Sherpti Way was at maximum effect! Onward to victo—

A big yawn seized him. The department's choice for second-floor carpet, an aqua-toned polymeric fiber patented under the name *Titaniflax*, was remarkably more comfortable than one would suspect. No! No sleeping! The second leg of his siesta must defer to the new imperative! He jumped up, threw on his jacket, pocketed his cell phone. Then he went skipping downstairs.

Out in the parking lot, a sprinkling of empty spaces bespoke other dicks sleuthing the streets. Sherpti sort-of-recalled that Xavier had gone to Hollander's workplace, Oceania Imports. Don, per Sherpti's morning request, was on surveillance detail at Milton's apartment (surveillance being Don's usual gig, and the germ of his gut.) Hesser's car was gone, too. She was mapping out a dog-fighting racket and had been for some time, her forward progress retarded by her pumpkinhead partner, Earl. Last April Fool's, Sherpti had asked the M.E. to declare Earl clinically brain-dead but she'd refused. Curse you, Culture of Life!

Sherpti dove into his coupe and revved the engine. With agility born of blissful purpose, he threw the car into gear and zipped through the lot, nearly side-swiping a Crown Vic and a cruiser with its hood up. He swerved onto Market Street, shifted into fourth

gear, and lugged the engine all the way to Second Street. Jimi was on the radio, growling "Foxy!"

"Lady!" Sherpti growled back. He punched the clutch, downshifted, powered into a right turn. Then south on Second, stop and go, hooking left to avoid a intriguingly abyssal ditch in the road. To where would it lead? A parallel universe! A hyper-spacial conduit! Sherpti would dive into this otherworldly chasm and emerge upon the red sands of Barsoom. Another day, perhaps. With Gus waiting, Sherpti could spelunk no wormholes.

Dots of water appeared on the windshield, and he gazed up to see the sun tangled in clouds. Not true rain clouds, not yet at least—thick as they were, they weren't drooling with any fervor. He screeched onto Columbus, crossed Washington, went right and a few blocks past. There it was: Dandi Donuts, indeedy. Sherpti swung into the parking lot and braked into a spot, steamrolling discarded foam cups and crumpled wax bags. Then he jumped from the car and approached the donut shop's entrance. Seeing him through the window, Gus left the counter and came to the door, looking mighty cantankerous.

"Hey, Gus," Sherpti said, stepping inside. "How's life?"

Gus leaned past Sherpti, yanked the door shut, and engaged the deadbolt. "Fuckin' sucks." He tore the suction-cupped OPEN 24 HOURS sign off the glass and tossed it across the room; like a frisbee it

sailed over the counter and pronged into a basin of radiantly blue (-berry?) dough-ball treats.

From his apron pocket, Gus took a folded piece of paper and a roll of tape. He opened the paper, and Sherpti read “CLOSED 20 MIN DEAL WITH IT.” Disingenuous, the man was not.

Gus taped up his note and grumbled, “You watch, they’ll be bangin’ on my door anyway, like I’m givin’ free hummers with every fuckin’ dozen.”

“Hell, that’s why I came,” Sherpti said. He noticed that Gus’s right eye was mostly missing, occluded by a puffy knot of deep purple. The gnarly bruise uncannily resembled a discolored cruller hanging from the man’s supra-orbital lobe, and Sherpti couldn’t help but grin and point. “Though I see you’ve forgotten your protective eyewear.”

Gus showed his teeth. “Very funny, asshole.”

“Perhaps you should get that looked at, y’think?”

“Can’t yet. I been here since midnight on a double fucking shift and don’t get off ’til Chowie takes up the register t’night. Little schoolboy couldn’t drop his classes fr’even a moment to help an old man, he’s got shit to do. I got no issue with him though, he ain’t a fuckin’ embarrassment.” Gus rounded the counter and motioned to the kitchen door. “Come back with me.”

Sherpti’s gaze was drawn to the near corner. “*Somebody* hates the March of Dimes,” he said, looking at the wreckage of the charity’s trademark gum-

ball machine. Bent metal, broken glass, gumballs, all swept into a craggy, pointy, multicolored pile. “Don’t suppose a PETA posse stopped by?”

Gus honked some mystery curse and disappeared into the kitchen, and Sherpti moved to follow him. Stepping behind the counter, he heard the murmurs of a TV turned low. A soap opera was playing on a little set by the aptly named coffee burners.

“Amanti, where ever will we go? They will find us!”

“We shall be as nomads, mi Sorento, *nómadas del amor.*”

“Your eyes, Amanti, they rush and rage like the Rio Cinco.”

Sherpti pushed through the kitchen door and brought a hand to his face. Donuts! He had tripped the threshold and entered the sacrosanct birthing place of donuts! They were made right here in this sticky cave, thousands upon thousands of lardy rings streaming daily from the swampy hot womb of the conveyer fryer hulking right before him. Ancient grease was jelled into grotty corners; fermented batter laced the floor in organic reticulation. When Sherpti lifted his foot, the bottom of his shoe detached from the sugar-glazed tiles with a snappy *pluck*.

Across the room, Gus was engrossed in a languorous snort. Leering in the corner was an aluminum sink, the basin lined with brownish silt, and he drew up and hocked a stringy wad at it. Field goal distance,

would it reach? No, not even close! A brick! A brick going *splat*. Sherpti regretted every Boston creme he'd ever eaten.

Outside, somebody started banging on the shop's front door. Sherpti could hear the muffled beats, the forearm blows, the wrenching anxiety of the donut-deprived. If only they knew what he knew now, they would turn tail and skedaddle.

Gus wiped his mouth, then went to the back of the room and opened a closet door. A sensational rankness sprang from within, grabbed Sherpti by his bloodhound nose, and yanked him near. Inside the closet's shallow recess, behold six trash bags! Piled waist-high, they bulged and stank with ungodly personality. The bags at the bottom were set to pop, so squashed they were from the weight of their higher-uppers—oh, look, one already had, sloshy guts pooling before the burst plastic. Puddles, tissues, decaying dough, moldering coffee grounds, and no doubt plenty o' loogies. Sherpti thought it unfortunate he wasn't from Food Safety. He could've picked up a few extra bucks today.

"See, detective, what I think—" Gus swept a hand up and down the pungent mound like a game-show girl "—inside one a' these trash bags, you'll find the gun that killed Hollander."

No gun killed Franklin Hollander, not directly at least. What had the news been saying? "Really. Why's that?"

Gus squinted his good eye. "Damn dots were all there, but I didn't connect 'em until after I seen that Milton's face on the afternoon news—because first they'd screwed up, the TV did, showing that faggot I didn't recognize."

"Faggot?" Sherpti said. "What faggot?"

"How the fuck should I know, the dumbass morning news screwed up and showed this other face first off, and 'cause of that I didn't pay no attention to the story. B'so I'm sittin' there later watchin' the fuckin' soaps, and when the c'mercials come on I go take a piss, okay? Well, I come back and the commercials're still going—but then some news break comes on and *motherfuck!* Look who it is! I took a fucking shit."

"Wait—what'd this other face look like?"

"Don't recall. Faggot face."

"A real faggot or you just using the term for emphasis?"

"What the fuck you're askin' me? Do you wanna hear my story or not?"

The detective wrinkled his nose and nodded. With that closet wide open and reeking, respiration had lost its pleasant subtlety.

"Yeah you do," Gus said. "So listen good."

Sherpti shut down his snout and turned on his ears.



As Detective Sherpti's olfactories parried a trashy assault, the noses of Melvin and Jimmy quivered at the piquant shimmer of gasoline fumes.

After appeasing Juliette's inquisitive demands by spooning up a half-laundered tale of One-Gun Wayne at the Dandi Corral, the boys had hopped on the El and taken their two thousand dollars a couple miles north to Franklin and Castor Avenues. Not wanting to arouse any thuggy attention, supremely conscious of their big buckage, they'd carefully scowled throughout the train ride, down the station stairs, and on foot over the next several blocks.

But the nearer they got to Moses's As-Is Superlot, the more pressurized their glee grew, and upon arrival it could be capped no longer. Here lay the rusty axis of autophilia, here the wasted world released its finest death rattle. Jammed ten-deep along three acres of sinking asphalt, every car and truck abandoned by time was prized and valued, pinnacled and platformed, washed not by man but by nature's own rain.

Pacers! Darts! Novas! Gremlins! Mavericks! Dozens of Omnis, even a turbo GLH! Listless limos and hoary hearses, grand once upon a time and perhaps grand again with the help of Bondo, Smooth-Flo, and naval jelly! Every vehicle was, like the name proclaimed, totally As-Is, but Moses would not apologize nor offer excuses for this. His motto spoke truth and was red-inked upon his business card: *As-Is, Is-Cheaper!*

Melvin and Jimmy surveyed the lot. They waded ankle-deep through a leaf-litter of corrosion. They vaulted over detached bumpers set like hurdles. They danced from roof to roof and dent to dent, honking horns and booting tires and flicking antennas. This was their Riviera, their Monte Carlo, their Eldorado. Oh, heaven is a place on earth!

Then they flagged Moses, who came shuffling to deal. And cash money was traded for a cool-whipped dream: a van, a sweet van, a van with a pedigree of creamy pleasure.

And now they were screeching out of the lot, Moses waving in the rear-view, and as there exists no manly joy greater than the firecracker ignition that sparks a newly beloved ride to vroomy life, Melvin and Jimmy conveyed a happiness that rubbed against ecstasy, a happiness that needed to be sung, sung aloud, a yodel of joy, a burst dam of fermented delight.

The radio was broken, but the sugar-cone megaphone worked like mint, and so they sang, sang aloud, not in these exact words, but close enough:

What's this tear fell from my eye?

what's this key electrify?

Boneyard-sent before full span'd,

Again to life, Good Humor van!

Dry-rot Eagles hug the rims –

bald Eagles, yeah, but fast they spin!

*Smack the button! hear the chimes!
Pop the weasel's cheatin' time!*

*Children rush into the street,
droolin' for the G.H. treat
Swerve hard left! Swerve hard right!
Honk before you blow the light!*

*Ice-cream van got Triton power!
Good Humor in our finest hour!
Jam the gas, feel revived,
Rampin' up I-95!*

Who dare deny the joy? Melvin at the wheel, Jimmy hanging out the window flashing V for Victory at eighty miles per hour on Interstate 95. Other drivers—baffled and alarmed by their heroic vigor—stared, honked, changed lanes in alarm. Jimmy grinned as he watched these lesser motorists flee to the far side of the highway. The van had no working clock, but it was sometime in the afternoon, and the highway was a quilt of sunspots and sprinkled rain. The weather, unable to settle, had decided to be many things at once.

They roared past the Naval Yard, pumping their fists at the huge gray warships of mothballed might, then shot past the airport, gunning the engine to race a plane lifting off a runway that paralleled the interstate. Jimmy cheered as they lost the contest. “Go, Ramjet, go!” He laughed aloud, drummed

rhythms on the windowsill, and pounded on the armrest, which fell off.

“Oops,” he said, picking the part off the floor.

“Yee-ahh!” Melvin howled. “Back in fucking business, that’s what we are, Jimmy!”

“What business is that?” Jimmy screamed. With all the windows down—big trucky windows, too, plus that ice-cream hatch they’d left open—screaming was the only way to talk.


“Fix her up and sell ice cream!”

“But it’s almost November!” Jimmy bellowed at him.

“Yo, so we’ll have a balls-out monopoly!”

“Good point!”

The freeway was abuzz with rampant goons and goofy dreams, and they supped from a full tank of glee, hi-test and nitrous. Swing low, sweet ice-cream van, comin’ for to carry them home! Specifically, Jimmy’s momma’s home, so Melvin could raid the fridge and also steal a fat pile of hand-me-down clothes (maybe not the underwear) because he could never return to his own home without being mauled by his father or his father’s unswervingly obedient rottweiler, should one or both be laying in wait.



Meanwhile, back at the Dandi Donuts, Detective Sherpti was displeased. According to Gus’s story, Wayne Milton had come into the shop around three-

fifteen last night, an hour past the Hollander incident. Supposedly, he'd brandished the gun, robbed the till, and, as a parting gift, assaulted Gus with a knockout punch.

Based on his own intuition and Doug's input, Sherpti had built a profile of Milton that didn't comport with this tale. Which was crooked—his carpentry or Gus's story? Neither choice satisfied, and Sherpti demanded that Gus show him corresponding time-stamped footage from the donut shop's security camera.

Of course, said Gus. Here you go. Let's watch it together.

White bunny in a blizzard, that was the footage. White bunny in a tofu deluge. White bunny drowning in a sticky pool of microwaved marshmallows.

After cackling at Sherpti's frustration, Gus led him back to the trash-filled closet and requested an endeavor most obnoxious.

"You want me to do *what*?" Sherpti hollered in reply.

Gus jerked a finger at his stash of garbage bags. "The gun's somewhere'n there, I *tell* ya, I can feel it. Because I *know* my trash can, spend ev'ry day and night *staring* at it behind the counter. Just gettin' beat up don't make me overlook different garbage in my can. But at the time I was thinkin' it might be a hallucination, maybe temporary amnesia. But seein' the news got me on the right track, and I sat here hashin'

out what Milton might've done. Then—" *clap!* "—a stroke of genius told me he probably dumped the pistol somewhere, and I tied it all together."

"Gus," Sherpti said, "a stroke of genius would send you to the hospital."

"Fuckin' gratitude I get." Gus stomped out of the kitchen and returned holding a trash can—the very can under discussion, Sherpti gathered. The one Gus professed to *know* in and out. Only proper to assume this knowledge encompassed the biblical.

"After my hunch," Gus continued, shaking the trash can for emphasis, "I went to my bins, pulled out every bag came from this can, and stacked 'em like you see. Now nobody can get to 'em but you and me."

Sherpti eyed the trash can, then scowled at the fetid pile of shit-packed sacks moistening the closet walls, polluting the air. "Y'actually expect me to rip open these nasty bags and root around for some supposed gun. Why don't—why *didn't* you do it?"

Gus lowered his trash can and grinned. "You the detective." He went to a cabinet and took out a foam cup in a sealed plastic bag. "I've also got this, Milton's cup, you can get some spit from the rim, do the DNA. What it's all about these days, the DNA."

"Gosh, Mr. Gus, I'd no idea," Sherpti said, then pointed to the cup. "Outstanding work, and plastic-wrapped, too! How *wonderfully* smart. Want me to filch your trash now?"

Gus tapped his foot. “I don’t got all day, y’know.”
“But you do, Gus, you *do*.”

Still tapping his foot, Gus shook his head.

Fine! The Sherpti Way did not forbid a little dirt-mongering. Sherpti doffed his jacket, strapped on a pair of food-handling gloves offered by a wickedly smiling Gus, and advanced on the miserable closet. Slash and tear, endure the suppuration!

The first bag erupted like a huge pimple. The second oozed an ichorous effluvium. The third slopped open like a huge drooly tongue. The fourth geysered up a thunderhead of villainous fog. The fifth discharged dozens of donuts soggy with rot; the sixth was already banefully split. Sherpti dug, delved, quarried, and collapsed from his Herculean labors. Screw the stables of Augeas—after this noxiousness, bullshit would smell like ambrosia.

“I was right, there it is!” Gus cried triumphantly from behind Sherpti, loud and near enough to spittle Sherpti’s nape and rattle his eardrums. Reaching past Sherpti, he pointed to a murky hollow—one of many—in the chaotic trash heap.

“Where?” Sherpti said crossly. He saw no handgun.

Gus groaned and thrust his gloveless hands over Sherpti and into the filth. “Right in fronna—damn, lost it!” He romped atop Sherpti and through the waste, pushing left, scooping right, all the while squashing his jellied flab against the detective.

Sandwiched between Gus and garbage, Sherpti grew lightheaded and reminiscent. He hadn’t been this close to a fellow male since the Great Arcadia Theatre Debacle of 1979, in which Officer Sherpti—young and greenhorned—had been smirkingly dispatched, undercover, to the basement of an innocuous-looking rowhome where heretical nookie was said to be in constant procurement. He’d meekly climbed the concrete steps and slipped an envelope holding four dollars through the front door’s mail slot, whereafter he’d been led down a narrow pass to a stuffy, miasmatic cellar. Within this iniquitous hive he and ten other men watched classic French cinema, smoked sugar-tipped Turkish cigarettes, and drank ash-flavored coffee from slender, fluted cups. They’d talked of Jimmy Carter’s lustful heart, darling Italian motor scooters, peculiar words like *tergiversate* and *snollygoster*.

Aside from the triple threat of asphyxiation, claustrophobia, and—during the denouement of *Bob le Flambeur*—some disturbing back-stroking that he’d sprung away from, put the kibosh on, and left because of, the evening had been almost enjoyable. Hypothetically, though, a dank cistern of ten Guses, unsubtitled Franco-Catholic schoolgirl porn, and clumped-up tissues would certainly be a marriage of worst-case scenarios.

As Sherpti floated in memory, Gus plowed deeper into the garbage, hands pinching.

“Almost, cuntrag, c’mon, cuntrag, come *on*,” he chanted. Then, finally, “Got it!” Gus rolled off Sherpti, jumped up, and hoisted his trophy in the air.

By Jove—was that a pistol in Gus’s toxic hand? Careful of the slippery moat around him, Sherpti stood up and studied it: Kip & Holst, target barrel, 9mm. Heya-ho! Then the forensic guys might be right. According to that lab report Sherpti had been sleeping atop (but nonetheless absorbed the salient points of, how’s that for intellect), the shell casing found beside Franklin Hollander had impressions common to certain Kip & Holst firearms.

What’s more, a K&H 9mm was the same make and caliber of the gun registered to Hollander in State’s database. Here might be the match, this pistol held high by a happy, goopy Gus. Here might be the *double* match. The microscopers did their thing, Sherpti did his thing, and, hallelujah, both things might correlate A-okay. Serendipity was diligence manifest!

Sherpti turned from the pistol and examined himself. Fearsome sludge coated fingertips to forearms, well beyond the fringe of his plastic gloves. He stripped off the gloves and tossed them into the exploded putrescence wherein he and Gus had so recently frolicked. Under the airtight gloves, Sherpti’s skin had gotten slick with sweat, and the fearsome sludge was crawling down his wrists and mixing with this sweat. Very skanky, very luscious.

“Now you *gotta* catch the fucker,” Gus stated, waggling the Kip & Holst 9mm as a proud fisherman waggles a trophy bass. “You got the cup, you got the gun, you got me as a witness.”

Sherpti was only half-listening: a blue bottle of dish detergent had caught his eye. It lay sideways by the kitchen sink’s faucet and beckoned to his diseased flesh. He went over, opened the tap, smeared the detergent along his hands and forearms. Regardless of how hard he scrubbed or how hot the water got, the blue stuff wouldn’t lather. Yet it decimated the filth, rapidly melting it to nothingness. Also dissolving from Sherpti’s flesh, every last vestigial trace of oil and moisture held within since infancy. What the hell was this soap made of? Antimatter? Sherpti maxed out the tap, water gushing onto his hands, but still his skin felt like ancient flatbread. He gave up and shut the faucet. When he flexed his fingers, the grooves across the knuckles drained to ashy whiteness, a few actually splitting open and swelling red.

“Gus,” he cried, “what is this fucking soap!”

“That?” Gus was wrapping up the K&H niner as he would a donut, packing it in wax paper and stuffing it into a white paper bag. He placed it beside the plastic bag containing Milton’s alleged styrofoam cup. “You just washed your hands with triple-concentrated Industrial Degreasing Solvent, Mr. Sherlock.”

A lukewarm stream of stupidity flowed through Sherpti, sparing his forearms and fingers, which were

too parched to be bothered. He sighed at his red knuckles and admitted to himself that the Sherpti Way was not so renowned at detecting soap. Then he went over, opened the white paper bag, and checked out the slime-logged pistol.

“Clip’s gone,” he said, looking up at Gus. “Any idea why?”

Gus shook his head. “Fell out?”

“Nah.” Sherpti threw on his jacket. “You find it when sweepin’ up, call me.” He grabbed both bags, the one with the gun and the other holding Wayne Milton’s foam cup, and flicked Gus a salute. “More food for the lab rats. The department thanks you.”

The donut man’s face looked bloatishly satisfied, his swollen shiner plum-pleased. “Humph. You go find that fuckin’ punk, then you thank me.”

“We do what we can,” Sherpti said. He waved, left the kitchen, and walked to the shop’s front door. He disengaged the deadbolt but halted before exiting, his eyes going to the “CLOSED 20 MIN DEAL WITH IT” sign stuck to the glass.

He looked from the sign to the sixteen angry people waiting outside. Then he peeled off the sign, yanked wide the door, and told the bitter multitude that today was Gus’s birthday and all the donuts were free in celebration.

“Really!” they whooped in unison, shedding their mantles of consumerist wrath.

“Yup,” Sherpti explained. “I’m the Philly area

manager and my word is gold. Go get ’em.”

As the beasts ransacked the shop, Sherpti got in his car, set the two bags in the passenger seat, and zoomed back to the police station. Once there, he lockered the cup and gun with Evidence (pulling a pistol from a donut bag was a better trick than yanking a rabbit from a hat any day, though the locker jockeys, gluttons all, expressed disappointment that he hadn’t cared to bring a few donut bags containing a more proper cargo.)

Next came a quick conference with his fellow dick Zavier, who was back at the station after having collected statements at Oceania Imports. The statements included one from a co-worker of Hollander’s named Avery Kaddison. Sherpti remarked that Akiko Takayanagi had mentioned a man named Avery.

“Man was a basket case,” Zavier said. “He’s who set the pair up, s’pose that’s part why. I told him the girl was okay, he did seem glad about that. Didn’t want to exhaust the Hollander issue with him all a wreck, so tomorrow I’ll work him again. About the girl, I hear she’s still at the hospital. Glued to the bed. She’s got to be outta there by tomorrow, Sherp. You want us to evict?”


“Best I handle it,” Sherpti said.

Zavier nodded. “All you, Ambassador.”

After Zavier sallied off, Sherpti went to the media room and—so many hours late—spun Lt. O’Grady’s red-labeled videotape, the one of the early morning

newscast. Written on the label: I-SIX 5:30/6AM SHERPTI SUX! How mature. Sherpti popped in the tape and zipped past the flashy graphics.

So! *That's* what Gus meant, the “faggot” on the TV this morning: Doug's face, tagged with Milton's name and imbued with homicidal implications. Magically confounding, this ingenious and clairvoyant gaydar employed by Gus! Criminy. And here was *Sherpti* calling himself a detective.



Blue and tired, Juliette sat on a stoop, the hood of her jacket loose on her head, a cigarette burning in her hand. A flotilla of news vans commandeered the adjacent block of Conifer Street, the block of Wayne and Doogie's apartment, and probably a cop was staked out, too. Just like this morning, but now Juliette lacked the willpower for confrontation. From a distance she watched, her thoughts stagnant.

Melvin and Jimmy, the moron twins, they were car shopping or whatever, she didn't care about them or their ludicrous story. After humoring her half-baked deposition, they'd been quick to scam, and then she'd taken herself to Toby-Mart, bought a pack of smokes, and stamped around the city coughing bitter menthol. Midway through her hacking, she'd been possessed by the urge to raise hell, to slag her anxieties and blow right here to Wayne and Doogie's place, where she would storm up and demand in-

formation from the police, the media, or, ideally, Doogie, whatever slim chance he was home.

Sadly, this hellraising spirit had died on arrival, and instead of conquering into Conifer Street Arms #3B, she'd shied away and used a pay phone to call it. As expected, as every time before, no response. And again she'd called her own apartment to check for messages. Nada.

Her apartment. She should go there and fall apart. Instead she kept sitting on a stranger's stoop and watching her missing friend's busy block, smoking cigarettes, more cigarettes, too many cigarettes. She was barely inhaling by now, her poor windpipe barbecued, but she was deep into the other physicalities of match-striking, arm-crooking, huffing, et cetera. She couldn't let herself get hooked, re-hooked, she didn't wanna die with emphysema and cancer and horrible lungless suffocation.

She stood up. It was cold, and the sky was spitting some rain at her, and the clouds kept building. Go home, Juliette. Yes. To mark the decision, she took a last drag on her smoke and flicked it into the street. It felt awful, confiding in cigarettes after a half-year's independence, doubly awful with that sliver of pleasure glowing under the dust and ash of her sore throat.

Hood pulled low, she made for home. She was nearly there when a possibility slowed her steps: might news vans be camped and waiting? At the

Bad Art Diner, radio guy Mike Bell had sought to pry, and surely his colleagues would pick up the trail. She wasn't the easiest person to find, her phone and address known by a small group only: Wayne, (ex-)boss Tommy, a couple lingering friends, certain family members. She wasn't in the Philly white pages, nor was her name on the utilities or apartment lease. This privacy owed to the apartment being her cousin's, which she was subletting while he was out of town.

Out of town in this case being a walled-in "safe zone" near Baghdad Int'l Airport. Her cousin was a medic in the Army Reserve, and last winter his unit had been activated, and this winter he was coming home. Or so he, and she, prayed. Before shipping out, he'd offered her the apartment and she'd jumped for it. A win-win deal when taken on the merits alone—a balanced budget for him, a great pad for her. At the time she'd been holed up in a dank cubby atop a club that had been *out* before she'd moved there but went *in* right after. With all the sumo feet and boomtastic grooves, her bed had been Magic Fingers four nights a week. As a bonus, these dancehall vibes would also impel a conga line of festive insects to depart the walls and scat along her ceiling.

Unlike that dive, her cousin's apartment was civilized in the best sense. Washer/dryer, sunny windows, raised-relief wall tiles, a baby buttress in the hallway. Charm and glow. Every day she loved the

place, every day but the fifth of each month, when charm and glow demanded compensation. Still—she'd stay if given the chance, but was ready to leave when her cousin returned from Babylon. The hardships of packing and vacating couldn't compete with the depredations of a violent desert. Her upcoming move-out had prompted Clark to propose living together, which in turn had prompted romantic confusion. Domino effect! Factor in her surprise unemployment and she couldn't by herself handle a new lease, regardless of wishes or intent.

Almost home now, any news creeps awaiting? She crept around a corner and surveyed her block. Nothing looked suspicious. She hustled to her door, unlocked it, vanished inside. Safe!

She looked at her answering machine. No blinking light. She clicked on the radio news, hoping for revelations. Ears to the broadcast, she peeled off her work clothes and threw on sweats. Though the death of Franklin Hollander was still packaged with the lead stories, no new information was forthcoming. She placed yet another unanswered call to Wayne and Doogie's apartment. She'd had but four hours of sleep last night, and everything about today was taxing and grim. She shut off the radio, tumbled into a beanbag chair, and without protest succumbed to a doze.

The ringing phone woke her and she flailed to it, stiff muscles yawling, but paused before answering.

What if it was a reporter, what if Tommy had given out her number or they'd found it somewhere else? But her hopes were too trenchant to deny, and she lifted the receiver, eager but cautious, ready if necessary to feign ignorance of anyone named Juliette. "Hello?"

"Yo, Ju'lette, it's Melvin." Melvin. Always she was protective about her digits—so why had she revealed them to *him*, of all people? Had she really believed that the dork or his dorky buddy would recall something pivotal about Wayne, something she'd not been able to drag out earlier? She supposed she had.

She glanced to the window. The glass displayed a flimsy reflection of the room, and beyond it the light was weak. Growing dark already? How long had she slept in that beanbag chair? Her creaky muscles testified to a couple hours, at least.

"What is it?" she asked Melvin.

"You heard the news," Melvin said, sounding on edge.

In her chest a misery hatched. "What?"

"Turn on your TV."

"Don't have one."

"Oh!" Melvin said. "You—you're one of *those* people."

"Tell me what happened," she said, wanting to yell it but lacking the air.

"Cops did this announcement, that's what—"

"An announcement about Wayne?"

"Yeah," Melvin said. "And the dead dude. And the Dandi Donuts. But they're done the speech—ah, hold on—" She heard Jimmy's voice, unintelligible in the background, and then Melvin resurfaced. "Jimmy says they're re-running it, part of it—"

"Put the phone to the TV!"

"Okay," Melvin said. Then, to Jimmy, "Catch!"

A whistle, a thud, a scuffling, giving way to the voice of an anchorman in mid-sentence: "—again, that certainly was dramatic information about Franklin Hollander's death, straight from Philadelphia's homicide commander. A heart attack!"

A woman's voice, a co-anchor: "Truly strange, Dave. The bullet didn't hit but the ticker still failed. That's just unlucky."

"So right, Tracy. Still unaccounted for is Wayne Milton, perhaps the world's worst shot! Missed at point-blank range!"

"Now, Dave, we can't simply assume he shot the gun, that's for the police investigation to decide."

"So right, Tracy," the man said. "That's why I said perhaps. Irregardless, I'm sure that donut clerk's happy to be alive."

"As are we," the woman added. "Who doesn't love donuts?"

"My personal trainer!" the man chirped. "He's a tiger! *Grrr!* Speaking of tigers, it's time to swing to the Z-man!"

And here came the Z-man, gleefully: “I’m Gary ‘Z’ with sports and how’s about an E-A-G-L-E-S, Eagles! ’Cuz Philly loves Eagles fever! Fly, Eagles, fly, on the road to vic-tor-eee—”

“Gary?” the woman asked. “How do you fly on a road?”

“Tracy! Eagles fever don’t have to make sense and with these birds so hot it don’t need to! Goin’ all the way! Yes! Yes! Ye—”

The Z-man’s throaty passion yielded to Melvin, who pulled the phone from the TV speaker and said, “Missed it again, but here’s the breakdown—the dead dude died of a heart attack, your Wayne is still missing, and the last place he was seen was Pappy’s shop. Just thought you should know—”

“It’ll be on the radio,” Juliette said. “They’ll repeat it on the radio. They repeat everything on the radio.”

“Oh, uh-huh, good point,” Melvin sputtered. “And we bought a van, we’re gettin’ out of here, we gotta go. Me an’ Jimmy.”

Fear in his voice. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“What the news said. The cops know your Wayne was at Pappy’s shop. Gotta mean they know ’bout me and Jimmy too. We’re hidin’ out at Jimmy’s house but his momma’s givin’ us looks. I dunno how, but maybe she knows too, I don’t trust her. They’re gonna come and get us. We don’t wanna be gotten.”

“In their announcement, did the police mention you at all?”

“No, but it might be a trap. Pappy must’ve told ’em about me, of course he would, I was there, y’know, it was my thing, I was *there!* Hey, okay, Jimmy’s ready, we’re going now—”

“Going where?”

“Out. In our van. Wait! You wanna see it?”

“Why would I want to see your van?”

“It’s cool!” Melvin breathed. “You’ll like it! Also! Also! You can help us out, with, like, thinking. We need that.”

“Melvin, I don’t—” she began.

“You have a car?”

“No—”

“Great, we can help *you*, too. You tell us where to go, we go. You wanna toss around town lookin’ for your guy, we do that. Search and rescue, we do that. Drive and seek, we do that—”

A fool’s errand, Juliette thought. “Don’t you fuck with me.”

“No! Never! *I* wouldn’t, and Jimmy wouldn’t neither.”

She didn’t trust Melvin, but her resistance was flagging. When given the chance to act, could she in good faith refuse it? Even if the proposed action was ninety-nine percent guaranteed to fail? Damn that leftover percent, *damn* it.

“Fine,” she said. “You and Jimmy and your van, meet me at the Spoon in forty-five minutes.” The Spoon was a monolith of public art near Penn’s Landing that was shaped like, yes, a spoon, albeit a spoon standing five stories tall. Hard to miss.

“Oh? O-*kay!* Forty-five minutes, the Spoon? We’re there—”

“Bye.” Juliette hung up and dialed Wayne and Doogie’s place one last time, expecting and getting no answer. Wayne was in one ditch and Doogie was in another. She went to scrub her face and put on warmer clothes. Revisiting Melvin and Jimmy would be less than thrilling, but it gave her an excuse to do something besides wallow in a beanbag, sick for news of her friend’s fate.

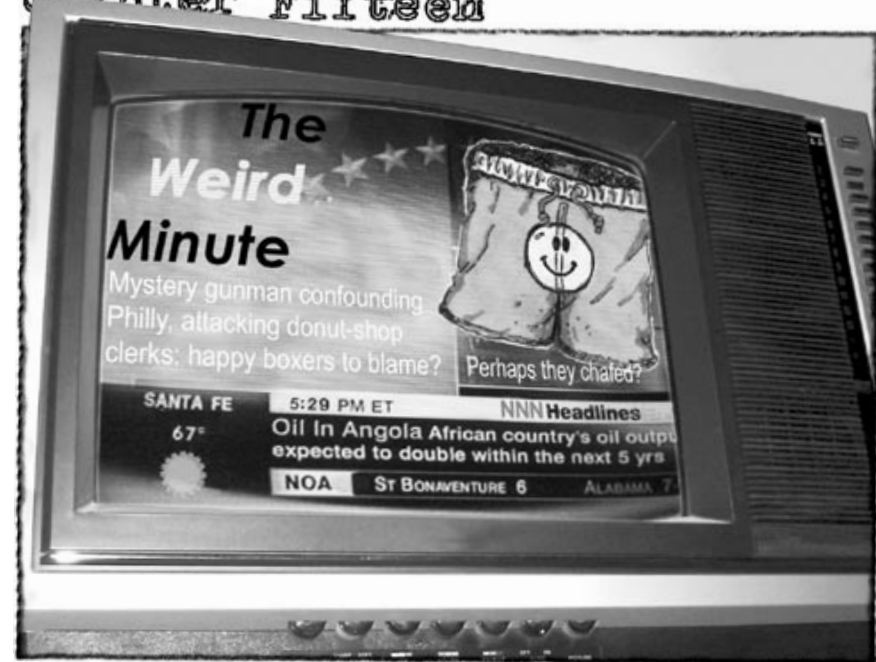


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Chapter Fifteen



concession stand

FOR THE LAST HALF-HOUR WAYNE HAS BEEN DRAWING, not writing, in his notebook. Because words have so far failed him, he's surrendered to a lifelong habit, one stronger than nicotine: put a pencil and paper before him, and eventually he'll succumb to sketching.

He studies his work. Juliette's face, his favorite face. Technically he's done better but emotionally he is satisfied, and to him the portrait is animation, alive with her character and spirit. Drawing it provoked only a mild complaint from his pained right hand, as if his brain had dampened the sting for art's sake, love's sake, any noble causation. But he can't concentrate anymore. He can hardly think anymore. He slips his pencil into the notebook's spine and tips back his head. His eyes become narrow, his eyes close—ah!—and as they close a twitch returns them open.

Beside him Percy is motionless, hands on lap and face relaxed. His eyes are shut, peaceably shut, and headphones cover his ears. If listening to music he does so in perfect trance, no tapping of feet or mouthing of lyrics.

Wayne's trance is a different creation, a steel-wool blanket. Where Percy can rest, where Percy is restful, Wayne is, instead, afraid of the dark. An inky membrane has coated his eyelids, and when he lowers them for a moment or a moment's fragment, he drops into a final and utter lightlessness—not the diaphanous black of a daytime curtain, but a terminus roiling with vertigo. Every blink runs him through it, every blink travels the space between control and release. Wayne's body is sliding across Pennsylvania and into Ohio, but his brain is twirling down, sucked underground, eaten by Morlocks.

From the tempest comes a question: *Is there a soul?*

A meaningless question. A troubling question.

Imagine the soul, clung to the spine like a koala to a tree, liaison between the multiplane brain and the linear heart. And when comes the rot of death, this soul detaches and escapes—to where? It flails in zero, in limbo? No, it would need a home. True void is a horror and cannot be perceived, not when an honest attempt sends airless ripples through the living mind!

Blackout. Breathe. Blackout, breathe, see the trees stream by in a skeletal swim. Wayne's scabbed chest prickles and subsides, prickles and subsides. He shouldn't have pointed the gun at Franklin Hollander. Without malice he'd held it, without thought he'd raised it. And it fired like the tool it was built to be. Palms to his ears, Wayne relives the hatchet smack of the blown powder and the truck alarm's gyrating squall.

No grunt or howl from Hollander. The gun went *bang* and the man died without a whimper. Even doomed prisoners were given a bitter boon of final words, but Franklin Hollander was robbed, by Wayne's hand, of that last allowance, of that most extreme unction.

Is there a soul? Wayne cannot picture Hollander's death face. Truly he'd rather not, but tries all the same. Nothing comes. The data is corrupted in his mind, corrupted by his mind. The gun had gone off,

the bullet had struck, and instantly it seemed he was upright and blinking, a dead man slumped at his feet. Here is the gap in the record, the memory scar—because Hollander's body had been overtop him, yes, and before rising to a stance he must have thrown off its hollow weight. Remember?

Is there a soul? The question persists. The entire corporeal becomes corpse alone, and without divinity there is only an end. But divinity is no guessing game, nor are its riches bestowed or denied by anything mortal. Can a human jury keep heaven's promises? Has a human jury authored them?

The gun, he'd kept the gun, running to the Dandi Donuts he'd kept it, and again he'd used it to threaten. He'd threatened for a good cause, he'd threatened to rescue. Souls to save. After he'd dropped the gun, after that cashier had grabbed it and trained it on him, he should've stepped up, should've pressed his face into the carefree barrel and fixed a fiery glare to the old man. *Shoot, I dare you. Flip the safety, cock the hammer, pull the trigger. Whatever it takes. Let's be men together, you and I.*

The question returns, *is there, is there, soul, a soul?* and in the dark turbulence there is nothing to absorb or diffuse it. It rackets from black wall to black wall and through the black between, and although the mind's eye is sacked and shuttered, the mind's ear is rocked by a thousand refractions of the same inquisition.

*Is there a sou—*stop it! People have torn out eyes in pursuit of an answer that religions great and small presume to know. Acolytes preach a dream of holy industry, a foundry of souls, angels with ladles. Wayne cannot join with religion. Religion is a splintered crutch that bloodies the hand, a contagious collection of love songs and power ballads, a sanctimonious notary public. The souls of religion owe fealty to specific and exclusionary writs, these thin souls are bound to cant and contract. Faith is a magnet in full, a sphere of attraction and repulsion, the purest and grandest form of apartheid. St. Peter pops the lock and rubs your head, and dog-like you thrill with satisfaction and trot through the gate, past the shrouded homeless who trusted a miscreant tout.

Pick a winner or be condemned: Yahweh, Osiris, or Ahura Mazda, flanked by majestic and terrible seraphim. Roll call in Paradise—claws, trunks, tails in the air, Coyote, Ganesh, Damballah! Variations on a mystical theme, the nominals of salvation, Jesus feeding sexy raisins to martyred saints. Sit, traveller, for mint tea with Mohammed, perpetual peace be upon him. Exit the medina, turn left at the ziggurat, take the tube to the River Styx, don't forget to bring a bone or two for Cerberus. Or must we stay beaten and earthbound, reincarnated as beast and fool, as slave and king? As a giver of torment and a taker of grace? Awaiting for many, the hell of the unwanted.

Is Elysium a prison planet ruled by tentacled psychic emperors? Is hominid life force culled and dispersed as a gaseous cloud on Jupiter's bloody face?

Theories, a pickled crock of theories. Dozens of them. Hundreds. Tally past the eras, past time recorded and time not, and there are thousands. And a thousand theories can whirl like a typhoon, but there is an eye to the storm, a hush in the center, and this hush whispers a reckoning of all which circles it.

It whispers: “ ”

Nothing.

What Wayne sees inside the darkness, what Wayne has given Hollander for time unending. Nothing.


He breaks apart and reconsiders the word. Is it childish to fear a word, just a word? Even if this word, sundered, regains its power?

Nothing. No thing.

No thing, no things.

No pulse, no embrace, no hope of warmth.

Simply and forever: nothing.



When his head stopped spinning, minutes-hours-moments later, Wayne opened his eyes, popped his ears, and looked out the window at a receding straggle of daylight. He turned the other way and saw that Percy was awake and alert, crossword magazine propped on his knee, reading lamp dropping a yellow circle.

“Lookin’ like a cat attack!” Percy closed the magazine and pointed to Wayne’s face. “Meow!”

“What?”

“Those lines on your face,” Percy explained. “What you get for hogging the heat vent with it.”

“Oh.” From chin to cheekbone on the right side, Wayne traced his finger along a set of embedded grooves.

“Wave good-bye to Youngstown,” Percy said.

“Youngstown?”

“We pulled out of the depot a few minutes ago and now we’re back on the highway.” Percy’s tone was one of narration, like it was storytime and Wayne needed a recap. “Short layover, though I feared it was gonna be longer—dogs were sniffing the bus in the next bay, the passengers herded off for your typical unconstitutional state police drug check. But they didn’t move on us—good for you and Johnnie, sleepin’ as you were.” Percy nodded in Johnnie’s direction. “As grandpa still is.”

Police. Dogs. Looking for drugs. Looking for Wayne, too? Doubtful, hundreds of miles from Philadelphia. Doubtful, in Youngstown. City come, city go. Before Youngstown, Pittsburgh. Soon to come, Cleveland. “We’re in Ohio.”

“The heart of it all,” Percy said. “You hungry?”

Wayne was, and Percy split the last of his Little Debbie cakes with him. *Again we break cake, you and I.* Then they got to talking. Or Percy got to talking and Wayne got to listening.

An effusive guy, Percy. Prodigiously gifted with gab. Shortly into their lopsided chat, Wayne realized the man had no plan to clam up, even with Wayne's contributions limited to nods, affirmations, and the occasional terse rejoinder. Unfazed by this reticence, Percy flowed free-form: observations about kids, morals, mores; musings on politics; then an offhand detour into his life story, or the stories surrounding his life. And now he was talking about his birth, or the stories surrounding his birth?

"...*that* is a funny thing, inventing my own conception, the nuance of it. Origin of me, accident or mistake? Evolution or intelligent design?" Percy gave a short laugh. "I can try and imagine what might've happened, but it's just fantasy. Honestly, what do I know about Thailand? Almost nothing, and I guess that's intentional. But I imagine my father—ooh, I'm boring you, ain't I."

Wayne's eyes were to the window. Sun gone, sky soupy, evening piling on. All his blackouts, all that wastrel sleep, and it had become so late so soon, valuable hours and miles snapping by. Then he heard Percy's question and answered belatedly, "Mm-hm, sure." He realized his mistake. "Oh—no, I'm not bored. Out of it for a second, that's all."

"Ha!" Percy said. "Don't lie, man."

"Trust me, I'm not bored." And in truth Wayne wanted Percy to continue, because it took his mind off himself and his responsibilities. He was a procrastinator to the last.

"Ah, even *I'm* sick of my voice," Percy said. "What's your game, can I get some reciprocity? You do owe me, remember?" He tapped his jaw where Wayne had punched it hours earlier. "But maybe you're Mystery Man for a reason."

Wayne said nothing.

Percy gave him an appraising, pensive look. "What about—" he paused, shrugged—"that notebook of yours?"

Wayne shrunk back. "What about it?"

"Err..." Percy seemed uncertain. "Don't get bent, now, but it was wide open on your lap, wavin' hello, and you were snoozin' deep, and I couldn't resist."

Wayne's pulse tripped, skipped, doubled in tempo. He'd blanked out, that he knew, he was becoming a seasoned pro at blanking out. And yes, he'd been sketching in the notebook before he'd gone under, but had he really dropped off with the pages wide open? How stupid would tha—wait, where was it anyway? Not under his thigh, not in the pockets of his jeans—

Percy motioned to the floor. "Look down."

Wayne did, and saw the notebook at his feet. He picked it up, brushed a shoeprint off the cover, and clutched it protectively. "You read this?" His voice rattled. "Why!"

"Was open. Was bored." Percy made a pistol with his fingers and popped it at Wayne. "Was stone dead down."

Wayne flinched and hid his face. Then he composed himself and said, “You had no right.” He was angry, but certain that Percy hadn’t deciphered his trauma. Given the writing’s abstraction—an accidentally prescient ciphertext—Percy would have to be a diviner to understand Wayne’s lost marbles.

“No, I didn’t,” Percy said, “but we’ve been on this bus all day. You take whatever entertainment you can get.”

“Entertainment? You want entertainment? Get a Gameboy or something, I dunno, do more crosswords, I mean *damn*—”

“Ain’t *you* fresh. And to think I was gonna compliment you on your little drawing.”

Disarmed by the flattery, Wayne dragged a fingernail across the notebook’s edge, *shrrrip*, and opened directly to the ninth page. “This drawing?”

Percy hummed affirmatively and pointed to the sketch of Juliette’s face. “Miss Lady.”

“Juliette.” Reflexively Wayne spoke her name and swore he could taste a faint sweetness. Dementia?

“I recognize that tone,” Percy said. “Girlfriend?”

“Not mine,” Wayne said. His back knotted up and his defenses barked a warning: *Quiet! Don’t talk personal, next moment you’ll be breaking down and playing the confessor.*

Percy clapped his hands. “I sense a story here.”

“What do *you* know?” Wayne growled. “She’s not my girlfriend and never was, and there’s nothing more to it.”

“You *are* the irascible type, Wheyant.” Percy flashed a sneer. “I’m done stirring your pot.”

Wayne pulled his mechanical pencil from the notebook’s spine and brought it to Julie’s face. Her hair looked light in one spot, an easy fix, but when he went to darken it the pencil made no mark. The point had snapped off? Time to advance the lead. He clicked the button but no new point emerged.

“Hm?” Again he clicked the button. Nothing. He shook the pencil and clicked several more times, each click in vain. “Rip-off pencil’s empty already? Just fuckin’ bought it this morning—”

Percy bit his hand to conceal a laughing fit. It didn’t work; his body quivered with the effort.

“Yeah, that’s real funny,” Wayne hissed, but a second later he forced out a smile. Percy was nosy but not cruelly so, and Wayne would gain nothing from offending him. “Sorry, I’m not really myself today, if that’s any excuse.”

“The transient effect,” Percy said, mirth still about his face. “Away from our nested swaddle, can we suppose to feel and act as there and then we had?”

An itch entered Wayne’s left temple and spread to his nose. “I suppose the answer’s *no*.”

“Am *I* right now a hundred-percent myself?” Percy poked himself on the forehead. “Can’t say I am, but even fifty-percent myself remains a hundred-percent Percy. Who am I? Where did I come from? Am I comic or am I cosmic?”

Wayne put aside his notebook and scratched his face. He lay back in his seat and let his muscles drift. When he breathed deeply, his lungs expanded and pushed at his scabbed chest, a sensation buzzy and tight. Under his t-shirt, the long streak of clotted blood tugged and tickled at healthy banks of skin.

“Your father,” he asked Percy, “you said he was in Thailand, end of the war?”

“Oh—my father—” Percy said with a note of surprise. “Yes. He was a transporter. Ran trucks from airstrip to airstrip...” He faltered and stopped but his mouth continued moving, twitchy and slight, testing words in soundless recitation. When his voice returned it was measured and clear. “I imagine him in uniform, fit and strong in a way I never saw. Maybe he’d just finished loading up a convoy with munitions or bricks, cans of stew or Coca-Cola, whatever it was besides numerous and heavy. He’s sweating like mad in this ancient jungle where the sun is a laughing devil and the rain is a daily flood, where tires spin and sink in knee-deep mud. And night brings more heat, wet heat, camp lights swarming with weird bugs and weird fevers.

“But say he’s done the day’s work, and he’s standing there by some townie marketplace, ready to fall from exhaustion. Maybe he sees her while she’s picking through open pots, searching through spices, haggling with some hoary toothless guy for a good price. She turns, catches his eye, and what

goes through his mind has nothing to do with being a foreign devil, a negro invader, a bone-tired *farang* trucker knowing only *speakee American*, coated in the dust and dirt of another day’s hauling.

“No, he only thinks *oh*, and then *Lord*. Maybe he walks over, maybe she walks over.” Percy gripped his knees and blinked rapidly. “Makin’ all this shit up, clear enough. What happened for real, the truth of anything, I don’t know.”

The air around Wayne seemed thicker than it had before. He folded his hands and said, “If I believe your version, then it’s twice as true as it was before you told me.”

“I like that logic,” Percy said. “What about your family?”

“Nothing to tell. My mother’s in Oregon, my father’s down on the Gulf coast, more or less living on a boat. They’re divorced, they don’t talk to each other. Barely talk to me, these days.” While saying this Wayne grew ashamed, but of what he didn’t care to delve. “They’re healthy, I’m glad for that.”

“Living on a boat,” Percy said. “Go figure.”

Half-snappish, Wayne asked Percy, “What’s to figure?”

“It’s the parrothead dream, isn’t it?” Percy grinned and tapped a finger to Wayne’s shoulder. “This white-man fascination with floating about, island to island, flip to flop, like some flaccid, pasty plank of driftwood—”

“I see you’ve actually *met* my father,” Wayne said.

Percy responded by squinting his eyes and pursing his lips, like he couldn’t decide if Wayne’s remark was in jest, in earnest, or pinned between. “Didn’t mean to say it that way.”

“That’s fine. But I don’t see what’s so white-man about boats.”

“The economics,” Percy said.

“So it ain’t racial, it’s about being rich.”

“There’s also this chemistry trick. Take a fifty-foot yacht, add a black guy, and watch the cops emerge from thin air.”

“You’re mixing issues,” Wayne said. “Look, I grew up hearing that black people were scared of water, black people don’t sail, crap like that. And here’s you, reinforcing it, saying blacks don’t do boats. What about those all-black cruise ships?”

“I didn’t say *anything* like that,” Percy said gruffly, squinting at Wayne. “Africans were fishing from boats ten thousand years ago, African-Americans are fishing the Chesapeake right now. I’m simply saying there exists a certain culture that, in my view, is pure starch. Big white yachts named *Wet Dream* or *Vitamin Sea*, S-E-A, cigarette boats named—eh, cigarette boats *at all*—”

“My father’s boat isn’t even close to a ciga—”

“Okay, but I’m talking about those special white guys who needs twenty feet of thunderous turbo-charged dick. What they get, a quarter-mile per

gallon? An engine like a semi to carry one scowling asshole with mirrored shades and a peacock strut.”

“These scowling assholes, they come all colors and creeds,” Wayne said. “Your theory doesn’t hold water.”

“You mean it’s not shipshape? It won’t float? It’s, god forbid, rigged?” Percy had mistaken the phrase *hold water* for intentional wordplay. “Point taken, I admit a bias. Never cared for maritime culture, the icons, the histories. I don’t want to know about the captain’s brave scullery slave. The Western perspective is entirely dominant. And the past decade tearing down Columbus—good intentions, but wrong idea, he’s just a straw man.”

“Really, Percy,” Wayne said. “I hope you’re not trying to draw a line from Christopher Columbus to Jimmy Buffett.”

“No, I’m changing the subject.” Percy wiped one hand across the other. “I’m on to Europe in the so-called Age of Discovery. Dark Ages done, all these ports churning out fat sturdy ships. Great ships, beautiful ships, the premier European triumph. You want irony? Couldn’t grasp bathing, but perfected boating.”

“Triumph and perfection?” Wayne said. “Words like that, you’re only feeding the Eurocentric cliché. The Chinese had a navy, a *seafaring* navy, thousands of years ago. Polynesians got to Hawaii—how, did they swim? Lots of cultures had ships, lots.”

“Yes, the Phoenicians, and yes, the Persians, and you’re right, who hates Kon-Tiki? But who made the first ships that could cross an ocean, really cross it, there and back and there again? You know who. You know the result. Slave trade boomed, imperial egos boomed, the whole world order gets all fucked up—”

Wayne hummed a low note, a signal that he wasn’t game to debate, but Percy was dauntless in his narrative, a docudrama of venal conquest: “—’cuz then all of a sudden you got pox-belching ruffians storming every beachhead from Chichén Itzá to Manila, quinine in their pockets and lust in their eyes—”

“Tch, you might as well pine for Pangaea,” Wayne said, interrupting Percy’s argument. Usually Wayne enjoyed revisionist dogma, and always he preferred it to establishment dogma—but presently he could stomach neither. Not that Percy was wrong, perchance the opposite, but his voice of unconflicted certainty soured Wayne’s ears. “Your pure world,” Wayne continued, looking straight ahead and speaking just above a whisper, “your ideal history with everyone in their proper place, it would’ve been shattered sooner or later, was destined to be, if not by the Europeans than by some other gang. Like the atom bomb, it’s waiting to be invented, it’s that stage in history. Whoever strikes it first makes all the difference, maps redrawn across the globe. Just gotta hope you’re on the lucky side.”

“Oh, sure,” Percy scoffed. “Make everything a

recurring inevitability. Make every crime a *stage*. We won’t *get* anywhere like that. Not with the propaganda so smart these days. I mean, how’s this, ten years ago we used to laugh at trickle-down. The country *mocked* it. And now, Wheyant, now we’ve enshrined it—what happened? First world isn’t all egotists though sure appears it, people love their kids, their pets, but won’t look beyond their little subdivision. We’ve globalized slavery and want the slaves to love us, to kiss our ring. Our cities’re crying for help, their cities are becoming toxic dumps. You *can’t* preach fatalism, you can’t.”

Another change of subject? Wayne rubbed his eyes. “Percy,” he said, opening them, “who’s the preacher here? I got no idea what’s with this world. No idea at all. People get bought and sold, they get sick and die, other people ignore it or watch with satisfaction, *alright*. It’s a mean world, no dissent here. Maybe slaves farmed the chocolate in your Little Debbie. Maybe my jeans came from forced labor. Maybe global warming will crash our party. Mean world! But it wasn’t somehow better back when it was flat, krakens and monsters and fuckin’ Shamu snapping at the edge. Fucked up the whole world order, you say? *What* order—”

“Settle, okay?” Percy said. “Your point has *some* merit, but I’ll never go full relative, and I doubt you really do, either. I mean, consider this about indigenious people, they don’t—”


“Percy.” Wayne held up a palm. “Please understand. Usually I’m game for this kinda talk, I am. But I’m flippin’ in and out today, and I can’t keep up. I’ll listen to your stories but I can’t debate.” He lowered his head. “Not now.”

Percy was watching him with an expression slightly but perceptibly different. “Right.” Then he opened up his crossword magazine. “You must be contagious, ’cause I’m getting a mite gloomy myself. I’ll spare you my voice for a while.” A pause before adding, “Though you got anything to say, I’m open. Know what I mean, Mystery Man?”

Wayne met Percy’s gaze and held it longer than he wanted to, no blinking from either side. “Yeah.” Barely audible.

Percy shrugged and looked out the window. “Sure got dark early, clouds came in like a wall. No stars tonight, I s’pose.” He snapped on his headphones, but before starting up his walkman turned to Wayne and said, neutrally, “Keep at it, Wheyant.”

“I’ll try,” Wayne replied, unsure how else to respond.



A quarter-hour later comes a whelp of 1kHz, the bus driver’s voice channeled through cheap woofers: “Alright, people, evening’s comin’ on down and we got a rest stop ahead. Last before Cleveland, and it’ll be a fifteen-minute break. So if you want a snack

or a smoke—or, like me, you gotta hit the head like everybody’s bizness, here’s your chance.” A different voice than before, Wayne realized. During his sleep a new driver had taken the wheel.

Johnnie opened his eyes, yawned, scratched his pits. Percy had removed his headphones to better hear the announcement; now he wrapped them around the walkman and shut his crossword magazine. He looked excited, slapping his knees and snapping his fingers as the Trailhound approached the waystation. “Mm-hmm, closin’ in on Cleveland,” he said to nobody in particular.

The bus turned off the highway and rolled into the rest stop, which was more impressive than most. Not simply a pump or two, this waystation shone through the accelerating dusk: a radiant cluster of snack shops and food joints, flanked by a gas station and a dome-capped Ohio Visitor Center. When the bus parked, most of the passengers went out to explore the complex. Percy and Johnnie stood up and headed briskly down the aisle, intending to do the same. They stepped off the bus and made for the rest stop’s main building.

Wayne trailed them outside but went no further. Arms crossed, feet rooted to the asphalt, he watched Percy and Johnnie go.

Several strides distant, Percy stopped, looked back, and said, “Not comin’ in, W?”

“No, think I’ll stretch my legs—”

“—and smoke your cigs in the gathering night,” Johnnie declared. “*Très noir.*” He continued towards the building.

Percy gave Wayne a curious look, then turned away and followed Johnnie into the building. Wayne leaned against the bus, pushed away from it, lit a cigarette. He walked in a circle of slow deliberate footsteps. The Ohio night was cold and he had no defense. He coaxed a shiver from his muscles; he shuttled his hands over half-sleeved arms. Tobacco smoke mingled with the fog of his breath, and he decided that one cigarette would have to do for now. It was a bad time to invite pneumonia.

An old woman was sitting on a bench some yards away. She waved her own cigarette and called out, “Son, ain’t you freezing?” She was dressed warmly, and her voice was mirthful with the sensibility of this arrangement.

Wayne kept his eyes from her. He didn’t feel comfortable looking into strange faces. “Yep.”

“Least you smart enough to admit it.” She laughed. “So many kids run around in shorts, dressin’ naked like summer, like they so tough the cold bounce off.”

“Just the fashion, I guess. Comes and goes.”

“My nieces, the babies, when they go down to the Flats even a blizzard sees ’em all straps and thongs. You’re young, you know the place.”

Wayne shook his head. “What place?”


“The Flats, down on the river.” She saw his confusion and gestured to the westward highway. “In Cleveland. All those dance halls, liquor joints, youth clubs. You going to Cleveland?” She wagged her hand. “Or you just passing by?”

“No, never been to Cleveland before,” Wayne said, then dragged on his cigarette and swooned. Temples pounding, he stumbled to the bus and leaned against it.

“Watch yourself, child,” the old woman said, her tone not of concern but of pure suggestion.

Yeah, grandma, thanks for the tip. Wayne stared at the burning cigarette in his hand, watched the leaves crimp and fold inside the orange ring. Any warmth was welcome, and he brought the hot nugget near his skin. A few people left the rest stop and reboarded the bus. A few more people left the rest stop and reboarded the bus. Then the old woman on the bench finished her smoke and got up. “Warmer’n there,” she said before reboarding the bus.

Wayne’s fingers relaxed involuntarily, his cigarette twisting and burning a knuckle. Little left but a sour stub, hardly any tobacco left, so he dropped and stepped on it. Then he spied the glint of a reflective sign several yards past the now-vacant bench. A pay phone sign. Beneath it, a pay phone. Wayne’s legs carried him to it. He picked up the receiver, put it back, lit another cigarette. He stared at the phone and smoked.



The interior of the rest stop was clean and roomy, with multiple kiosks selling salty snacks and Buckeye swag. High along the wide hallways, televisions tilted from ceiling-mounted cradles, the screens busy with sports scores, news scrolls, gesticulating anchors, travel advisories. Throughout the building were at least a dozen of these sets, angled towards Percy's face no matter where he paced. He stopped ambling and rested his back against the hallway wall, which was upholstered with a brown mat that looked like the pelt of a bizarre and unfortunate animal.

He yawned, stretched his arms, scratched his knuckles along the mat's hairy burls. Johnnie was still in the bathroom, and while Percy didn't feel obliged to wait for the old man's emergence, he didn't want to return to the bus just yet. His body appreciated being upright; his muscles tingled with fresh blood. He perused the busy gamut of televisions, each tuned to a different station. The set in front of him showed a local weather map, another down the hall was feeding football predictions to a huddle of fellow Trail-hounders, and one to his left was tuned to the cable network NNN, a 24-hour "headline news" channel.

Triple-N, fix me up! Bring on the world, trimmed and scrubbed! The pretty anchor was yammering about a Tennessee highway pile-up caused by the confluence of a freak ice storm and a jackknifed

chicken hauler. As she spoke, unrelated headlines crawled beneath her bust: *Congressional Colonics Ease Passage Of Legislation* ♦ "Left Behind XXX: Grotesque Perpetuation," 30th In Series, Hits Stores Today ♦ *Frozen Embryo Endangered in NYC, ATF Dispatched To Rescue It, Blows Up Port Authority By Mistake* ♦ *Rev. Sun Myung Moon Claims To Have Suitcase Nuke* ♦ *Terror Alert Level: Elevated.*

These nonstop news channels were partly why Percy didn't desire cable—he could imagine himself forever zoned before them, endlessly awaiting each parceled update, hypnotized by their scrolling pernickets, their kicky graphics, their factoidal seduction. Depth, no, breadth, no. Catnip all the same.

Johnnie strolled out from the bathroom and approached Percy. "What's news, pussycat?" he said, leaning against the fuzzy wall and pointing to the television.

"Nothin' much," Percy said, his eyes to the screen. The anchorwoman finished the Tennessee accident story and was promptly knocked aside by a checkered gang of financial figures who hung around for several seconds before stalking off-camera. Then a different anchor's face, a man this time, materialized under the heading "The Weird Minute."

"Cha, the Weird Minute?" Johnnie said, sounding familiar with it. "Funny, sometimes."

Onscreen, the man bowed to the camera. "Yessir, suspend the sanctity and spare the solemnity of your

regular Triple-N newscast, because I'm Morty Taff and it's time for the Weird Minute, your favorite quirky blotter of headline head-scratchers from our affiliates across this great nation."

"He's a happy guy," Percy remarked.

Taff continued: "Topping the Minute this evening is a lede from Buffalo's WBNY-TV. Rayton Patton, a security guard with a notably lush rap sheet, was arrested and charged with the attempted murder of, in his words, a 'good buddy.' But apparently this good buddy went bad and suffered a twelve-gauge shot in the arm. His capital offense? Helping himself to the last can of beer in Patton's refrigerator." An animated six-pack in crosshairs bounced beside Morty Taff's head. Taff dropped his gaze and wrinkled his chin. "Police won't reveal the brand of beer implicated in the crime, but sources indicate a domestic dispute."

Percy turned to Johnnie. "Kind of a dick, this Taff."

"I believe that's the point," Johnnie said, and motioned to the exit. "Let's go?"

"In a sec."

Now on the TV screen, a graphic of a horse wearing a police cap. "Next up," Taff said, "courtesy of WNAZ in the Big Easy, a drunken lad, out on the town, who thought to impress his crew by socking a police horse in the snout. And impress them he did, for not only did one Bart Raney Jr. get a hoof in the

gut, he also got booked for the charge of assaulting a police officer.

"Mr. Rainey's lawyer is demanding that the charge be reduced to animal cruelty, arguing that the horse lacks sufficient cognizance and brainpower to legally qualify as a police officer. The New Orleans police department has petitioned the judge to disallow what it sees as a false and narrow argument, remarking that, with a client like Mr. Rainey, the defense may wish to avoid altogether the subject of brainpower.

"Finally—" Taff pressed his hands together "—we close this round of the Weird Minute with a tasteful snapshot from Informer Six TV in Philadelphia. Gander this, folks."

Percy chuckled. "Philly, huh?"

A photo spun onto the screen: a pale twenty-something crank leering suggestively in a desk chair, his body bare but for a funny pair of skimpy red shorts. The tables surrounding him were lined with computers, papers, folders; clearly the room was an office. The photo's focus was less than optimal, so discerning the guy's face took a bit of eyestrain—but eyestrain was not Percy's concern. "Yo Johnnie! Up there, is that who I think?"

Morty Taff lifted his brow. "See this chunk o' cheesesteak? Philly boy Wayne Milton, saucy in his skivvies, taking business casual to new lows. Police allege Mr. Milton's involvement in a late-night

shooting *and* a karate assault on a donut-shop clerk, and *au naturally* are seeking him for questioning. Nothing weird about that, you say, happens every day? Well, friends, here at the Minute, we're not about the crime or the punishment—we're all about the aesthetics. Note those red boxers, people, especially as we apply a little zoom for your—and his—benefit.”


Onscreen, the photo grew larger, the magnification centering on the crotch of Wayne Milton's bold boxers, which doubled then tripled then quadrupled in size, letting Percy see, far too well, the lemon-toned smiley face emblazoned directly on the groin area. A snapless fly descended through this beatific smiley, and a wrongheaded shift in thigh position would give the grinning visage a most phallic tongue.

“All you gentlefolk of easy flusterment, I apologize,” Taff said. “But fear not! As we speak, Philadelphia police—with leather on and cuffs a-jangling—are casing the City of Brotherly Love for this cagey Chippendale wannabe.”

Johnnie folded his arms. “Interesting.”

Percy rubbed his jaw. “Benefit of the doubt?”

“What?” Johnnie said. But then he grunted in understanding. “Let's find out.”



Standing at the pay phone with receiver in hand, Wayne finished keying in the numbers for a collect

call to Juliette. His fingers were cold and shaky, missing or mashing the buttons, and he'd needed three attempts to get the sequence right.

He put the phone to his ear. A long pause. Then the line rang, and he shivered. It rang four more times and his shivers deepened.

Now the *click* of pickup.

“Julie?” he said into the phone, and the name entered the receiver as a breathy burst and returned to his ear as overloaded static. A computer voice answered, some synthy female, saying *please say your name for the collect call, please say your name*, so he did. Seconds passed, more seconds, more...

Juliette's voice, bright and nervous: “Wayne? Wayne? You're okay? Where are you?”

“Oh—” he began, but could scarcely continue. Tears rippled his sight and froze his skin from cheek to neck. Why couldn't he talk, damn it! “J-Julie, I'm—” he gulped for air “—I'm alright, I am. Everything's all screwed up, it's all a mistake, things went wrong and I can explain—”

“Wayne, please slow down, okay, please?”

Was he speaking too fast? His voice sounded heavy to his ears, heavy and slurred. “Sure, sure.”

“Where *are* you?” she said.

“I don't know, some rest stop. Not for long, the bus's gonna move pretty soon, five minutes, but the next stop's Cleveland and that's where I have to get off—”

“The bus? *What* bus? Cleveland? Ohio?”

“Y’know, the Trailhound bus, Trailhound, I took it to get away, to get out, ’cause I have to get things straight, get my mind straight, before I’m arrested, or worse, or—” *breathe* “—Julie, whatever you heard, I don’t know, but I was trying to help this girl, she was bleeding from her head, and—” Wayne’s senses caught motion and he spun around.

More people getting back on the bus? No, damn, looked like all the people *were* back on the bus—all except for Percy and Johnnie, who were standing a dozen or so yards away, their eyes on him. How long had they been there?

“Wayne? Hello?” Juliette’s voice was frantic. “C’mon, you there? Wayne, Wayne? You didn’t shoot anybody, I heard it on the news, an official report, the cops—”

Johnnie split off from Percy and boarded the bus. Percy didn’t watch him go; instead he kept staring at Wayne, staring without aversion, and then he began to call out, call urgently, his finger jabbing towards the bus: *get over here, we’re leaving, the bus is leaving now, hey, hey, are you listening, the bus is about to go—*

Wayne felt his muscles flutter, all of them at once it seemed, and meanwhile Juliette kept repeating these words that made no sense, no sense at all, and his voice cracked in reply, “Wh-what are you talking about Julie the gun was in my *hand* the gun went off,

of course I shot somebody Christ he died in front of me, on fucking *top* of me—”

“Wayne, listen to me, listen, it was a heart attack, a heart attack.” She was pleading, gasping, and the connection was poor and her cries fractured in the speaker.

Through watering eyes Wayne saw Percy dash into the bus right before the doors closed. Air brakes relaxed and the bus began to move. “Oh *fuck* I got to go I got to *go—*”

“No!” Juliette yelled. “You *can’t just call and—*”

“Julie, goodbye, I love you.” And with that he hung up and ran towards the bus. But he would never catch it, it was picking up speed and leaving the lot, and he was about to crumple to the ground, beaten by a torrent of resignation: *Let the bus go, who cares, go back and call her, I’m freezing, I’m freezing out here, I have to get back on the bus but why do I have to get back on the bus? Heart attack, why are they lying, are they lying? Julie I don’t understand and I can’t stand up anymore but the ground is so cold—*

Then the bus stopped, and the door opened, and there was no more questioning what to do, the bus had decided for him. He stumbled towards it and through the doorway; he grabbed the handle and crawled the stairs towards the driver’s cruel look. Beside the driver stood Percy, who said “thanks, thanks” and grabbed Wayne by the shoulder and took him to the last row. The skin of Wayne’s arms

sparkled and his fingers were laced with strands of torn hair. He fell into his seat and jammed short sleeves against his face.

The engine thrummed and the bus rejoined the highway. The driver spoke, his voice harsh: "Hour-ten to Cleveland. All passengers not continuing to Chicago, change or exit there."

Wayne pressed himself into the cabin wall, against the cold window, trying not to look at Percy, who was right there, watching him, inspecting him. And Johnnie was staring from across the aisle, his mood and manner nothing casual.

Then Johnnie nodded to Percy and Percy nodded back.

"Feeling okay, Wayne?" Percy remarked.

Wayne responded automatically, a quarter-century of his given name trumping half a day of Wheyant. "Yeah..."

Percy beckoned to Johnnie with a severe glance.

Johnnie leaned over and flipped up Percy's left armrest, then swung into the aisle and balanced himself on the edge of Percy's seat. "Bingo."

Percy trained an eye on Wayne and then on the row ahead. "Just about. Wanna check the underwear?"

"Nah." Johnnie looked past Percy and studied Wayne from shoes to head. "He doesn't *look* violent."

"Good evening, Wayne Milton," Percy whispered. Realization. Wayne's spine bolted vertical. "Oh!"

"TV in the rest stop. A blurb on the headline news," Johnnie said softly. "You made national, kid. Or more exactly, you made the Weird Minute. Or even more exactly, your smiley boxers made the Weird Minute. Triple-N loves quirky."

"My boxers?" Wayne said. "Weird minute?" Again with those boxers, they'd been on the radio too. And what was weird about a minute? He didn't know, but it didn't matter. What did matter: he was known, exposed, relieved, ruined. He gestured forward and asked in an airless croak, "Anybody else, anybody else know about this, about me, do they—"

"No." Percy put a finger to his lips. "We're buttoned."

Johnnie raised an eyebrow at Percy and said, "Buttoned somewhat, yes. We'd rather not cause a scene on the bus."

"Although we, uh, we *have* done our part—" Percy began, then looked to Johnnie.

Johnnie pulled out his cell phone, waved it in the air.

Percy breathed in and continued: "—so the cops'll be waiting at Cleveland. We gave 'em a ring."

Invisible bindings coiled around Wayne and choked with deepening power, the compression fast and intense. His muscles rippled, tightened, demanding to lash out, and under this pressure he bit down hard and tasted blood from his gums. The crush dissolved, a metal tang remaining.

He would be arrested, he would submit. He could not fight with Percy or Johnnie, these people who had shown him kindness. They were being fair, they were following code and conscience, they had no choice but to do this.

“I...I won’t fight,” Wayne said, reassuring himself as well. “And whatever the news said, I’m not armed.”

Percy squeezed Wayne’s shoulder. “Good man.”

At this a rage took Wayne, and with a new realization he snarled at Percy, “Is that why you held the bus for me? Is *that* why? Because you have some fucking promise to *deliver* me, to take me in? To take me *out*? Is that it, huh? *Is it?*” Two rows up, a couple turned to look over their seatbacks.

Percy’s mouth jarred open and he looked to Johnnie with a nervous expression. “Um—”

Johnnie bent in and fixed Wayne a cold stare. A warning stare. “I think you better calm yourself. I think you better relax.”

Wayne glared at this command, this order given like advice, but he checked his fury, he forced himself not to lunge over and bash in the old man’s head. Instead he hammered a fist to his knee—his right hand, the sore one, stupid move, pain.

“Jesus, I’m, I’m—” He stopped and closed his eyes.

Johnnie patted Percy on the arm, then climbed over him and hovered his face a few inches from

Wayne’s. “Kid, trust me here. I want you to tell us your story, start to end, right now. And please, for heaven’s sake, keep it down.”

“Time for round three, Wayne,” Percy said gravely. “Your reprieve is over. Why are you on this bus?”



Wayne’s phone call had come while Juliette was pulling on her jacket to go see Melvin and Jimmy at the Spoon. Already it was several minutes past their appointed meeting time, but she had no compelling reason to be prompt, no compulsion to locate the required energy. Then Wayne’s voice fueled her with an aching vigor, and she quivered there by the phone hoping he’d call back, but as the seconds and minutes ticked by she knew he wouldn’t, because he couldn’t, because he was on a bus to Cleveland.

Cleveland! She grabbed her wallet and keys and tore outside at high speed, slicing down the block and into traffic without stalling for walk signals. It was early evening, and dark, and rain tingled the air while rush-hour grievances filled the streets. As Juliette ran, drivers yelled and smacked their horns, and a dreadnaught sport utility missed her by something less than a foot, judging by the thunder of its passing. Wavering, balance and body nearly gone, she steadied herself and pressed a hand to her kicking heart. Then she resumed her fierce sprint towards the Spoon.

On reaching the five-story sculpture, she looked across its wide plaza and sighted Melvin and Jimmy at the far curb. They were resting their backs against a grungy old cargo van thick with gouges and half-stripped stickers for Peter Penguin Pops and Naughty Nanook Pies, and though the chilly drizzle matted their uncapped heads, they seemed not to care.

Their clothes were different, still ugly but different, and their faces were abuzz with the pride of new ownership. The vehicle's compromised status as transmuted stolen goods didn't seem to dent the satisfaction.

"Whatcha think of her, Juliette!" Melvin draped his arms along the van's perceptibly rusting side panels.

Juliette tried to speak, but after her exertions could only wheeze. Fucking cigarettes. She bent over, gripped her hands to her knees, and endured a dizzy spell. "Does," she panted, straightening up, "does it run? I mean, like, well?"

Melvin twisted his fingers in a turning-key gesture. So cued, Jimmy yanked the driver's door open, climbed into the cab, and ignited the engine. The thing sneezed to life and the tailpipe began rattling and braying black smoke. Jimmy revved the engine until the smoke shifted to pearl white, then to misty blue, then to a cindery grime that crawled through the rain-glimmered streetlamp beams.

"Sweet, huh?" Melvin gloated.

Juliette nodded. "I need to go to Ohio."

Melvin chewed his lip. "The state?"

"Yeah. Cleveland. Wayne's there. Or will be soon. At the bus station. Maybe he'll stay there because he has nowhere else to go, or 'cause it's too cold outside, that's what I hope, and if he's not there when we arrive, we can ask around, he couldn't go far, how would he, it's a strange city so *why* would he?" She took a deep breath. "*Please*, Melvin, can you help me."

Melvin looked baffled. "Lady, you're makin' crazy talk."

Jimmy jumped down from the van. "What's up?"

"Yo, Jimmy, where's Ohio exactly?"

Jimmy crossed his arms and bent his brow. "West, by the Great Lakes, kinda under them."

"Right," Juliette confirmed. "It's the next state over. Pennsylvania Turnpike takes us straight there, no turns, one road, easy."

"We're going to Ohio?" Jimmy said, lacing his fingers together. "What's in Ohio?"

Melvin whistled. "Didn't you hear? That Wayne dude's in Ohio and the girl wants a ride."

Jimmy stepped back to survey the ice-cream van. "But we ain't bought inspection stickers yet."

"And," Melvin added, grabbing his hips and nodding his head, "we ain't got reason to get involved further, don't think we do at all. 'Sides, we got our own issues, we sure *do*."

“Involved further?” Juliette cried, her face whipping with heat. “You *promised* to help me out.”

Melvin frowned. “Uh.” He looked at her, then at Jimmy, then back at her. “Hmph.”

“Why the fuck else I’d be here? Awful day like this and you think I wanna *hang out*? I’m here t’ admire your van?”

“I, ah, I talked to Pappy,” Melvin said. “After we talked I called him up. Didn’t want to. But I had to know what he told the cops, it was eating me up. I get him on the phone, and first he’s hurting me, tellin’ me I’m garbage, how *stupid* I am, how he’s shamed to have a son like me. But then he says—” Melvin crossed his arms “—he says he covered for me. He didn’t tell the cops nothing ’bout me. Left me completely out of the story. Even Jimmy, he left out. And he hates Jimmy. But he couldn’t leave in Jimmy without also keepin’ me in—”

“Huh!” Juliette crossed her arms. “Make Wayne the patsy, that puts you in the clear?”

“I didn’t punch Pappy—”

“Y’told me he *saved* you, Melvin. That’s what you said!”

“Maybe I said that. Doesn’t make it true.”

“Melvin, really,” she said. “You think you’re off the hook? C’mon! What about the blunderbuss? The man you stole it from, this Dagget, your stepfather—he *already* hates you, right? Don’t think *he’s* gonna cover for you. And how ’bout when Wayne

comes back, and he *will*, dammit, even if I gotta find him myself. You think he won’t say the truth? He’ll let you and Pappy slander and lie? Melvin, Jimmy, really. Your future is fuckin’ mud. The two of you ain’t exactly crafty.”

“Yeah?” Melvin’s face hardened. “Says who?”

Juliette gripped her forehead. “Melvin! Chowderhead! You sold stolen goods to a *cop!*”

She looked sternly at them. Jimmy’s demeanor had bleakened during her rant, but a dull protest yet lumbered on Melvin’s face. She ran a hand through her curls and hung her head. “Melvin. You robbed a donut store. You *do* understand that’s a criminal act.”

“But—” Melvin said, “but it was Pappy, it was a personal thing, takin’ him for what was due. Nothing like a crime!”

“Law don’t care,” Juliette said. “Law got its own dues. How I see it, the best thing you can do is go to the police and confess. No games, no double talk. The sooner the better, try *now*. Just a matter of time ’til the cops figure things out. And when they do, they’re gonna find you and come down *hard*.”

Melvin and Jimmy brought their heads together and exchanged dolorous murmurings. Juliette waited for the gloom to build and then levied a challenge: “Melvin. Jimmy. You know it’s the best way out of this, you know it’s the *only* way. It’s like they say—the truth will set you free. Are the two of you *man enough* to tell the truth? Are you men at all, or just punks?”

The two boys straightened up and looked at her. “Do men lie?” Melvin asked.

Of course the answer was an outright *yes*. “No.”

“Do men run away from responsibility?” Jimmy asked.

Again, a *yes*. “No.”

Melvin stroked his chin. “Men are amazing!”

Jimmy agreed. “Men are tremendous.”

“So,” Juliette posed anew, “are you men?”

They shook their heads. “Nope,” Melvin said.

“Just punks,” Jimmy added.

“A-ha,” Juliette said, “if you don’t wanna hit the police station, maybe you’d try Ohio instead?”

“Why?” Melvin said. “Like you said, finding your Wayne won’t clear jack for us, it’ll do the reverse.”

“I hate to repeat myself, but you *promised* you’d help me.”

“Yeah! I said we’d drive around town, not to Ohio! An’ now I think it’s better if your Wayne never gets found!”

Juliette wanted to break Melvin’s jaw, but she couldn’t seem to move or speak.

“You got gas money?” Jimmy asked her, and she nodded.

“Jimsy!” Melvin flung a heavy palm in the air. “Yo!”

“How could you say that, man. How? Apologize to her, Melvin. Apologize or I’m done with you.”

“Oh.” Melvin looked down. “Crap.”

Jimmy cocked his ear. “What?”

Melvin straightened up. He made a scowl and maintained it for an imperial moment. Then he knocked a fist to the side of the ice-cream van. “Ohio,” he said, bowing to Juliette, “or bust.”



In words disheveled and difficult, Wayne finished his story, quietly sharing what recall allowed: “...and I still haven’t decided what to do, and now we’re almost at Cleveland.” He touched a finger to his nose. “The smell of gunpowder. That I remember.”

The rumble of the bus nearly covered his voice, as it had throughout the telling. Before starting, Wayne had switched places with Percy. In the aisle seat, with Percy at his right and Johnnie leaning in from the left, he’d been able to speak softly and still be heard. Each of the four people in the row ahead was either asleep or in headphones, and this had helped Wayne measurably; were they alert and nosy, he’d never have talked at all.

He held up his notebook and dangled it open. “There’s no brave confession in here, there’s nothing close. I thought I’d find the sense to write it, but all I’ve got so far is babble between naps. And a sketch.” He felt like apologizing for the notebook’s deficiencies, but why to these people?

“Tough stuff,” Johnnie said. He handed his cell phone to Wayne. “Turn it on. Red button.”

Wayne tried. “Nothing happens.”

“Battery died an hour before Pittsburgh,” Johnnie said. “Totally drained, phone won’t give a single blink. Needs at least fifteen minutes’ charge to work more than a few moments, even if you got it plugged in—the charger I got’s a low-volt piece of junk. I would’ve juiced up at the Pittsburgh layover, that’s if I hadn’t slept through it. How it looks now, I won’t get the chance until we reach the Cleveland station.”

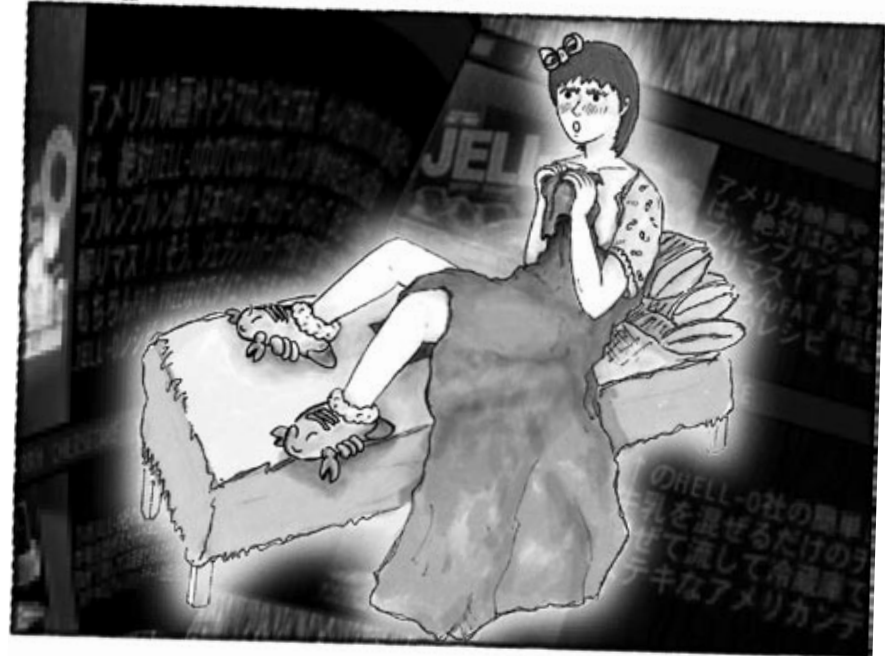
“So how did you call the police? Pay phone? Did you—”

“You say the shooting was an accident,” Percy said. “We believe you.”

We believe you. Wayne heard this and almost cried, and were he less inhibited he would have: the three most beautiful words in the English language had nothing to do with love.

“Here, take this back,” Percy added, unclipping the mechanical pencil from his crossword magazine and handing it to Wayne. “You make me feel bad.”

Chapter Sixteen



gelatinous cube

DOOGIE WALKED OUT OF KEVIN’S SKEEVY TOWNHOUSE minus the Torotex bomber jacket he’d grown so sweet on. Sniffling in the cold, he crossed the street and headed towards home, already missing that fly fashion. He was missing the fly fashion more than he was missing Kevin, who frankly he was relieved to be escaping. Kevin hadn’t been happy to see Doogie. Hadn’t been happy to get his Torotex back. He’d been a lying surly sourball and nothing besides. Crash and burn!

Doogie had come to Kevin's skeezy townhouse about three hours ago, shortly after his rough encounter with the crowbar-waving hardware-store cashier. The walk to Kevin's had been a challenge: at each passing block Doogie nearly detoured, so wretched his suspicions, so distasteful that morning sight of Kevin and the chummy news gofer. On arrival he'd been relieved to find no Informer Six van, though he hadn't expected the gofer to still be hanging about so much later.

Kevin had answered the doorbell with feet slow and face unkind, responding to Doogie's greeting with a languid and underwhelming "sup." When Doogie stepped inside, Torotex proffered in outstretched arms, Kevin had seized the jacket with a wordless, loveless glare. And *that* had been the best of it. Doogie had acted positively princely, he'd been as fair as circumstance permitted. For hours he'd brooked Kevin's cruel funk, gently and patiently digging to find the bulbous root, but Kevin hadn't spoken except to be snippy. Why? Was Kevin playing deceitful games? Was he blaming Doogie for that big, bad door falling on him? Was Doogie *really* being rooked by a tee-vee poseur?

Any reason would be petty, considering that Kevin had tattled on Doogie's pot business and Doogie hadn't so much as *broached* the betrayal. If anyone deserved to be snippy it wasn't small-fry Kevin! Not when Doogie was a fragile bloom on

the devil strip, the intriguing discretion of Dick Sherpti being the only thing saving him from a life-slaying felony charge. Even for weed, dealing was a severe rap, and Doogie had ample cause to berate his pussy McJudas. Instead he'd been the model of restraint.

Kevin The Betrayer had maintained restraint of a different sort: repeatedly, calmly, Doogie had asked him about his day in nicey-nice ways, like *you get home all right? The media bother you? This Sherpti guy, he been sniffin' around? What a fuckin' day, heh? Anything else happen? You catch the news? Funny business, that. Hey, I'm hungry, how 'bout you? Had anything to eat today?*

Keeping to grunts and shrugs, Kevin had steadfastly refused to answer, which was naturally an answer itself. Doogie had concealed much of his anger, or tried to; he'd put forth the diplomatic admission that today's events had been tough on everyone, and they would talk tomorrow.

Now he was marching on home, frigid and coatless and sporadically sprinkled on. Weird weather today. His foolish hope: please, prithee, let the news vans be gone from his place.

Foolish hope denied. Approaching Conifer Street, Doogie saw two vans still there, glommin' like leeches. But he had tipped, and was determined to get in regardless of opposition. Fire escape! That would serve, and Doogie was hella ripe for some

urban mountaineering. He skulked into an access alley, jumped a parapet, and landed his feet to a narrow slot between his building and the next. Midway down this slot, a set of sturdy pipes poked up from the concrete, and he clambered atop them and reached for the ladder of the fire escape. A careful climb took him to the third-floor platform but the window there was locked; he shinnied to the fourth story and found that window unlatched.

How good he was! After pushing up the sash and rolling into the hallway, Doogie congratulated his quicksilver wits. Then he pounded down the stairs to the third floor, dashed out of the landing—and suddenly halted. “You.”

“Howdy,” said Detective Sherpti, sucking on a mint. He was sitting in the hallway directly across from apartment 3B, his butt on the threadbare carpet and knees leisurely inclined. In light of this intrusion, Doogie was glad to see the front door solid and unbreached, still gummed in the frame by silver duct tape.

Sherpti pointed to the door and smiled. “Holy Home Depot, Batman, that’s a neat trick!” He stood up and yanked straight his downer-cow jacket. “Smart move with the Spidey climb, too. Front entrance has many eyes upon it. I told ’em to push off again, but they ain’t scared of me no more, they just circle the block and come right back. Still fun to make ’em scramble.”

Doogie didn’t care to be jovial. “Why’re you here? Good news, bad news? I mean you’re here for a *reason*, aren’t you?”

“I’m from the government and I’m here to help.”

“Gee.” Doogie raised his eyebrows. “You ever talk with that Asian girl, Oochie, Waki, Archie? I forgot her name, and they didn’t say it on the news, not that I caught.”

“Aki. Short for Akiko. Pretty standard Japanese name.”

“Hm, everyone knows *that*.”

“She was a letdown. Didn’t know a thing about Wayne. She’d gotten knocked out prior he showed up, before the fight.”

“But who knocked her out? This Hollander did it?”

“Oh.” Sherpti looked embarrassed. “I forgot how little you know.”

“How would I know, man? How would I know *anything*?”

“Have patience. Soon I’ll tell you all about my exciting day, like it or not.” Sherpti reached into his jacket and pulled out a pair of screwdrivers. “Where you been? Out gettin’ hardware?”

Doogie’s brown bag of screws and hinges was rolled up and stuffed into his pocket. He removed the bag, unrolled it, and waggled it before the cop, the contents clinking.

Sherpti nodded and cast a dour eye at the duct-taped door. “So. How might we get this open?”

“Same way you guys did,” Doogie said. “Just stand back.” He handed the bag to Sherpti, who opened the top and peeked inside. The hardware seemed to satisfy the detective, providing Doogie with a prickle of handiness, like he was a carpenter or HVAC guy or lumberjack. And though Doogie had lumber he was nobody’s jack, Doogie was a fearsome crucible of mephitic energies ready to explode—and explode he will!

He steps before the door, right foot warming in anticipation, toes tingling in magmatic precognition of the tectonic force about to be unpenned. *Prepare, you doubters! This silver-taped barricade shall be dislodged like a rotting tooth in Tsar Peter’s court!*

He aligns before his oblong target and presses his hands together. He tips his head back and inhales to the pneumatic limit. After achieving total mindlessness, a process of great effort and six seconds, he gently shifts his weight backwards. To counter-balance, he elevates his left knee and spreads wide his arms.

Unbelieving Sherpti flits his hands and mutters, “Wait—you aren’t—you’re not—you don’t mean to—hey, hey, hello?”

But Doogie pays no heed, and Unbelieving Sherpti gabbles on: “Doug, please, I’m all for seeing your flying mimosa, but listen, I bet I could poke my flathead through the tape and slice the door open. Wanna uncrouch your tiger and let me try?”

Doogie will never uncrouch his tiger! Sherpti’s mockery will find no consciousness to curtail! Let the harridan flap his gums—and let loose upon the door the massed *chi* of Doogie! Funnel the impervious whirlwind within! Visualize the door unmoored and toppling from the avalanchian velocitude of the Doogie-foot! T-minus 3, 2, 1, and *strike like an lightning asp!*



Sherpti had been sitting in the hallway for an hour prior to Doug’s arrival. He hadn’t been napping, though; he’d spent the time thinking, extrapolating, mentally caulking the drafty gaps of a dozen narrative scraps. That, and playing “Snake” on his cell phone—he generally disliked cell phones but was quite fond of “Snake” and its subtle symbology. Apples and serpents and eternal repetition! In any case, his spirits were somewhat gray. Despite a judicious slathering-on of the Sherpti Way, the story of Milton, Hollander, and Akiko was refusing to coalesce. Then there was Gus’s Dandi-Donut tale, which aided the investigation in no fashion whatsoever. And so darn what if it did, Sherpti was loath to give that creep any credit, even privately.

A mess of reasons had returned Sherpti to Conifer Street Arms. Ultimately he’d come to invite, cajole, and if necessary drag Doug back to the police station, but he was also here to apologize, if only through

implication. He'd learned why Doug's mug had gotten the star treatment at the Informer Six news studio, and he shared a serving of the blame. True, it was Kevin's fault in the main, but Sherpti felt guilty at being proven wrong. For being the *enabler* of Informer Six's dog and pony show.

To avoid appearing unforgivably obtuse at work—always a wasted effort—Sherpti hadn't dared ask his colleagues how and why the Informer Six morning news had pinned Doug Royko's face to Wayne Milton's donkey. Instead he'd crept into a sidewalk pay-phone stall and called Informer Six himself, posing as an intern from a media watchdog group. Under this persona Sherpti could transform his guilty embarrassment into whiny ire, and he'd done so at the expense of the channel's unfortunate ombudsman, who'd already beat off the real watchdogs hours earlier.

The weary ombudsman spun a tale more hair-shirt than cotton candy, a tale that indisputably confirmed that Doug had been right, and Sherpti wrong, about Kevin's passive-aggressive peccadilloes.

Things had gone like this: Just before two in the morning, the scanner systems of both Informer Six and its arch-rival Revealer Ten tagged a developing, promising stream on the Philly PD's 800mhz radio band. *911 call, Tallon Street, medical and police response, possible gunshot, units moving to secure the scene.* Greasy untelegenic backroom lackeys latched onto

this gestating story with an eye and ear for the morning broadcast. Quasi-investigatory phone calls were made to the police department's press room. Quasi-investigatory phone calls were rebuffed by the police department's press room.

All standard procedure, no cause for headaches and disgrace. Headaches and disgrace commenced a couple hours later, four-thirty approximate, when Informer Six received a windfall. A windfall with a name, a contemptible fink windfall named Kevin, who rang the station's "toll-free tipline" to dish out a creamy scoop of revenge. Four-thirty a.m., aich! Sherpti had dropped him home around four-twenty. Snappy little cocksucker.

After thrilling to Kevin's phone call, Informer Six promptly dispatched a lip-smacking hack to further pump their new prime source, who in his passive-aggressive throes loved to be pumped. No longer sobby and snotty, Kevin fed spoonfuls of sugar to this handsome hack, emphasizing everything Sherpti had admonished him not to tell, everything Sherpti was amazed the boy had even heard—let alone remembered—over his wailing dramatics.

And pretty please, Informer Six's handsome hack had said, *could you share a photograph of Wayne Milton, should you happen to have one?* Why sure Kevin could oblige! However, not having any photographs of Wayne solo, Kevin had given this Guy Friday a snapshot of Wayne and Doug together.

“Simple as that,” the ombudsman told Sherpti. “Got bungled up, that’s all—I mean, the photo went through a dozen hands, multiple layers of hierarchy, and somewhere the stickie fell off and got put back on, but on the wrong side, the wrong face.”

“The stickie?” Sherpti exclaimed, spraying saliva over the pay-phone pickup, adding vivacity to an already lively petri dish.

“One’a those little yellow posty-note things. You know, a stickie. This time it didn’t stick good enough. It was on Milton’s head, signifying the guy, but by the time it reached our digital imaging department, it was on Royko’s head instead.”

“Ain’t technology a bitch. Think I’ll send you a shot of a panda but write ‘bigfoot’ on the stickie. Imagine the commotion—”

“Hey buddy, I’ve explained this a billion times already, aren’t you kinda late with the fill-me-in? Your bitchy comrades hassled me all damn morning. You slow or something?”

Lacking a good comeback, Sherpti had hung up and gone to find Doug. And here Doug was. Time to halt the repartee and start the redress plan. The plan was simple: *a)* repair Doug’s door if necessary, as obviously was, *b)* treat him to an early dinner, nothing fancy, and *c)* return him to the station for a second round of questioning, a parlous parley with Lieutenant O’Grady or Captain Doom or Judge Dredd. That

last step wasn’t notably redressful, but Sherpti had responsibilities, too.

First item was to fix the door. A simple charge, unless idiocy intervened. Which, on his watch, it so often did.

“Yaaaah!” Doug hollered, careening into the duct-taped door like a marshmallow shot from a plastic spoon. For one hopeful instant the door bowed inward a degree or two—but then the tape snapped back and Doug’s body rebounded to the floor.


He lay at Sherpti’s feet, his eyes screwed up in pain or shame or both. “Ouch.” He crooked his neck to assay his ineffectual assault. “How humiliating.”

“Can you stand up?” Sherpti asked.

“Depends.” Doug struggled up on his left foot, then attempted to bear weight on the right. His eyes rolled back, his breath hurtled out, and he dropped to the floor. “Sure.”

“Splendid.” Sherpti extended a hand. “I had a date at the hospital anyway. I’ll give you a police escort.”

Even if Doug was faking it, this granted Sherpti a good excuse not to lug him back to the station and into Lieutenant O’Grady’s honeysuckle embrace: the old doctor’s-note trick.



Sherpti helped Doogie descend the three flights of stairs. Then he whirled into the street and chased

off the news vans while Doogie hid inside the entranceway and spectated.

After lustily flushing the squawking tubers, the detective peered down the street, waved his arms, and hollered, “Yo, Don! You should try this sometime! It’s a fuckin’ riot!” He laughed and went to unlock his car. He opened the passenger door, grabbed Doogie, stuck him inside. While being grabbed and stuck, Doogie noticed that the skin of Sherpti’s hands was seriously flaking, the knuckles patched with scabs.

Sherpti plunked into the driver’s seat and raised his right hand, a mint container manifesting in the peeling fingers. Doogie ascribed this legerdemain to his own pain-fogged perception rather than Sherpti’s magical powers. “Here, pretend it’s Oxycontin,” Sherpti said, offering the container. Doogie shook out a mint and sucked on it. Interesting flavor. Cinnamon Refinery?

Sherpti started the car, eased away from the curb, and assumed a gentle coast. What’s more, he maintained this gentle coast. From his prior stint as Sherpti’s passenger, Doogie had been expecting rocket-launch and whiplash. Hooray for unmet expectations! Could be, the detective’s inner nursemaid was moderating his nickel-ride instincts.

“You have health insurance?” Sherpti asked.

Doogie bit down on his mint. “No.”

Sherpti looked askance. “You’re dumber than I thought.”

“What, you’re calling fifty million people dumb?”

“Not talking about *people*, Doug.” No patience in his voice. “I’m talking about *you*.”

Doogie tightened his lips, snorted, said nothing.

“Gay men’s health crisis.”

Indignation spurt from Doogie’s throat. “What!”

“Don’t *what* me, Doug. You know the odds.”

“I don’t cruise, man.”

“Kevin does.”

“Don’t be an ass,” Doogie snarled. Not that he presently disputed the cop’s deduction, but still—the nerve!

Sherpti scratched at his scaly hands. “Look, kid, I ain’t Poirot, but I *am* a pretty good judge of the obvious, and I’m fair to certain that Master Kevin’s the wrong kind of sticky bun.”

“Just...just shut up.”

“Can’t, I promised to tell you about my d—” A car shot from a cross-street and fishtailed into their path, and Sherpti stomped on the brakes. The spotty drizzle had oiled the street, and they skidded freely until the tires regained traction and sent them into a stagger. Doogie groaned as his weight piled forward onto his injured ankle.

Sherpti released the brakes and resumed a civil pace. “My day, where to start. Aki-chan. Let me tell ya about Aki-chan. Then we’ll get down to the

donuts...” The detective rubbed his forehead. “Say, this morning, after I left, did you happen to catch the early news? Channel six? Informer?”

“I didn’t,” Doogie said, “but a man who did tried to behead me with a crowbar.”

“The devil he did. TV really does make you crazy.”

“What’s this about donuts?”

“I shall explain,” said Sherpti, and over the drive to the hospital he did, telling Doogie, as promised, all about his day. Doogie learned about Akiko Takayanagi and her understandable distress, about Hollander’s pistol and health code violations at Dandi Donuts, about angry superiors and the hazards of improper napping. From topic to topic Sherpti bounced, his rhythm and tone easy to follow but hard to question.

After several minutes he halted the tale, loose ends abounding, and pointed through the windshield to a multi-block medical campus. “Here we are, the deep red heart of the city. Let’s get you admitted.” A lighted canopy protected the hospital’s entrance from the elements, and he steered underneath it. Doogie’s throbbing ankle was soothed by the man’s official privilege to jam his vehicle directly before the door of any building, damn propriety and the parking authority. Damn also the incensed trio of wheelchair-bound, cigarette-puffing malcontents who jeered as the car rubbed the curb and blocked

the hospital’s handicapped ramp (neatly putting it at Doogie’s passenger door.)

When Sherpti cranked the brake and stepped out, a curious valet approached, but a flash of the shield sent him ambling away. Then Sherpti came around, helped Doogie from the low bucket seat, and propped him against the car’s side.

“Hang on,” he said, then strode inside the hospital and rolled out a wheelchair. “Saddle up, hoss.”

When Doogie dropped into his new ride, Sherpti pushed him aside and went to move his car from the handicapped ramp, a process greatly enlivened by the raspberry catcalls of the nicotine gallery. Ramp unblocked, he returned and gripped his dandruffy fingers to the handles of Doogie’s wheelchair.

They entered the hospital lobby to see approximately thirty sick people, a healthy complement of their relatives and friends, three women processing papers behind thick windows, and one television nattering on about the power of the Tarot. A man at the back was slumped in a chair, a puddle spreading beneath. A girl cried quietly, a dishrag pressed to her head, an old woman holding her hand. Around the room were strained faces, tearful eyes, tight-set jaws, but no violent wailing. The asinine Tarot show dominated the sound waves.

Sherpti pushed Doogie to the only open corner and said, “I’ll go put your name in. Then I gotta

check on Aki.” He looked at his hands. “And get some lotion.”

Doogie nodded. “My pain isn’t bad. Do your thing.”

Sherpti left for the admissions line and Doogie resumed his study of the room. Barring those too agonized to do anything but suffer, most people were watching the Tarot show so they wouldn’t have to watch each other. Doogie followed their example, and after ten minutes, he’d learned to avoid the Knave, attend the Fool, and adore the Queen. He would have learned how to subvert the scary Hanging Man, too, but Sherpti returned and blocked his view of the television.


“They’ve got your name now,” Sherpti explained, “so if they call it while I’m gone, wheel yourself to one of those ladies and they’ll set you up. I’m off to see Aki.”

“Thank you,” Doogie said, and gave a demure thumbs-up.

Sherpti moved to leave, but then paused, his face thoughtful. “You like mushrooms?”

“Yes, I do,” Doogie said, unsure of the context.

“Good,” Sherpti said, then pushed through the double doors and vanished to the hospital’s inners.



An hour later, Doogie was called to the desk. The lady gave him a form to complete and asked about his insurance plan. About its absence she betrayed

no feeling, and Doogie supposed much of the room’s ailing crowd was in his no-coverage camp. Two cheers for American ingenuity! He filled out and remitted the form, and on inspection the lady tapped her pen to a blank line.

“Next of kin,” she stated. “You didn’t specify.”

Doogie hadn’t considered the possibility of his swollen ankle being terminal. “Ma’am, my kinfolk gave me to exile.”

They x-rayed and found a sprain. An immobilizing brace was clamped around his ankle and heel, and he was given a silver-and-violet foot muff to wear over it. Then they devised a monthly payment plan that ensured he’d pay, *in toto*, roughly double what any insurance conglomerate would for bankrolling the same ministrations. Four cheers for American ingenuity!

“Sorry about that,” the physician offered as sympathy, “but one Douglas Royko can’t do much collective bargaining—say, you look somehow familiar. You ever been on television?”

“No.” Not by choice, leastwise.

“Funny, you look like somebody.”

Funny, didn’t everybody? “Sorry to disappoint, doc.”

The physician wheeled Doogie into the hallway and left him there. Hunched in his carriage, Doogie loitered while important people criss-crossed before him at urgent velocities. Their strides were purpose-

ful, their scrubs and coats blurring into a minty streak, and watching them gave Doogie an acute case of uselessness. Then he grew consumingly weary, eyelids gradually losing their upward function, and he snoozed until Sherpti arrived from one of a dozen branching avenues.

“Look alive.” The detective snapped his fingers at Doogie’s face. “Is it broken?”

“Sprained.”

“Great!” Sherpti said. “Love the moon boot. Lift your feet.” He maneuvered behind the wheelchair and jolted it forward. “Here’s what’s what. Our shy princess Aki is depressed, and refuses to rise from her pleasant and pricey bed. And she still won’t give me any numbers, no family or friends to call. So we’re gonna tag team the girl.”

“What can I do, man?” Doogie said, a nervous tussle in his gut. “I don’t know nothing.”

“I want you to tap that compassionate gay empathy shtick and drench her full force with all you got. The deluge of your queer tide shall confound her pilings of resistance.”

Doogie couldn’t shake the idea that Sherpti equated homosexuality with comic relief. “But it’s not a shtick.”

“Even better!” Sherpti said brightly. “Let’s scoot.” He pushed Doogie up ramps, down corridors, into elevators, on and on for such an impressive distance that they might’ve reached Baltimore had they gone

straight south. The journey ended before the threshold of an open door.

Sherpti released the wheelchair and prodded Doogie to roll himself through. “In you go, Dr. Doug, your patient awaits. Oh, call her Akiko, not Aki, it’d be more proper—but not overly so. Good? Good. I shall return.”

Before Doogie could backtalk, the detective disappeared around a corner. Abandoned to the bowels of University Hospital with neither clue nor will to escape the maze, Doogie resolved to do his duty. He glided into Aki’s room and found her to be sleeping. From a few yards’ distance he observed her, and took a moment to devise an empathetic method. Then he wheeled towards her bed and collided with the support post of the loaded swivel tray by her head. The contents of the tray pitched overboard: orange juice drenching Aki’s face, gelatin tumbling down the décolletage of her gown, a baked potato caroming off the bed frame and thumping to the floor.

“Eh!” Aki cried, waking and seizing upright from this deluge of queer tide. She jammed her hand inside the gown’s front to grope for the gelatin; she found and scooped it out—but these reflexive throes loosened her flimsy robe most revealingly, and this nakedness dovetailed with her realization that a man was in the room, and barely two feet distant. She grabbed her blanket and bunched the cloth over her breasts.

“Sorry!” Doogie averted his eyes and waved his hands. Blushing, he peeked at her. “I’m new at this wheelchair stuff.”

Aki buried her face into the blanket. She was either mortified past speech or sponging up orange juice. Possibly both. After a moment she lowered the blanket from her face. Doogie caught her eye and offered an apology.

“My fault,” he said. “Please forgive me, okay?”

“*Kimochi warui.*” Aki dabbed her fingers to her face, neck, forehead. “Sticky. Everywhere.”

Doogie knew the feeling. A washcloth was hanging by a sink several feet from the bed, and he managed to spin over, wet it, and give it to Aki without further collision.

“Thank you very much,” she said, which struck him as being far too polite, considering his crass clumsiness had necessitated the washcloth in the first place.

“I’m Doug. Detective Sherpti sent me in to talk with you.”

“He was here. He told me about you.”

What had she been told? Sherpti wouldn’t have revealed that Doogie shared an apartment with Wayne—information like that would only complicate the empathetic mission. Who knew, though? “What did he say about me?”

“You are homo.”

Doogie squinted. “Uh?”

“You are *a* homo? You are *the* homo? Homo is Japanese word for you, man wanting man, I don’t insult. It is not good?”

“No, not so good, not in mixed company,” Doogie said with a chuckle. “But hey, you’re welcome to it.”

Now it was her turn to squint. “Eh?”

Eh. Doogie supposed that even low-level wit relied on high-level comprehension, which she probably didn’t have. He’d just talk plain. “Did he say anything else about me?”

“He said...you are a good man, and you will help me.”

“How nice of him.” Doogie smiled. “I think my job is to cheer you up.”

“Eh.” Aki’s mouth narrowed. “Do you have balloon?”

“Um,” Doogie made a face, “I left it at home?”

“Do you sing?”

“Sing? No...well, to myself, yes, but really, no...”

“You can make the wheelchair dance?”

“I can what?”

“Maybe I can’t understand. How do you cheer me up?”

So much for witlessness. Sherpti hadn’t warned that the woman was a little minx. Doogie cleared his throat and drove straight to the root, purging his message of everything but clarity: “I hear you won’t call anyone. I hear you won’t tell your family where you are.”

Aki was silent.

“Where are your parents? In Japan?”

“Underground,” she said. “Like broken pieces.”

“Oh.” Wrong topic. “I’m sorry.”

Aki rolled her face away, presenting a thick mat of gauze for Doogie to converse with. Doogie was sensitive, sure, but he was also tenacious. “Any brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, friends?”

No response.

“Akiko.” Doogie shook her bed by its side-rail. “I know there’s *somebody*.”

For a time she didn’t move. Then she righted her face to stare at the ceiling. “Brother.”

“In Japan?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Why don’t you call him?”

“No.”

“No? Is he an evil, horrible man?”

“No! Not like that.”

“Does he love you?”

Her eyes widened. Then she closed them and nodded.

Doogie crossed his arms. “Call him.”

She shrunk into her pillows at first, but rejoined with a glare, her voice metal: “I am fine.”

“Akiko, you’ve got nowhere to go once they kick you out of this hospital. And they will kick you out, soon enough.”

“I don’t care.”

“Fine! Sympathy is *over*.” Doogie banged a fist on the bed’s side-rail. “Hide under your blankie if you want. I dunno what it’s like where you’re from, sister, but here in America *we don’t care* about your freakin’ family problems. If you got a brother and he’s all you got, then you call him now and let him know you were hurt, and you’re healing, and you’re alive—”

With a rapping of knuckles on the open door, Sherpti marched into the room, his entry richened by a breeze of tomato, dough, and cheese. In his grasp was a pizza box, which he brought over and dropped on the swivel tray conveniently cleared by Doogie’s wheelchair ineptitude. Atop the box lay napkins and paper plates, and when Sherpti placed them aside and swung open the lid, Doogie beheld a pie of many mushrooms. Jumbo yum.

The detective gazed upon the joy and sucked in the fragrance. “Deliverance,” he said, then grabbed the plates and started loading them with hot, steamy slices. “My treat.”

First slice went to Doogie. Sherpti handed it over and said, “Doug deserves this for being a good sport.”

Second slice went to Aki. “Aki-chan deserves this because she’s gonna fill her empty *onaka* and then do the right thing.”

Aki looked up at the detective. “*Nani?*”

“You’re going to call your brother,” Sherpti stated.

She shook her head.

“Yes, you will.” Sherpti raised his own slice and lovingly considered it. “You heard me. You heard Doug. And we’re both right. Doug there—” he forcefully pointed to Doogie “—is the end of the line for people who give a shit. I’m the start of the line. Ain’t nobody between us, least not stateside. I know you understand, so call the bro and start the flow, okay?”

“Start what?”

Sherpti swallowed half his slice with a single bite and gulped for air. “Just do it.” Then he took another uncouth chomp.

Doogie watched Aki’s face buzz and twist; he watched her jaws flex and teeth clench behind closed lips.

“Okay.” She tossed her arms to the phone by the bed. “Show me how to dial.”

Sherpti, his mouth full of food, winked at Doogie. Doogie knew better than to return the wink, for such reciprocation might foment an awkward dynamic that would best be bypassed totally. Instead he smiled grimly and ate his exquisitely delicious pizza in silence.

“*Aki desu.*” It’s Aki.

“Aki-chan! What time is it, are you okay?”

“It’s only evening here, brother.”

“That’s right, that’s right.”

His wife, waking up and squeezing his shoulder:

“...*uzatte!* What’s her trouble now?”

“A moment, Aki-chan,” Kazu says into the phone. He smiles at his wife, doesn’t bother to cover the receiver, “Dear wife, I love you, please shut up.”

For Kazu, a phone call in the early morning, a fumbling grab from the bedside: “*Moshi moshi?*”
Hello, who is this?

Chapter seventeen



convergence

NO TIPPED-OFF COPS AT THE CLEVELAND DEPOT. The bus discharged a gaggle of travelers, filled its vacancies with a clutch of new boarders, and motored off towards Chicago. Among the discharge were Wayne, Percy, and Johnnie, who walked into the heart of the station, their eyes sweeping for trouble. With none found, they slid to a corner of the busy room. Along the baseboard was an electrical outlet, and Johnnie plugged in his cell phone and handed it to Wayne.

“Give it, oh, five minutes before you try to use it,” Johnnie said. “Otherwise it’ll keep dying on you.” He left Wayne and went to scan the station’s board of departures. Percy was across the room at an information kiosk, sipping a soda and paging through dog-eared brochures.

Wayne let the phone charge for two minutes before switching it on and calling Juliette’s number. The answering machine picked up; he left a message saying he was safe in Cleveland and please don’t worry. Then he called his own apartment, hoping to snag Doogie. Nope, it just rang and rang and then the cell phone died. He folded it shut and walked over to Johnnie. Percy noticed and came to join them.

“Thanks,” Wayne said, handing Johnnie the cell phone.

Johnnie packed it up, then told Wayne and Percy he’d be hopping an evening run to Kansas City that left in just minutes; from Kansas City he’d connect with an L.A.-bound bus.

“High time to roll home,” he explained. “Reintroduce myself to the wife and dog.” He gestured to Wayne’s pocket. “Lemme borrow your notebook?”

Wayne obliged, and Johnnie tore out a blank page. He printed his e-mail address twice, one on the page’s top half and one on the bottom. Then he ripped the paper in two and gave the halves to them. “I’d like to know how this ends, and that goes for the both of you, got it?”

“Of course,” Percy said, taking the notebook from Johnnie. Following Johnnie’s example, he wrote two copies of his e-mail address and tore them out for his companions.

“I got e-mail, too, but it’s at work,” Wayne said. He retrieved his notebook and returned it to his pocket. “Be hard to check it from jail, so forget it.”

His confidants frowned and dipped their heads. After a moment of downcast quiet, Percy looked up with a halfhearted shrug and said, “Ah, Wayne, keep your head up.”

Johnnie offered his hand. “My time to run. Let’s shake, boys.” In turn, Wayne and Percy did, and though Johnnie’s hands were small, his grip was strong and assured.

“I wish you a smooth westward sojourn,” Percy said. “And may your movie win the *Palme D’Or*.”

Johnnie chuckled. “Too high a peak. A Silver Sprocket would do me plenty.” He shuttled his forefinger between them. “You two look out for each other. Your road’s a lot stranger than mine.” Then he left.

Wayne and Percy eyed one another. Wayne spoke first. “Go find Isabelle, Percy.”

“I plan to,” Percy replied. “But I also plan to take you along, because my conscience is the damnedest thing.”

Isabelle had e-mailed directions for Percy: exit the downtown bus station, go two blocks to the regional rail line, the RTA, and take an outbound train to a suburb called Laker Heights, a twenty minute ride. From there, walk a half-mile south to Beechem Lane and turn left. In the fourth house from the corner, behind door number seven-oh-two, there she’d be, Isabelle Patel, abiding like a storybook princess, her splendor spilling out the hairline cracks ’twixt door and frame.

Throughout the RTA ride, Percy stayed on his feet, pacing the aisle, watching the windows, drumming on various fixtures. He noted the name plaque of each passing station and then pinned their relative position from Laker Heights by using the route map on the train car’s wall.

He looked from the map to Wayne, who was having no trouble sleeping on this clanky trip, although the train’s hard plastic chairs were nothing like the spongy fabric buckets of the Trailhound bus. Percy felt for Wayne, he did, but what he felt far stronger was precious, gleeful anticipation.

Finally, outstandingly, the RTA train slid to a stop between two concrete risers, and a trilling bell signaled their arrival at the Laker Heights station.

“Hey! We’re here!” Percy told Wayne.

Wayne shivered awake, pushed himself off the seat, and in movements stiff and cadaverous followed Percy to the door. Percy skipped down to the well-lit



platform, but Wayne took the exit steps like a rusty Slinky, one interminable plunk at a time, left hand on the railing and right pressed to his chest.

Percy felt a stirring of concern that intensified when the train began chiming for disembarkment with Wayne still half-aboard. Before Wayne could trip and become meat pudding, Percy went and steadied him.

“Man,” Percy said, helping Wayne to the station platform, “you don’t look so good.”

The train shut its doors and pulled away. Wayne thanked Percy, then stepped away and flicked open his pack of cigarettes. He popped a smoke between his lips, and Percy clucked his tongue and hissed. Boy couldn’t walk right but had no trouble sucking poison. Wayne lit his cigarette, took several puffs, and looked around. His features hardened and Percy followed his gaze to see why: a police cruiser parked on the berm of a nearby traffic circle. Wayne regarded this threat with a face split by alarm and fatigue, his jaw set tight and smoke bubbling from his nostrils.

Percy almost smiled. Not much the odious criminal, this one. What seasoned lawbreaker would stare so openly at the police? Though he couldn’t deny that moving along *would* be wise, and not just for Wayne’s sake. If staring openly at the police was a proven proactive method of attracting attention, exhibiting excess pigmentation was a proven passive method for same.

Where they were, this Laker Heights village some miles from downtown Cleveland, looked like a nice old neighborhood, and nice old neighborhood police understood that a portion of their tax-drawn budget was tacitly devoted to waylaying perambulating African-Americans. Wayne’s every move bespoke self-incrimination, but what did it matter with Percy to absorb suspicion? At ease, Wayne, for here I am, your shifty black smokescreen, your dark raiment of deflection.

Percy studied the cruiser from the corner of his eye and saw inside a lady cop, looking not at them but at the motorists rounding the traffic circle. Relief tickled his nape—he didn’t need his theorem proven just now, thank you.

The train platform was elevated a story above the street, and he drifted to the edge and investigated the leafy town, which was charmingly lit by street-lamps that resembled baroque, upended chamber pots. He saw stately brick buildings with Doric columns and corniced canopies; some were offices, others, apartments. He saw clean sidewalks and big shedding trees and lawns in good keeping. He saw a goodly percentage of imported cars, meaning a tasteful spread of fresh Toyota Camrys seasoned with a pinch of German sedans, not a rotting casserole of Yugos and rustbucket Le Cars. By outward evidence, Isabelle’s world advertised pride and progress.

And here was the capstone! Across the street from the train stop and refulgent in the night was a Cabin Coffee franchise, an institution germane to every spiffy zip. All Cabin Coffees shared the same chain-defining cachet: a mocked-up loggy facade that might have made Abe Lincoln nostalgic for his boyhood home on the Indiana plains—though as this home had but three walls to fray the gusting blades of winter, probably not.

Cabin Coffee's coffee was proudly expensive, as were their espressos and Lincolnberry tarts, but Percy couldn't roust excess ire against a company that dropped the price of all their beverages to a single penny every November 19th, the anniversary of the Gettysburg Address. Why? Because Abe was on the penny and he was gaunt and grim and cool, upstairs in presidential paradise enjoying a righteous poll position which had, as yet, deflected the happy mudpies of revisionist history.

Granted, Lincoln's abolitionist fervor may have been peanuts next to John Brown's walnuts, but Brown misplanned his raiding itinerary and got hanged. A bad end, though more aesthetic than the one afforded Nat Turner, who after his own revolt was likewise hanged but then skinned to boot. As both Turner and Brown were beset and fueled by divine hallucinations, Percy imagined them stalking through heaven, preaching cantankerous jeremiads against God's schizoid way of igniting earthly progress.

Percy back-burnered the historically maladjusted in lieu of the immediate-and-ignoble variety—what was he to do with his distressed pet? First concern, shelter. “Wayne! Standing there like a fool won't clear your head.” He beckoned to the Cabin Coffee. “You need a boost—look there. Let me buy you a big healthy cup of herbal bilgewater.”

Wayne tapped the ash off his cigarette, sucked in the cold air, spat it out. “You sure?”

“Yes, I'm sure. Come-come, it's warm in there. You can sit and perfect your memoirs forever and they're too polite to kick you out. And unless I've missed a sea change, I can't imagine police crusin' in for chai infusions and anisette ladyfingers.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Wayne said, then coughed. “I guess that politeness wouldn't extend to customers who fall asleep.”

Percy fixed a stare. “Then show some strength, captain.”

Wayne crushed out his smoke. “Understood.”

They descended the platform and crossed the street to the Cabin Coffee. Before the entrance Wayne paused, but Percy opened the door, pushed him through, and followed behind. The decor was soothing, though somewhat clunky: the walls painted and rusticated to evoke stacked timber, the corners packed with soft billowing chairs, the sound system reliving the Me Decade. Faux-yellowed prints of famous Lincoln quotes hung tapestry-like from the

ceiling, most pure, but some with the base alloy of calumny.

“With malice towards none,” Percy read aloud while approaching the counter, “with chamomile for all.”

The girl at the register slid aside a textbook and tossed her hair. “*Hola! Bienvenidos al Café de la Cabina, tierra del fantasma de Lincoln. Muy infeliz, esta fantasma.*”

“Wha, why’re—” Percy began but recovered swiftly, drawing on his bank of approximately twenty Spanish words. “*¿Bonita senorita, por qué español?*”

Her smile wrinkled her nose and spread to her eyes. “*El gran examen es mañana.* And I’m deadly bored. *¿Qué va a tomar?*”

Percy looked up at the menu, a turbid farrago of baffled variety. “You have hazelnut coffee?”

She pouted at his English. “Sure. Thimble or bucket?”

After a moment of confusion, Percy remembered that these were the proprietary Cabin Coffee terms for *small* and *big*. He couldn’t fathom how thimbles and buckets reflected the Lincolnite idiom; some folksy aphorism or backwoods fable, perhaps, from the man’s country-lawyer days? A blessing that the workers weren’t forced to wear fake beards and enormous stovepipe hats.

“Thimble, please, to go,” he said, then pointed

to Wayne, who had claimed a fluffy chair in the far corner. “And, hmm...a chamomile bucket for him, for here.”

“Hazel thimble to go, cammy bucket for here.” The girl keyed the order into her terminal. “Comes to four-fifty-two.”

After paying, Percy asked her, “The tea, you’ll bring it out, or should I tell him to come up?”

“*Le traremos,*” she said, and handed Percy his take-out thimble. “We’ll bring it over.”

Percy thanked her and crossed the room to Wayne’s corner. “Good eye, you got the best chair in the joint.”

Wayne looked to the window. “The passing of time.”

Percy nodded without bothering to comprehend. “I got you some chamomile tea, they’ll bring it out. I’m off to Isabelle’s.”

Wayne breathed in, squeezed his eyes. “This is goodbye?”

“I’ll be back,” Percy said. “Let’s say two, yeah, about two hours. To check up on you, see if you found the answers.”

Wayne looked at him with unguarded tenderness. “Isabelle won’t mind?”

“Not if she’s the girl I know.” Percy clasped his hands and laughed. “Big *if*, you’re thinking. All’s a mystery!”

“I see.” Wayne’s face was dark, his aspect solemn.


A staffer came by and dropped off the herbal bucket.

“Thanks,” Wayne said, sitting up and spinning the mug to face him. A quote was printed along the outer circumference, a ribbon of text just below the rim, and he read it aloud: “If this is coffee, please bring me some tea, but if this is tea, please bring me some coffee—A. Lincoln.” He cocked his head. “Nah.”

Percy laughed. “In here, who knows.” He tapped a finger to Wayne’s notebook. “Good luck, Wayne. Dare to do your duty as you understand it.”

“Good luck to you, too.”

“Mm, but I hope I don’t need it,” Percy said. He swigged his thimble, tightened his knapsack straps, and embarked on the last leg of his journey.



It could have been the herbal bucket. It could’ve been the feckless tunes of the Thompson Twins, Mr. Mister, and The Bangles. It could have been the spirit of Honest Abe entering his body and preternaturally powering his pencil. Whatever it was, the effect was real, and the sentences built and piled upon themselves, and two hours past Percy’s departure Wayne was done, his statement spilling over twelve little notebook pages.

He signed at the end, flipped back to the beginning, and read the work in full. Then he read it twice again. The words were stilted but harbored no

lie; any omission on the paper was an omission in his head. All he could recall, and all he believed as true, was committed to these pages.

The photogenic staff of three perky girls and a soul-patched barista hadn’t given him any guff, not even when he’d gone outside, smoked two cigarettes, and returned to his big, soft chair without making a new purchase. So Percy was right about their politeness. After a couple more of these cigarette breaks, though, Wayne’s personal sense of etiquette (and frosty skin from standing in the cold, puff-puff-puffing) compelled him to buy a second “bucket” of tea from the roving server, which dwindled his cash to three dollars. Never before had tea tasted so fine, and he drained the hot mug with a throat-searing fervency.

His throat good and wet, he slipped out for yet another smoke. Halfway through it a notion arose, and coming back inside he went to the register and asked the counterperson if a Zing-It CopyShop or similar place was nearby. She looked up from a textbook and folded her arms. “¿Dónde está Zing-It, sí? ¿Fotocopias, sí?”

Wayne drew back. “Y-yeah, photocopies.”

The girl unfolded her arms and drummed her fingers on the counter. “Down the road a mile, next to the Applebee’s.”

“Thanks!” he said, then reconsidered. “*Gracias.*”

He returned to his chair and revised his statement

to fit his developing notion: the Zing-It CopyShop would have fax service, and he could take the twelve pages of his statement, transfer them to regular copy paper, and Zing Them to the Philadelphia police. Such a transmission would be irreversible, and that was the point.

But he wouldn't Zing Anything until Percy returned. Wayne wanted him to read the statement, he wanted a second opinion. Before issuing a proclamation to the powers of authority, he needed outside assurance that the proclamation at least made sense. Also, he didn't suppose his bankroll of three dollars was sufficient faxing capital. Five bucks, six, that might do.

Oh, but he needed a better loan than that, he needed a ticket back to Philly. This deepened his hopes for, and his dependence on, Percy's happiness. Isabelle, you best be real, you best be fantasy *made* real—if Percy returned to Cabin Coffee in euphoric style, Wayne could more easily hit him up. But if Percy reeled in with a tale of woe, squeezing him for cash would be rude and tacky. Still, no way around it. Wayne needed charity, and he wanted *Percy's* charity. He'd rather walk than hitch on a stranger, and he'd rather collapse than walk.

A clock was set above a bank of cappuccino machines, and Wayne studied the time and mused on his acquaintance. Percy *had* promised to be back by now, but his lateness might be auspicious. If Isabelle

had been a fake, wouldn't Percy have returned right away, livid and storming? Lateness could mean lingering, and lingering was romantic. Maybe they were on their second bottle of wine, or better—but not so much better Percy declined to come back. That would be problematic.

Once more, Wayne flipped through his statement. Then he closed the notebook and tried to relax. Please, a moment of peace, he felt he'd earned that much. But he began thinking about his call to Juliette, the call from the freezing rest stop where he'd spoken like a man possessed—though possessed by what? Panic, desperation, a cry to the angels.


He tried to isolate and interpret what Julie had said, or what he thought she'd said: *heart attack*. She'd been talking about Franklin Hollander, but the idea that Hollander died from a heart attack didn't, or wouldn't, fit anywhere in his mind. Wayne's direct experience rejected it, his sensory memory rejected it. And even if a coronary was the killing blow, the bullet was doubtless the catalyst. Semantics couldn't undo death.

The Cabin Coffee had grown busier in the last half-hour, with many of the new arrivals being young, sanguine, and fond of bohemian trappings. Wayne saw one staffer clearing chairs from a spot by the window. Another came and set up a microphone stand. Then Wayne overheard a group of seriously-nodding teenagers discussing rhyme scheme and the

agonies of recidivism. He scanned the room to discover that most everyone, like him, possessed some sort of notebook.

So *that's* why his loitering had aroused absolutely no interest! It was poetry night at Cabin Coffee. Wayne had paper and pencil, Wayne was part of the club. A stocky fellow about Wayne's age was mouthing words from looseleaf. He noticed Wayne's attention and tipped a greeting.

Poetic. Normally Wayne would smile at these local bards and silently deride their convictions and exhortations. Now he wanted to be in their number.



```
]] ChatCage ver. 3.2a, saved message ID: ISABELLE.P-B.  
]] rec'd on 9/14 2:31 am - archive is 6 wks 1 day old  
]] recording modes: background ON - hidden ON  
]] captured record START !
```

```
Isabelle> Sweetie! can't talk long tonight. you read it  
yet, my new favorite book? i want an Iorek of  
my own.
```

```
Percy> The Pullman? You just recommended it a few  
nights ago.
```

```
Isabelle> i have high expectations of you, my dear.
```

```
Percy> I thought I told you: I ain't reading no more  
of your choices until you read some of mine.  
I've done your Phams, your Kings (!! ok, ok,  
high marks to DT4), your Lahiris, your  
Nipponese suicide lit --
```

```
Isabelle> ...and I'm still warming up, dearest Percy.
```

```
Percy> You got range, girl, and I like that. But  
where's the reciprocation? I spanned the scope  
and got it all. You want fantasm, I give you  
Due n' Barnes. Killer lit, ZZ or Mr. Don't-  
fence-me-Everett! And I've said it before and  
I'll say it again: Madison Bell, holy hell,  
the loa -rides- that man. And there's always  
(cough) Zane et al (+al al al) should you be  
that secret freak. But you don't care about my  
tastes. You're just trying to colonise mine.  
:P baby should know better, methinks.
```

```
Isabelle> don't give me that lip, and stop being so  
pleased with your own special self. i DO want  
to read all that stuff. but i have no time  
these days.... long long story, but don't ask  
me about it. it's Booring.
```

```
Percy> Ok, I won't. I'm warning you, tho -- you keep  
tossin' aside my bibliographia, I'm gonna drop  
the fun stuff and sic Captain Blackman on ya.  
Speaking of fun stuff -- you like the armored  
bear? Yea, Iorek's all right.
```

```
Isabelle> you ..did.. read the Pullman book! hehe, i got  
ya bad. now you must read the sequel. your  
mistress commands.
```

```
Percy> the one with the dimensional dagger?
```

```
Isabelle> noo! you didn't already?!
```

```
Percy> Hey, the writing's catchy. Consider me caught.
```

```
Isabelle> yums. there's something so superlative about a
```

man of reading and discernment ... i blush
before you, my cheeks a chocolatey auburn.

Percy> Blush that you should, because I only read to
impress and please women. Be you impressed and
pleased?

Isabelle> tickled tremendously. you read fast, you
brainiac.

Percy> Brainiac? Just you wait, classy lass. I got a
new palindrome for you. A loooooong one.

Isabelle> whatever, you cheated on last week's, you got
it from a website, i looked it up. 'Stressed?
no tips? spit on desserts!'.....so you're a
stinking thief.

Percy> Shame, shame, I'm dead to rights. The pressure
gets to me, you wicked-eyed wench -- you're
always demanding new ones, and I swear I'm
only human, and not even half as clever as I
claim! But, I promise, tonight's edition is
all mine, and far better.

Isabelle> let's have it then, my Palindromeo.


Percy> Cute! Ok, "Snug, we fat lovers lap enmity as
raja's eyes ajar. Say, Tim, Nepal's revolt - a
few guns?"

Isabelle> ajar is not a verbbb :P

Percy> You ARE an ungrateful jaded sot.

Isabelle> :P oh, i love it! but i'm still gonna
run a search on it. once a plagiarist, always
a plagiarist.

]] END capture 9/14 2:52 am !



]] ChatCage ver. 3.4b, saved message ID: CHESTER.B.
]] -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- {alias ISABELLE.B-P.}
]] rec'd 10/25, 3:10 am -- archive is 1 day 16 hrs old
]] recording modes: background ON - hidden OFF
]] captured record START !

Percy> So it's set --- I'm leaving next morning,
neurotically early in the AM, and I've got my
knapsack at the ready. Twelve hours down the
westward pike and holla-holla, Cleveland.
Wait! You wanna t-shirt with the Liberty Bell
on it? Myself I've never seen the thing.
Anyhow, hey, you did say -come visit- so don't
blame me for finding that an actionable thang.

Isabelle> [wait]

Percy> Isabelle?

Isabelle> [wait]

Percy> Is it ok? I thought you wanted to meet finally.
Thought you said tomorrow was a good day to
visit. I got your e-mail with your address and
directions.

Isabelle> [back] --- Sorry, was getting a soda. you're
coming!

Percy> Yes, provisionally.

Isabelle> huh?

Percy> ...provided you massage my hurt feelings. I
make my big announcement and you're off
getting a stupid coke.

Isabelle> aww, poor Percy. I'm sorry. so i'll be seeing you for real, and so soon? Wow!-- hard to imagine. and i'm drinking a diet sprite, not a coke.

Percy> What, I thought you couldn't stand that nasty plastic aspartame phenyl-whatever flavor? Please don't go lo-cal on me, sweet thing, I was all set to commandeer your kitchen and cook you a fine fatback feast. Just point me to the butcher and unroll your paper towels, 'cause it's gonna get messssy.. ok, I get carried away by dreams of barbecue.

Isabelle> --- yeah, the soda tastes crappy. Found it in the back of the fridge, the only drink there. i must have bought it a long time ago on a whim, kinda yuck.

Percy> ..uh? I'm kidding, I don't care what you drink, crazy lady. It ain't no transgression.

Isabelle> So your bus leaves tomorrow morning?

Percy> Like I said!

Isabelle> cool, very cool. i think i am going to get some heavy duty beauty sleep to prepare for your arrival. plus clean up some, wouldn't want you to see my place a mess.

Percy> All right. Then tomorrow evening we shall meet, and it will be fun, fun, fun til daddy takes the T-bird away.

Isabelle> Yes it will, yeppers!

Percy> Thus, my dear, expect my hand on your knocker(s) in approx. 1.6 days +/- an


indeterminate expanse of time not to exceed a tribble of geological reckoning.

Isabelle> good night, you wacko.

Percy> likewise.....sugar.

]] END capture 10/25 3:32 am !

]] close program .



702 Beechem Lane. Red-bricked Colonial. A large Land Rover Butte sport-utility in the driveway. Percy thought he might have the wrong address—Isabelle wouldn't drive this brawny guzzler, and she couldn't possibly *own* it. More than once she'd condemned such overstuffed vehicles, her opinion unmoved by Cleveland's long season of lake-effect snowfall.

Maybe it was a friend's Land Rover, maybe she'd invited backup in case Percy turned out to be a dangerous freak.

Nervous, he was so nervous. He was at her door, standing between yellow lanterns. The right-side lantern had a splintered pane that glowed white along the fracture. Hey, Percy, waitin' for Halloween? Christmas? Do it. Knock knock. Hand up, knuckles to door.

Percy? You there? Showtime, big man! C'mon, Percy, hit it already. Thirteen hours' travel and now you choke?

In a second, allow him a second to stop this shaking.

A mailbox was fixed beside the door. He glanced at it. Then he stared at it. What's that name there?

Bowman. Bowman?

Tumblers clicked, latches flicked, hinges creaked. The door opened. Very bright inside, the shine flooding his vision.

Cutting through the glare was the thick silhouette of a man. “Percy Morrison,” the man said, half-question, half-oath.

Percy made no response. Who the fuck was this?

The man nudged his head forward. He studied Percy for several seconds. Then he winced and blew out a long sigh. “Handsome kid.”

Percy felt the embrace of danger. “Who are you?”

“Oh.” The man frowned. “Don’t you know?”

Percy didn’t want to know.

“I’m Chester Bowman,” the man said. “This is my house.”

Percy stepped back. Chester Bowman’s open doorway was a portal into space, the swift helpless violence of space; the flare and the nova, sucking the atmosphere, crazing the light.

“Isabelle’s husband.”

Speech was impossible. Percy’s mouth bit at air, his lungs forbade him breath, his vocal cords slackened.

“Confused, huh? Not so smart now, huh?” Chester Bowman said. “I told you to come. I knew she was messing on the Internet, so I put a text-capture program on the computer. Child’s play.” Chester Bowman’s mouth flexed to a crooked sneer and then

relaxed. “She ain’t here anymore. Those last few chats, I took her place. Past two weeks you’ve been humping to me.”

“What, n-no—” Percy stuttered, his voice frail and ghostly. “You’re, you’re lying.”

“Percy, come see me,” Chester Bowman sang in falsetto.

Poison flooded Percy’s memories, and each sweet keystroke went to rot. He hadn’t noticed? He hadn’t noticed!

Lord above, how could he not have noticed?

“Why,” he whispered, “why did you make me come?”

“I had to see who did this to me.”

“I did *nothing* to you!”


“You ruined my life, kid,” Chester Bowman said.

Strength departing, gravity increasing, Percy struggled against the need to fall. The pack on his shoulders grew heavier and brought him to his knees.

“Get the fuck up,” Chester Bowman said. “You *ruined* my life.”

Percy obeyed. He stood. Then he turned from Chester Bowman, who demanded he stay and listen. But Percy wouldn’t listen to any more of this, he wanted nothing of this. He walked away from Chester Bowman’s house, too weak to run, uncaring if a knife or bullet or bat came for his back. After several minutes of short steps and shorter breaths, he left the sidewalk, crawled into a wooded plot

between two darkened buildings, and cried. He stayed there for almost two hours.



Some of the poems were good. So far, five people had stood at the microphone and read. None had been remarkably commanding or charismatic, but their voices were clear and their works never less than competent.

A sixth person was paging through a composition book and preparing to take the podium when the Cabin Coffee's door opened. This door had been flapping constantly with poets and their friends passing in and out, smoking and chatting. Not a dramatic event, the door opening—not until Wayne glanced over to see Percy stepping inside.

The look on Percy's face scared Wayne; it was fully unlike any expression he'd seen Percy wear before. But what did Wayne really know of Percy? All he knew for sure was that the man approaching his corner was not the one who'd left it a couple of hours ago.

Listless and squinting, Percy reached Wayne's table, dropped his knapsack on the floor, and lowered himself into a plush chair. Wayne leaned in to speak, but Percy lifted a palm and mouthed "don't." Then he lowered this palm to the table and bent his head to it. Wayne rested a hand to Percy's shoulder. An awkward gesture, but Percy didn't shrug it off.

The poet with the composition book stepped up to the podium and tapped the head of the microphone, *pop-pop*. He was teenaged, crew-cut, very thin, wearing a pair of glasses that cranked his face fifty years back.

"W-what's up, I wrote this last week," he said, eyes to the composition book. "Because, last week, the, the Hubble found a galaxy, NCC 4622, and it spins backwards, which is pretty remarkable, I think."

Nobody in the room audibly concurred, but they tilted their heads to him, expecting more. He nodded, breathed in, and began reading his work.

"There are lands—" he cleared his throat "—lands still without roads, where ragged tufts of grassland wedge against bland swells of earth that descend to gray riverbanks and uncelebrated shorelines. In opposition are a thousand cities, wire-tied grids of concrete beset by plumes of strange fog. Satellites skate the high arc of orbit, their cameras panned down, their retinas reflecting a static collage of monotones.

"Lenses pivot upward and focus past the darkness, and in that moment our universe expands. A new galaxy unveils, a convex corona, a whirlpool of gravity gone backwards. One more mystery lining up with the rest, another mystery too distant to hold but as near as the news. A galaxy in reverse, a wonder or a fluke or nothing so special, and at a

hundred million light years it is no more immediate than heaven.

“And might it *be* heaven, this brilliant circle rolling through the richest blackness? Just as the blue of Neptune is a dream of an ocean, and the crystal rings of Saturn recall a horizon wet with rainbows, the colors and curves of untouchable otherworlds engage our senses to the hues and forms lost beneath human accretion. There is celestial music, and there is comfort in cold light, miles above the sulfite haze of fever and stain.”

A flip of the page. “Perfect, this heaven, but for the isolation. A wish for deliverance to an astringent afterlife fades when the opening of a window invites a chill wind to shiver the skin. It is well known that the beautiful void is very—” he looked up from his papers “—very cold.”

Halfway into the piece Percy had lifted his head, and now he looked around the room, looked at the people clapping, looked at Wayne. After blotting away tears, he squeezed his nose, sniffed, and said, “Not so bad. Wonder what it means.”

Wayne dragged a finger along the table and folded his hands. “What happened?”

“I should have known better.”

Wayne kept silent, afraid that any reply might wound.

“She’s married, Wayne,” Percy said finally. “Or she *was*. Married! I didn’t know, I didn’t see.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Oh, me too.” Percy gripped his hands to the table’s edge. “I need—” he looked to the ceiling “—I need some coffee.”

Wayne waved to a staffer.

“Can’t do it,” Percy murmured. “Can’t drop it.”

Wayne didn’t understand, but chose not to ask.

Percy made a fist and squeezed it tight. Then he opened it and stroked his thumb along his fingertips. “Chester Bowman,” he said. “Husband. He knew she was messaging with me, he knew all along. He kicked her out, took her place *but* kept me fooled that it was her. Invited me to come and visit.”

“Why?”

Percy swung up his arms, and his voice was rueful: “He wanted to see the *man who ruined his life*. That’s me. I’m the *man who ruined his life*.”

The staffer came over, and Percy dropped his arms to the table. “A coffee.” He spoke with mechanical calm. “Please.”

“Thimble or bucket?” the staffer asked.

“Bucket.”

She nodded and left.

Wayne’s notebook was on the table. Percy pointed to it and said, “So, *Wheyant*, you get anything done?”

“Yes,” Wayne said. “But don’t worry about it. You don’t have to trouble yourself—”

“Shut up and give it here.”

Wayne frowned and pushed the notebook to Percy.

Percy grabbed it, flipped through the pages, found Wayne's statement. He read it twice, first quickly and second intensely. Then he closed the notebook and smacked it to the table.

"You ready to do it?" he said.

"You don't need to help, Percy."

"Course I don't *need* to," Percy spat, then relaxed. "But I will. I'm a fool. You're a fool. The only thing we have in common. No, there's two things—we're both in Cleveland for no right reason, and we should get ourselves home."

"You know I have no money."

"And no wallet, no jacket, no brain in your head. I know. Let's go." Percy jolted to his feet.

Wayne patted the table. "Sit down, Percy, your coffee's still coming."

Percy groaned and dropped back into his chair. "I guess I should thank you."

"What for?"

"That," Percy said, gesturing to the notebook. "Puts my broke heart in proper perspective."

"Huh." Wayne tapped his fingers on the notebook's cover. "Glad to be of help."

Chapter Eighteen



ouija board

AFTER BIDDING A FAREWELL TO AKI, Doogie and Sherpti left the hospital and made for Conifer Street Arms. During the car ride, Sherpti hinted that he was doing Doogie a saintly turn by carting him home and not to the police station. Accordingly, Doogie rubbed his moon-booted foot and played appreciative. When they reached his block, Doogie saw that, amazingly, happily, the scum-swilling news vans were all gone! Goodbye and good riddance, Informer Six, Revealer Ten, Intruder Two.

Sherpti swerved to the curb and hit the brakes. “Hop out,” he said with a one-eyed squint and a cock of the thumb.

Doogie did exactly that, and continued hopping to the entrance of his building. Sherpti parked the car, got out, and gave a brisk wave, plus several hand claps, to nobody Doogie could see. Kudos, presumably, for the undercover cop tucked away downstreet. Then they entered the building and went upstairs to deal with Doogie’s duct-taped antagonist of a door.

Sherpti took a flathead screwdriver from his pocket and fingered its edge. Then he sliced the outlying layers of tape and spent the next several minutes prying the door from the frame. Wheezing slightly, he shoved it open and folded his arms. “Voilà.” Doogie thanked him and limped inside.

Sherpti leaned against the empty doorframe and yawned. At the climax of this yawn, a rattle began shaking his jacket pocket, and he pulled out a cell phone going *braap braap*. He read the display, made a face, hummed a note. After another round of *braaping*, he answered the call with a voice loaded and jaunty: “El-tee! Mm? Yeah...uh-huh...the brother’s gonna fly in. Tomorrow, late. What’s that? I’m a fuckin’ mollycoddle? Hey!” He snapped the phone shut and rubbed his forehead. “Gotta go, Doug.”

“You hear anything, you let me know?”

“That’s my line!” Sherpti said, backing out of the doorway. “Keep your ear to the ground, my friend.” He left.

Doogie fell upon a mound of pillows and groaned in fatigue and futility. His door was unstuck but still not fixed. While he had the screws and hinges, he’d forgotten to buy suitable tools to apply them. And Sherpti’s screwdrivers had left with Sherpti.

He tried to rest, but the phone rang. He crawled over and answered it. “Mr. Royko! This is channel three—”

Doogie hung up, but another call came on its heels: “Doug, this is Jim Balderdarf from the *Keynote*—” Click.

Moments later, a third call broke in: “Hi! Mary Klein from Informer Si—” Doogie slammed down the phone and lay there steaming. But the calls kept coming, all press, all bothersome. With considerable reluctance, he took the phone off the hook.

He dragged himself back to his pillow mound. The fuzz-lined moon boot was giving him foot-sweat, the crannies of his toes pooling with oily dankness. He considered easing off the boot and running a toothbrush, complete with minty menthol toothpaste, between his hot little piggies—and then a cool drizzle of mouthwash to cleanse the webbing! But such therapy necessitated a trip to the bathroom, which meant he’d have to haul himself upright. Too much effort. His body was melting into the pillows.

Drifty figments clung together and shaped a pastoral, a honey-tongued guru lapping the lake of mantras. *Zhu are zo zleepy, my zweet. Zo zweetly zleepy, zo zleepy. ZZZzzzz.*

Sometime later: *Chak-chak-chak!* Three raps on the doorframe pierced Doogie's slumber, and he opened his eyes to a vision of Sherpti. "Ho," Doogie said half-asleep, "you got another pizza?"

Sherpti stepped into the room and tossed him a stapled packet of paper. "Tried to call but you didn't pick up—" he saw the phone off the hook and grimaced "—but would you fucking read this!" The detective's voice held wonder, not anger.

Doogie grabbed the packet and scanned the computer-stamped header atop the first page.

10/26 22:03 ZING-IT #237 CLVLND OH 216-CLE-ZNG4

Then came Wayne's handwriting, even sloppier than usual.

*This is Wayne Milton, no hoax. Proof of identity:
12/4/75, 987-65-4325, 215-555-3021, 3B.*

What follows is a statement of confession and confusion. As you read this, understand that I will be at your headquarters by tomorrow with this exact document in hand. Please excuse my bad handwriting, my hand is sore, later in this statement I will explain the reason why. My thoughts and nerves have calmed enough for me to describe the events of last night. I will do this as best I can, now:

Last night at sometime between one-forty and two in the morning...

Doogie read each page, feeding each sentence through his imagination, working to visualize Wayne's path: first came Aki, then the pistol, then Franklin Hollander. Next, anger and violence, violence and confusion. Pistol is raised, pistol fires. Death, sirens, escape. The Ben Franklin Bridge, a pause, a vision? Police! Again in flight, gun in pocket. No rest at Dandi Donuts, where a scuffle brings a pocketful of money. Scared, cold, praying for balance and clarity. Finally, at the last page, an escape...

...I went to the bus station and took the 6:30 a.m. to Cleveland. In the fifteen hours since then, my heart has returned to normal rhythm and my chest is healing. I am dizzy from time to time, but my health has returned. And my mind has recovered enough to write this confession. Unlike the dead man, I am still breathing. In a news report I heard his name was Franklin Hollander. I am so sorry.

Please, if you could, tell the Asian woman that I only meant to help her, and apologize for the awful way things turned out, and tell the family of Franklin Hollander that I will do anything to help them bear their loss. God, or fate, willing, I will see you tomorrow.

*Yours in truth,
Wayne Milton*

Doogie looked up from the signature and rubbed his eyes. He flipped back to the first page and noted the facsimile's time-stamp. Then he checked the clock. "This came in just twenty minutes ago and you brought it right here? I don't know what to say. Thanks." A tingle rose through his scalp.

Sherpti clapped his hands a single time. "My pleasure, Doug. Do me a favor and verify the handwriting?"

"Oh." Doogie held up Wayne's statement. "It's certainly his, every respect. Borderline illegible."

"Good, good," Sherpti said. "It's a lot to swallow, hm? I'd love to get him on the polygraph. Trust, but verify."

"Hey—" Doogie extended a hand "—help me up, couldja?"

Sherpti walked over and obliged. "Alley-ooop."

Doogie bounced over to the kitchenette and took a ginger beer from the fridge. "Ginger beer. You want?"

"Please."

Doogie pitched Sherpti a bottle, then uncapped his own. "Twist off," he said, and took a draught. "So it's over?"

Sherpti opened his ginger beer and pocketed the cap. "Eh, I'd say it's just getting started." He guzzled a third of the bottle. "Mmm, that's sharp."

"I mean it's over for Wayne—he's coming back, he says it right here, and everything he did's pretty

much an accident." Doogie held up Wayne's statement. "*Over* meaning *done*, meaning he's clear, meaning no criminal charges."

"Depends. Depends. Out of my hands. If your Wayne hadn't been so freakin' hare-brained..." Sherpti tapped a fingernail against his bottle. "Running away after the gun went off, fleeing the siren—that's stupid already, largely indefensible, but human. Running away *with the gun*, though, and *holding on* to the gun, and then, at the Dandi Donuts, *brandishing* the gun—"

"At the robbers, brandishing at the robbers!"

Sherpti gulped down another third of his ginger beer, exhaled, shook his head. "Doug, listen. Hollander's parents are still living, and I hear they want to press charges. The donut guy Wayne assaulted, he *really* wants to press charges. The DA might want to press charges, too, just to reinforce the Philly gun prohibition—Wayne was jogging around the city with a pistol in his pocket, all the while dodging fevers and hallucinations. Mental turbulence and concealed weaponry. Ugh."

Doogie bowed his head. "What's his best hope?"

Sherpti began counting on his fingers. *One*. "Hollander's death? Involuntary manslaughter if anything at all." *Two*. "Pounding the donut guy? Assault and battery, hard to escape that one. But only simple assault—whatever Gussy's hopes, I can't imagine aggravated. Makes a big difference." *Three*.

“He took money from the donut shop’s register, so we could append petty theft.” *Four*. “The gun charge—” Sherpti balled up his fingers and nodded slowly “—inside Philly limits, that’s a felony. But don’t fret, nothing’s set. He might sail on by, colors flying.”

Doogie wrung his hands. “Helping Aki, that’s gotta count for something.”

“That’s a plus, certainly.” Sherpti finished his ginger beer and placed the bottle by the kitchenette sink. “He’s not lying and actually shows up tomorrow, that’s another plus.”



THEY RETURNED TO THE BUS DEPOT AND TOOK A Philadelphia-bound redeye. Along the dark turnpike the cabin became a barracks, most passengers falling asleep, Percy among them. Wayne remained awake, the lightest nap beyond reach. With his ears dulled by road noise, the cabin was silent, but a silence he could feel, the quilt of a cathedral, that kind of present hush.

The statement had been faxed. He was going back. And he was expected.

He knew why he couldn't sleep, he knew implicitly. His body had decided to grant him a final chance at flight. Not a mandate, just the option, so that at every rest stop between Cleveland and Philadelphia, he could stand outside the bus, cigarette in hand, and think: *Now? Should I run now? At the end of the line I know they're waiting for me, so should I vanish here?*

Percy tensed, shifted, groaned in his sleep. Earlier, in a voice slow and plain, he'd told Wayne about Isabelle Patel, about their courtship, their promises, his blindness.

Wayne had listened, he'd tried to help: “—but you say her parents run a motel, west of Cleveland? Too late now, we're going the other way, but maybe you could go out there sometime? I mean, if what you had was special, then—”

“No,” Percy had said, bowing his head. “No.”

“So she lied. She's still the same person, right?”

“Uh-huh. And who *is* that person?”

“The girl who exists behind the lies? The girl you talked to, or at least messaged with, for a couple months before the husband took her place. That's all for nothing?”

“Wayne, if she'd told me up front she was married, and that it was a bad marriage, a mistake—if she said she was lonely but it was me who gave her

hope—that's different, that's something to work with. You got disclosure, you can help her drop a man she just doesn't love anymore. That could almost be classy if done right, if done legit. But me finding out like this? No. Lies of omission are still lies. It's done, it's past.”

“Yeah, but, ah... it seems like the marriage got canned pretty effectively anyway, and now she might be available for real, waiting and hoping you're not so—”


“—not so *what*, man? Not so what? I feel like a child, okay, I feel slicked and duped like a stupid child who doesn't know his way in the world. And I don't like it, Wayne, I don't like it at all.” Here the discussion had foundered, Percy falling asleep soon after.

“Rest stop in ten,” the bus driver called, speaking without the microphone. On this late run, only critical announcements earned amplification.

One cigarette left in Wayne's pack. The thought came again: *Have your smoke, Wayne, and then let the bus go on without you. So easy to do, the driver won't check to see.*

But the temptation had no strength, not anymore, and he resisted easily. Come morning, come Philadelphia, there would be accusations and flashbulbs, noise and tears, and they would sting. Until then he would soak up the dense quiet, the pregnant calm of the darkened cabin.

He could make no predictions, no plans. His unknown future promised nothing, and in return for this non-promise it forced an accounting of his past, and then the acceptance of all duties and damages. Acceptance or madness, these were the choices he perceived—and, by his lights, madness was a condition and never a selection.



“Are we there yet?” This from Melvin, slung over an old couch in the back of the ice-cream van.

No, Juliette thought, calling it a couch was too generous: it was a shambled mound of grimy stuffing and bent springs, laced atop a busted frame by a mummified floral pattern. Apparently it had come free with the van, meaning it'd been rotting in the van's filthy rear in a filthy auto lot for Lord knows how many generations of cockroachery. But Melvin didn't seem to mind the stench, so enamored was he of his disgusting lagniappe, this putrid bonus hidden in the cargo hold. A free couch!

Juliette had volunteered to Melvin and Jimmy that a thing being *free* has no qualitative influence on that thing being *good*. As an example, she'd used—of all possible things—the Fruit of Knowledge. What began as a lecture mutated, via the boys' disputatious daffiness, into a heated, baseless debate about whether Santa Claus was God's cabana-boy or Satan's arch-minion.

“Are we there yet?” Melvin wailed again, laughing. Jimmy, hands on the wheel, turned around and hollered, “Beats me! Hop out and take a look, why don't ya!”

For five hours they'd been westbound on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, and Juliette's watch was notching towards one in the morning. She reckoned they were three-quarters to Cleveland. Melvin and Jimmy—and *only* Melvin and Jimmy—were trading wheelman duties throughout the drive. Juliette's initial proposal of a three-way rotation had been instantly rebuffed by an incredulous Melvin, who'd acted as if she'd demanded the sanctified reins of al-Burak and not the scuzzy gearshift of some past-due dairy boat.

Pestilent Melvin burrowed in his despicable couch, dippy Jimmy following his own imaginary lane, Juliette sitting shotgun with head aching: not so different than any happy family on a Great American Road Trip. Thankfully the stereo didn't work, so Juliette didn't have to suffer through whatever cretinous music these boys liked. Never mind squabbles and complaints—they were barreling towards Cleveland, what else mattered?

Her plan upon arrival: locate the city's main bus depot, run inside, find Wayne waiting patiently on a bench. Failing that (and Juliette expected failure, she had no illusions, only determination) she'd have the boys careen their van around the bus depot in circles

of an increasing radius until they ran into Wayne or ran over someone else.

Western Pennsylvania was hilly, much more than home. As the turnpike swept through vales and gulleys, fearsome curves abounded in dire succession. Actually not, but with Melvin or Jimmy at the wheel, even shallow bends could frighten like chicanes—these flunkies handled the ice-cream van with no regard for its lofty center of gravity. In a heartbreaking example of education gone bad, Jimmy had told her that the center of gravity was of course the Sun, and Melvin noted that the Sun wasn't even up right now, so what did it matter anyway?

Very unsafe sitting up front, her face a split-second from the windshield. Seat belt, dear seat belt. Juliette wanted to wear it but couldn't, because like her two companions it was fundamentally deficient. The belt's shoulder harness worked fine, make no mistake, cleanly spooling out from a pulley on the door column, but after drawing it across her chest she'd found nothing to fasten it to. A band of torn threads straggled from the base of her seat, waving like sea grass over the shuddering floorboard. Rowdy varmints had chewed through the tether and made off with the buckle, or so she presumed.

She *could* sit in the back, but the ice-cream van had no bench rows, no rear seating, save for a broken freezer husk to curl up and die in. And she wouldn't dare share Melvin's vermilion cargo-bay couch. Still,

conditions could be worse. The rainfall, never torrential, had stopped completely hours ago. But for that, Juliette was certain that the boys would've flipped this high-topped clunker five times already.

The turnpike was dark and sparsely trafficked, with streetlights appearing only to mark billboards, signs, or exit ramps. A cluster of these lights approached.

"Look, a rest stop, one mile." Jimmy pointed to a blue sign coming near. "Yes? No?"

"Major yes." Juliette nodded. "See that fuel gauge?"

Jimmy did, then cursed. "*E* again? Didn't we fill it up like an hour, hour-half ago?"

She crossed her arms. "Sure did. Unless I stuck the nozzle in a rust hole instead of the tank."

He glanced at her. "You're paying for *all* the gas, right?"

"Yes, yes, a thousand times yes."

From the couch-dweller in back: "Hey, what food's at this rest stop anyways? Not some fucking Schnitzeltown, is it?"

Juliette squinted at a second blue sign as it swept by. "BurgerFiefdom," she told Melvin. "That's it."

"BurgerFiefdom? Awesome! I wanna UltiMeat!"

"Me too." Jimmy smacked his lips. "UltiMeat."

The rest stop's exit ramp was a hairpin turn and—to Juliette's expectant distress—Jimmy whipped the van stupidly fast around it. The curve opened to

a gas station, and he coasted to a row of pumps and braked to a stop. Juliette hopped from the van and went to unscrew its fuel cap. Diesel, the belching thing took diesel, its appetite was nigh unslakable.

“Hey, Juliette,” Jimmy said, exiting the driver’s side and coming around, “you want something from BurgerFiefdom? You want an UltiMeat, too?” He gestured to the turreted-and-bannered fast food joint, which was halfway down the lot, about a hundred yards away.

Juliette removed the fuel cap, put it aside, and pulled the diesel nozzle off its hook. “What the hell’s an UltiMeat?”

Jimmy looked about to answer, but Melvin rolled out from the van’s rear hatch and ran up to her. “Cold night like this, *brrr*,” he said, jogging in place before her, “an UltiMeat’s just the thing to keep a pretty girl warm.”

Juliette plugged the nozzle into the van’s tank and scowled at Melvin. “Don’t stand so close, I know where you’ve been.”

“Pfaw.” Melvin retreated a pace. “Y’least should *try* the UltiMeat, ’cause it’s got like a pound of meat total, but spread out t’ all different *kinds* of meat: a quarter pound beef, quarter pound chicken, quarter pound pork, and a quarter pound, um, a quarter pound...can’t remember...”

“Quarter-pound bushmeat,” Juliette muttered and instantly wished she hadn’t. In small part because the

hunting, trafficking, and eating of gentle, endangered apes was no subject for quippery, but largely because Melvin and Jimmy had no idea what the term meant and the wondrous looks on their faces betrayed an exceedingly incorrect assumption.

“Bushmeat.” Melvin rolled his tongue around the word.

Jimmy tittered. “B-b-bushmeat.”

“You’re the craziest lady *ever*,” Melvin whispered.

“Go!” she cried, whapping her arms. “Run along! Eat!”

Melvin chortled. “If only! Please!”

Juliette patted the fuel nozzle and sighed. “Boys, boys, both you outta my face, eh? Gimme the keys and go fill your guts with junk. When I’m finished pumping I’ll park the van by the, uh, the restaurant.” She looked at Melvin. “If it’s all right for me to touch the wheel, my insipid liege.”

Melvin took the keys from Jimmy and handed them over. “S’alright.” Then his face became serious, completely, with a tint of naked fear. “Please don’t take off and leave us here.”

With that, the boys bounded off to BurgerFiefdom, leaving Juliette alone at the pump. The diesel came slow and the fuel nozzle’s trigger demanded a gymnastic amount of grip strength, but luckily the trigger was the locking type. She snapped it into place, let go, and clenched her jacket around herself. Her stiff legs were agitating for a walk, and she indulged them,

distancing herself from the argent halo of the gas station.

At the far side of the rest stop, beyond the white floodlights of BurgerFiefdom, a bus idled in gloom, invisible but for its widely spaced headlamps. Then Juliette heard the engine swell and saw the headlamps swing into forward motion. As the bus crossed the lot, she caught a thin glimmer of aluminum side panels, light-touched deco ripples. Now it was coming towards her, gaining speed, and she was in darkness, and in dark clothes. She stepped out of the way.

The bus chugged past and climbed the ramp to the eastbound turnpike, rejoining a route to Philly or D.C., Baltimore or New York. Juliette watched its tail-lights vanish around the bend; then her ears picked up what her eyes had lost, and she listened until the motor's groan tapered to silence. She returned to the fuel pump, which had stopped at twenty-one gallons, forty-four bucks. After paying with a credit card, she got in the van and drove it over to the BurgerFiefdom.

Entering the restaurant, she was greeted by Melvin, Jimmy, and the feral sounds of rapid UltiMeat consumption. The boys had dragged their prey from the red-and-yellow BurgerFiefdom counter to a red-and-yellow BurgerFiefdom booth, where they were setting upon it, lips smacking and jaws gnashing. While repellent, the odor and noise awoke a nagging hunger.

They hadn't time to loiter, and she wanted to zap the boys with a cattle prod, kick 'em to the van—let's get going, Wayne's desperate, needing help, needing it *now*, c'mon c'mon c'mon—but she restrained herself. Dependent as she was on their good will and bad van, it was best to let them eat in peace, even if their manners were themselves an offense against the peace. Besides, they'd be done any minute, the rate they were chowing.

Roorgh. That was her stomach, gone grumbling. To quell it, she visited the counter and ordered a small bag of french fries. The red-and-yellow-uniformed BurgerFiefdom vassal reached under red-and-yellow heat lamps and handed them to her, free of charge.

"They're real old, ma'am," he said, sounding oddly pleased about it. "From way back in the day."

"Thanks." Juliette smiled. "Fryer's broke?"

"Nah."

She shrugged, took the fries, and stuck one in her mouth. Mmm, a fat, salty toothpick. Nibbling on it, she headed for a pay phone snuck behind an old racing video game. She brought out her wallet, tabbed through it, pulled out a long distance phone card normally used for calling Clark in Harrisburg. With it she dialed Wayne and Doogie's apartment, pleading for Doogie to be in. She needed to talk to someone besides Melvin and Jimmy, to someone in the loop and not simply loopy.

Doogie answered. One syllable, voice hostile: “What.”

Juliette almost dropped the phone in surprise, but dropped her fries instead. They hit the floor and scattered like pick-up sticks. “Doogie? Yo, Doogie! It’s Juliette!”

“Oh—Juliette?” Doogie’s voice jumped from cold to excited. “I’m so glad it’s you and not some media twit! They’ve been at me all day, all night, and I am *beat*.”

“I’ve called your place so many times, got nothing, I even stopped by, but those news vans, was like some trap—”

“Don’t I know! Sorry you couldn’t reach me, I wasn’t too reachable today, long story. And since evening I’ve had the phone off the hook. But I put it back on an hour ago, thinking it’s after midnight and even reporters gotta have some respect, fingers crossed. I didn’t like feeling detached, case something *else* happened, something new—”

“Doogie, Doogie, I talked to Wayne. He’s in Cleveland, he took a bus to Cleveland, so I’m on the way there to look for him, check the sta—”

Doogie cut her off, his voice bracingly quick and alert. “What? You’re *going* to Cleveland?”

The emphasis, that punch of disbelief, confused her. “I’m on the turnpike, I’m at a rest stop, right near the Ohio border—”

“How’d you get there? You don’t drive, do you? Forget that—*why’re* you going there? Damn, you

really talked to him, but when? He’s changed his mind, he’s not coming back?”

Juliette crushed a petrified fry under her heel. “Back? He’s coming back to Philly? *You* talked to him too?”

“He faxed us. Faxed the cops, actually, ’round ten o’clock. This detective I know, he brought over the fax and showed me. Our boy’s handwriting, sure, saying he’s headin’ home. So, tell me, what’s this about him staying in Cleveland?”

Juliette felt like sitting down, but the metal-sleeved phone cord wouldn’t stretch to the floor. “I don’t know! He called me ’round five-thirty but it was a short call and we didn’t get much chance to talk—” she banished Wayne’s panicked voice from her head “—but he said he was almost there, almost at Cleveland. Then he hung up.”

Doogie exhaled. “Well, it seems he got there, cooled off some, decided to return home. You on a cell phone?”

“No, a pay phone.”

“Oh?”

“Cells give me a headache,” Juliette said. “Tumors. It’s documented.”

“Hm. You got change for a few minutes, or a little more?”

“Yeah...”

“Good. I’ll do my best impression.” She heard the sound of shuffling papers, and then Doogie lowered

his voice a few steps, dropping his native inflections for a flatter, darker tone: “My name is Wayne Milton.”

“What, what’re y—”

“Tch, let me read,” Doogie chided, then started over. “My name is Wayne Milton. No hoax. Proof of identity, twelve-four-seventy-five, so on, so forth. What follows is both a statement of confession and confusion...”

As Doogie recited, Melvin stood up from the Burger Fiefdom booth, thirteen ounces of UltiMeat in his belly, three on his face and sweatshirt. Hands in pockets, he rambled over to Juliette.

“Yo, Juliette,” he said, poking a finger at the mess of fries on the floor, “why’d you go an’ do that?”

“Ssh!” she scolded, ear to Doogie’s reading, which had started out calm but was now heated and halfway to bombastic.

Doogie paused his performance. “Who’s that talking?”

“A meathead.” Juliette stamped her palm to Melvin’s chest and shoved him away. “But he’s all right.”

“UltiMeathead!” Melvin corrected loudly.

“Uh-huh,” Doogie said. “Tell whoever to hush up. This is important shit and I’m deep in the zone.”

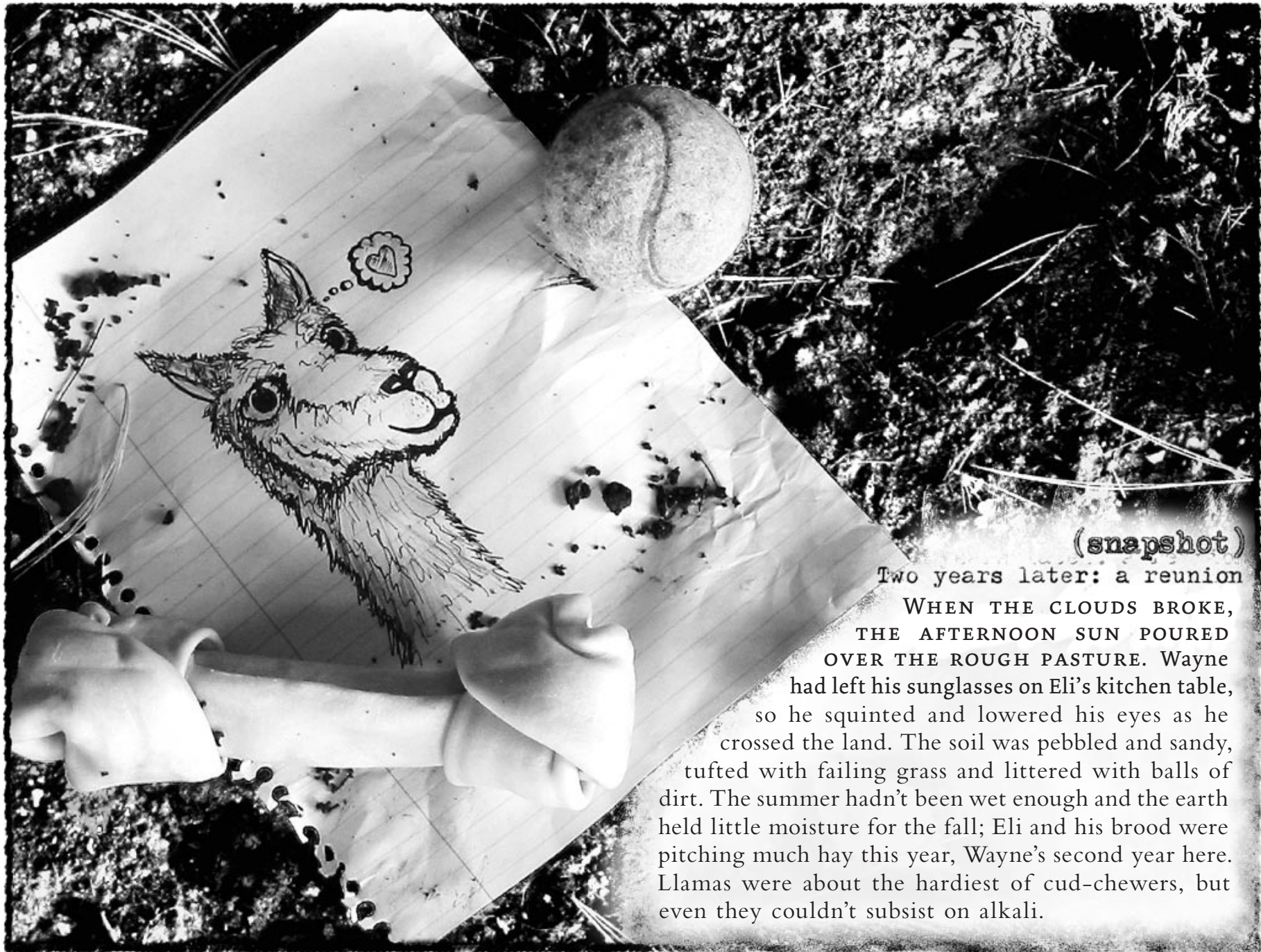
“Melvin, hush up,” Juliette said firmly.

Melvin frowned. “Hmph.” Then he leaned in and barked at the phone’s mouthpiece, “Horse pissing on flat rock!”

“Knock it off, doofus!” Juliette yelled, punctuating the command with a raised middle finger.

“Whatever,” Melvin said, retreating to the BurgerFiefdom booth. Over his shoulder, he gave Juliette a mournful backwards glance. “Where’s the love, y’know?”





(snapshot)

Two years later: a reunion

WHEN THE CLOUDS BROKE, THE AFTERNOON SUN Poured OVER THE ROUGH PASTURE. Wayne had left his sunglasses on Eli's kitchen table, so he squinted and lowered his eyes as he crossed the land. The soil was pebbled and sandy, tufted with failing grass and littered with balls of dirt. The summer hadn't been wet enough and the earth held little moisture for the fall; Eli and his brood were pitching much hay this year, Wayne's second year here. Llamas were about the hardiest of cud-chewers, but even they couldn't subsist on alkali.

Wayne rarely shouldered responsibility for the woolly animals' feeding and well-being, and Eli didn't expect him to—he hadn't hired Wayne and spruced him up a cabin to solicit some city boy's opinions on llama husbandry. Wayne was a custodian of simpler bits, as told by the advertisement that had lured him to this small Virginian farm: "Eli's Camelid Country seeks designer for print media, possible internet, in future. Applicants must have good eye for catchy and compelling presentation to advertise why Eli's Camelid Country is the best choice for your llama and alpaca needs. Candidate needs no prior camelid experience but must be willing to learn appropriate terminologies. Also, cabin available for substance-free upstanding sort, utils incl, within reason."

He earned a teenage paycheck but didn't suffer. Eli charged him a laughably low rent for the cabin, which was skewboned and tiny but worth several thousand a month in New York or San Francisco, cities where dollars were as pennies. In Russell County, Virginia, a dollar was still a dollar, and two of them were tender enough to get you a cinnamon bun denser than a barbell and a jumbo mug of caffeinated sugar at the Jaybird Tasty Pastry joint. Sales tax and stomach pumping extra.

At half past twelve on this newly resplendent October day, Wayne was walking away from Eli's house, a two-story ranch anchored to a slanted bluff. A promotional-planning meeting had just wrapped

up; per Camelid Country custom, this meeting had been conducted around Eli's kitchen table, attended by Wayne and the Family Farm: husband Eli, wife Cathy, their three kids, and Grog the Baptist, a red-eared slider turtle belonging to the youngest child, six-year-old Jacob, who persistently and patiently insisted the reptile understood both English and Terrapin. Grandma Euphoria was narcosed on painkillers and unfit to join the meeting, thanks be for that.

Eli was a semi-lapsed Mennonite, or so he'd once said, and in today's meeting he'd opined that the rough draft of Wayne's new direct-mail brochure was certainly catchy but distasteful in the extreme, and Cathy remarked that Wayne was Godless and deserving of no more fresh-baked cookies by her hand.

It wasn't *that* bad, Wayne thought: "Eli's Llamas Shall Never Forsake You," as a boldface title, followed by ten compelling commandments supporting the claim, set against a backdrop image of weathered stone. A neat and undeniably compelling design, but one rejected in totality by every non-narcosed member of Eli's family, even Grog the Baptist, who'd inspected it and then conveyed his low opinion by retracting into his shell for the remainder of the meeting. By now Wayne had learned to take hints, and without protest he'd agreed to retract into his cabin and concoct a pretty bromide.

A mile of suitably rolling field separated Eli's house from Wayne's compacted bungalow, and through it he navigated. He hiked up gentle hillocks, climbed past misshapen furrows, slid down a rocky scree. When the ground was moist, the tracks of his crossings would stamp in the earth and remain until the next sweep of rain. But in these dry spells his weight didn't impress the ground, and each footprint spun away in dust.

Wayne had wandered these fields in every season, in every condition. In winter his bootsoles would crunch over crystallized grass, frostbitten gusts aiming to excoriate him, and in summer his skin would peel and pits would sweat and bugs would nip him in all the right places. In sickness and health, for better or worse, he would amble the grazing grounds and discuss various issues, sometimes with the llamas, sometimes with himself. He was a man of reflection and ritual, of pattern and rhythm, of stumbling constitutionals and bubble-filled bathtubs. Bathtub, bathtub, bubbling bright!

Yes, his cabin had a bathtub, and without it he would be bereft indeed. Baptism be damned, the bathtub alone was a church complete; it was his nest of meditation, his bowl of contemplation, and often he partook its sudsy waters. As he soaked, his mind would research that past life, the before-life, not long gone in years but lopped by a sneakier schism. A trickle of faces, accompanied by the *dink-dink* of a

dripping faucet: Franklin Hollander, who was dead. Akiko Takayanagi, who had returned to Japan with a sad story and a scar on her head. Doogie, for whom rural Virginia would be as purgatory, no matter how benign Eli and his hearth. Percy, from whom Wayne received e-mails on occasion. Juliette, from whom he did not. Juliette, looming and luminescent in the chamber of memory. Understandably absent on the prairies of Virginia.

Wayne reached the foot of a long, dusty hill, breathed in, and started climbing. His stunted little cabin sat at the hill's apex, inside a copse of parched trees. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he looked towards the cabin door and saw his friend Absalom waiting before it. A gentle gray llama of fifteen years, Absalom had witnessed Wayne's first footfall upon this foreign land, this strange Camelid Country, and Wayne's inaugural memory of Eli's farm involved this ashen-haired ambassador padding up and sneezing in his face. Ever since, Absalom's attentions had been steadfast. Wayne appreciated the company, though Lord knew what the animal saw in him.

On reaching his cabin door, he leaned over and rubbed Absalom's soft-haired neck. "Afternoon, Abby." Absalom rose from kush position and responded with a throat-rumbling purr that Wayne could feel through his palm.

"News update," he told the llama, then entered the cabin. The community paper came out weekly

and didn't waste ink on the business of strangers, but with his computer and Internet connection, Wayne could tap into the global newswire, that wonderful, miserable, never-abating epic of headlines and date-lines, of bloodlines and bread lines.

At his old job, at the tabloid *Jiff*, he'd often keyed into the company's direct feed, watching as twenty concurrent articles poured down his monitor. Here in the Camelid Country, he could recreate this same flow via Internet plenitude. No Luddite was he, nor could he afford to be given his limited skill-set. He logged online, checked the top stories, saved a few for later review. Then he opened up his layout program to plot out a more secular camelid campaign. A good slogan, that's what he needed, advertising was all about the nutshell.

A Llama in your Yard is a Smile on your Face? No.
Alpaca a day keeps the blues away! No.

Llamas—they're not just for breakfast anymore. No, no, no.

He was still gasping for wit several minutes later when voices sounded outside his window. Familiar voices.

That couldn't be them, could it? Not *them*.

"You're stupid, man," the first voice scolded.
"Fucking llamas don't *do* that shit."

The second voice, thinner: "What, you the authority? Hey, here's a good stick."

"It *ain't* gonna go fetch."

Wayne heard a whistling noise, followed by a slight thud and a disappointed comment: "Didn't even look at it."

"No shit. Wait, it's comin' toward me. These fuckin' things have teeth, right?"

"They chew grass, don't they? Chew you too, I bet."

"Back off, I got no food! Shit, where'd she go, let her deal with this stinky fu—agh, don't *lick* me! Yo, Julie, get over here and do som—agh, it *sneezed* on me!"

A third voice, female, from a greater distance: "I'm coming! Hold your camelids already."

Wayne burst from his chair so fast he nearly upended his desk, the keyboard and mouse crashing over the edge and onto the floor. The computer admonished him with many angry beeps like a pinball machine ringing tilt, but he didn't care as he bolted outside to see Absalom nuzzling Melvin, Jimmy gazing at them from a few paces away, and Juliette climbing the eastern skirt of the slope that descended from his cabin.

"Wayne!" she called.

He tried to cry her name but was dumbstruck. Her hair was straightened now, and longer, and in a ponytail—and how it swished was hypnotically, perfectly feminine to him—and his memories were overpowered by her presence, as he was overpowered by her presence.

She came up and stood before him, all her face a shy smile. “Nice to see you,” she said.

Wayne took her hand and pulled her into a hug. “Julie.”

The embrace lasted until a wolf-whistle from Melvin broke the mood. Wayne flipped him the bird. “Pike off.”

Melvin giggled.

“Absalom,” Wayne said, pointing at Melvin, “kick his ass.”

The llama moseyed up and smeared his snout against Melvin, who ducked and ran from such creature comforts. But Absalom wouldn’t desist, and followed his target down the hill and up another one. Jimmy tagged along, unwilling to be left out.

Juliette gestured to the cabin. “Home sweet home?”

Wayne nodded.

“Cute,” she said. “Percy told me you were out here. Gave me the address. I had to see for myself.”

“He’s doing all right?” Wayne asked. The e-mails he and Percy traded were sporadic impulses of the *you doin’ okay?* variety, but still they were the most conversation Wayne had outside of Eli and his menagerie. Through Percy, Wayne knew that Juliette and Clark had amicably split over the summer. Or, Percy wrote, it had been amicable on the surface. Wayne hadn’t asked for more details, believing it better not to solicit fodder for fantasy—no way Juliette

would ever come down to live in some drafty hutch overlooked by earnest folk of uncompromised family values. But here she was, however fleetingly. Magic yet lived in the world.

“Percy?” Juliette said. “He’s got a girl now.”

“What!” Wayne raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t know that.”

“They just met a month ago. She’s new staff at his library, and—more importantly—a fan of *Melaninja*. Evoné. She’s an artist, pretty good with a brush. Good enough to illustrate Percy’s pulp, and that’s what counts.”

“That’s great!”

“Yeah.” She sniffed the air. “Smells funny here.”

“It grows on you.” Wayne shrugged. “In many ways.”

Juliette folded her arms behind her back and slowly circled him. “A year and a half. A year and a half. Why’d you leave, Wayne? Didn’t even tell anyone you were going. Was it me? Were you angry about Clark and me renting together, back then, back when—” she paused, breathed softly “—when you were inside? Was that it, you getting out and I couldn’t be there for you—or was it something else? I asked Doogie so many times but he didn’t know. I asked Percy and he said you gave no reason. So I thought it might be me, and I was afraid you were angry, and...”

“No.” Wayne shook his head. “It wasn’t you.”

She asked again. “Why?”

“Even if I thought I needed you, and you weren’t up for that—” Wayne cast his eyes to the arid ground and dug in a heel. “Remember how people kept telling me what a deal I’d gotten? A gift, really. Three months minimum security, no record besides a couple misdemeanors, no felony to keep me down...”

“*We* didn’t say anything like that, Wayne.”

“I know.”

In the distance, Melvin and Jimmy frolicked with Absalom, who still wouldn’t play fetch. Wayne watched them for a moment and then turned back to Juliette. Was that the sun in her eyes, or an expectant gleam? “Things were so unclear, Julie. It was hard.” He waved a hand in the air to dismiss his own words. “Not *unbearable*, okay. But I didn’t feel right about myself, about anything. Anybody. It’s hard to explain.”

“You still could have told us you were going,” Juliette said, her voice a careful rebuke. “Me, Doogie, Percy...” She looked away. “When you vanished, we didn’t hold it against you, didn’t *judge* you, never that, but we had to wonder—”

“Why did I go?” Wayne’s eyes narrowed. “Why did I.”

“That’s the question.”

“I can’t...I can’t totally say. Many reasons.”

“I’ll be happy with one,” Juliette said. “To start.”

“Huh.” Wayne bowed his head. “Well. A couple months after my release, I, I—” he quirked his head

about “—see, Doogie was invited to this party by one of his clients, some kid at the university? A straight party, right, so he took me with him. I’d been too much in hiding, he said. Said he wanted to push me into society, prove I was only a pariah in my own screwed-up mind. I said fine, why not try, so we went. Beer, girls, music. The social thing.”

“And what a thing it is.”

“The place was packed, it was pounding, a total drunken hootenanny. Doogie—”

“Hootenanny.”

“Yeah, but I was just repelled. Doogie poured a few shots down my throat to sauce me up. *You gotta drop the act*, he kept saying, and he pushed me deep into the dance floor, shook my shoulders, slapped me on the back. Then he went off somewhere and the DJ cued up this tribal shit, kind of music makes you want to hit someone, and it was so *loud*, bodies rubbing *everywhere*.”

“You vanished because of this?”

“No, no—or yes. Hard to say. I stood there, feet flat, ears bursting, and all around me these people ass-dancing, rump-stuffing, whatever the fuck it’s called, and suddenly I wanted them to die. Or I wanted to die myself. Almost fell to my knees with the crazy urge. So I...”

Juliette was staring at him with poorly repressed alarm.

“Julie, it wasn’t their fault, they were just, just doing whatever’s natural, I mean it was my problem, it was me, not them.” Wayne belatedly realized that *me, not them* was the alarming issue. “A—anyway, I split from that room and went down to the basement of the place. Quieter down there, a different tribe. People talking about politics, movies, sex, passing ’round a bong. Doogie was down there too, enjoying supplier’s privilege, and he introduced me to a few guys, a few girls, plus he swung the pipe my way.

“I took a hit, bad idea, and then I got to staring at this one girl, nothing special but *something* special about her, and she was talking about how she never got along with her mother, and these people were sitting in a circle around her, heads nodding, bobble-bobble, and then I started to knot up in this monster sob, and I couldn’t handle it. Or I could handle it but I didn’t want to. I felt like a whole different *species* from these people, different from the dancing ones upstairs too, and—”

“Wayne,” Juliette said, “you aren’t high *now*, are you?”

“No.” He scowled. “Look, Julie, I’ve never *talked* about why I left, okay, not to anybody. Never put it into words.” A chill was stealing into his voice. “Because there *is* no starkly delineated computation I can spit from my databank, okay? I just can’t *be* like so many others, is it penance, is it guilt, or was I always this way inside, I don’t *know*—”

Juliette’s face tightened. Wayne gave her a tense hug and quickly released it. “Fuck, Julie, I’m sorry.”

She offered a small shrug. “I wish I understood, Wayne.”

“You will.” He looked at her, then turned aside. “When I find the right words, you will.”

Juliette leaned in and kissed him on the cheek, a surprise that nearly buckled his knees. She looked up the pasture to the boys and Absalom. They were trotting, romping, and dashing through sunbeams; with merriment and tumbling they disappeared over a ridge. “Jesus,” she said. “*They* should stay here and you should come back, the way that llama’s taken to ’em.”

Wayne laughed. “Abby’s a sweet old goat.” Drought conditions or not, everything smelled fresh. His senses were wonderfully clear, better than they’d been in months. Years. He hadn’t been kissed in years, either. “I have to ask. Why are they here?” A wry grin came to his face. “Why are *you* here?”

Julie tossed her ponytail from shoulder to shoulder. “Their probation is done, so the moron twins are taking their truck down to Florida for the winter. Philly ice cream sales tend to lag after October, so they’re gonna try Tampa.”

“And?”

“I hitched a ride. Although I’m not going to Tampa, they’ll drop me at Fayetteville so I can catch a train back to Philly...”

Wayne stifled a pout, the effort apparent.

“Don’t look so sad,” Juliette said. “I brought you some presents.” She started walking towards the ridge where Melvin, Jimmy, and Absalom had gone. “C’mon, Wayne. We’re parked over there, right where the road comes in.”

They traveled the wavy field and topped a crest, and Wayne caught sight of the ice-cream van. While neither Melvin nor Jimmy seemed any brighter for the passage of time, their van was another matter altogether. The vehicle’s body was a shiny spray of gold, and the word “D-VAN” had been brush-painted over the door panels with amateur delight.

“D-Van? That a new truck?”

“Yup. D for dairy, they say.” Juliette chuckled. “You wouldn’t believe it, but they done good.”

Wayne regarded the sparkling new D-Van and believed it. Shortly before he’d absconded to Eli’s Camelid Country, Melvin and Jimmy had begun serving probation for the Dandi Donuts heist. Their sentence had included twenty months of community outreach, mainly in the form of using their ice-cream van to supply neighborhood kids with hot cocoa (fall and winter), frozen treats (spring, summer), and accessible-yet-nourishing literature (year round!) This had been a collaborative brainstorm of Percy and Detective Peter Sherpti of the PPD, with an organizational assist from Doogie. Not only had it kept Melvin and Jimmy from

further trouble, it also taught them how to supply and run a route. From the evidence, they’d learned these lessons well.

“Doogie misses you,” Juliette said. “Some queen moved into your old room and Doogie can’t ever use the toilet. We don’t know what the guy does in there, but it’s very in-depth.”

“You talk a lot with Doogie?”

“We’re pretty good friends now.” She looked like she wanted to say something further, but didn’t.

They reached the D-Van. Melvin was holding out an all-American rocket pop, Absalom was happily licking it, and Jimmy was petting the animal’s fuzzy back and looking contented.

“Yo,” Melvin announced, “we get one of these llamas, I bet we’d sell twice the ice cream. Friendly as fuck, kids’d go apeshit. Get a trailer, paint it loud, stash a llama innit...”

“*Stash?*” Juliette said. “You’ll *stash* the poor thing? Melvin, the moment you buy a llama’s the moment I call the SPCA.” She pulled open the D-Van’s sliding door and climbed inside, emerging a moment later with two broad, flat rectangles wrapped in brown paper. She dropped them on the grass at Wayne’s feet.

“Open,” she commanded.

Wayne hefted one of the rectangles, pulled off the brown paper, and gaped: a beautiful ugliness from the Bad Art Diner. “No! The Kraken versus the *Santa Maria?*”

Julie spun around. “A little culture for your cave, babe.”

“How’d you—”

“Tommy still felt bad about firing me. Gave me half-price, so I bought two. C’mon, there’s one more.”

Wayne tore the wrapping off the second painting. “The horny satyr? You got me the horny satyr?” He stuck his face right to the oil. “Wow. That’s one *extensively* detailed tongue.”

“I think you’re happier to see the paintings than y’are to see me,” Juliette said with a sniff. She scooped up the discarded wrappings and chucked them into the D-Van.

Wayne looked up from the horny satyr. “If I thought you’d like it here, I’d beg so hard even the llamas would blush.”

She squeezed her temples. “*You* like it here?”

“Eli’s nice to me, the animals are nice to me, my cabin’s pretty keen. Yeah, I guess I do, in some ways.”

“Wayne Milton, the unintentional monk. Did you take a vow of celibacy too?”

“You kidding? With all these llamas around?”

Juliette reached back and undid her ponytail. “Melvin, Jimmy, come here.”

They did, with Melvin saying, “Yuh, what?”

“Go take a ride for an hour or two, would you? Abby’ll be here when you come back, don’t worry.”

Melvin thrust two fingers in his mouth and blew out his cheeks, but an acid glance from Wayne deterred him.

“Okay, okay, whatever you want,” Melvin said. “Jimmy! Let’s go find a Toby-Mart or some shit.”

“I haven’t seen a Toby-Mart for three hundred miles.”

“Just c’mon!” Melvin got in the van, started the engine, and revved it. Jimmy sighed and jumped in alongside. They spun down the farm’s dirt trail, kicking up fat brown clouds, then turned left and vanished down the town’s only paved road.

“Ah...” Wayne lifted his Bad Artworks and nodded back towards the cabin. “Seeing as we’re alone now, what say we go hang these masterpieces?” His cheekbones were hot red points.

Juliette regarded him evenly. “Can Abby come too?”

Wayne whistled to the llama, who sauntered close, ears flicking. “There *is* a market.”

Juliette bit her lip. “Wayne—”

“I know.” He lowered Tommy’s paintings to the wiry grass and settled beside them. “Come here, Juliette. Have a seat.”

She did, and took his hand. Absalom stood behind them, his long face impassive, and watched the horizon with eyes dull and aged.



From: llamatic@virtech.net (Wayne M.)
To: melaninja_lives@hotmail.com (Percy M.)
Date: October 13, 13:03 EST
Subject: A Visitation...


...but not by aliens, though they'd be no less unexpected. Julie and the 'boys' showed up yesterday. here! in nowhere-land. But you knew they were coming? It was good to see them, er, good to see her.

She's gone now and I have made a resolution not to sulk.... * sulk *

Maybe I'll come up for a while this winter, revisit my old haunts.. or maybe all you good people come here to the ol' Camelid Country -- consider Thanksgiving? Eli and his progeny churn out a godlike feast every time. Churn their own butter too, which churns my stomach. But it's tasty like ambrosia.

I've been told you have a lady in your life, by the name of Evone? I hear she is gifted with her hands. May Melaninja's obsidian sheen never pale.

Until next,
Wayne



From: melaninja_lives@hotmail.com (Percy M.)
To: llamatic@virtech.net (Wayne M.)
Date: October 20, 08:39 EST
Subject: re: A Visitation...

You want me at some hearty rural Thanksgiving? With hand-churned butter? Dinner bells calling the Old Order to the hearth? Send me a picture of you with a pitchfork, staring blankly at the camera. American Gothic, the new generation. You come back here. I don't miss you but everyone else does.

So you saw Juliette. For some inscrutable reason she was notably excited to visit you. Hope she wasn't equally excited to leave you by day's end. Not even beauty such as hers can vie with a llama's heaving bosom, eh, Wayne?

Yes, I have a lady in my life. Say amen. She's too good for me, I swear. Oh... and Melaninja appreciates the blessing. He's doing well too, as always restoring probity and resplendence to that unfairly smirched word, 'swarthy'. Bloody Tolkien!

- Percy.

p.s. let me again suggest you return, as the above-referenced 'everyone else' is really 'someone important', know what I'm saying?

p.p.s. "Whoever hits his head at the ceiling does it at his own personal fatal risk." – M. O. Albert

p.p.p.s. (you get it?)

The end.

Questions & notions:
bullets@zaltyspress.com

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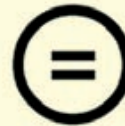
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