

Involutions



Volume 1 - Fall, 2007

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An Audience with the King – <i>Kenneth Halpern</i>	1
Wake Up – <i>Daniel Guzman</i>	5
Zombie Short – <i>Chanda J. Glass</i>	15
Little Emma – <i>Kenneth Halpern</i>	35
Hey You – <i>Jeffrey Steinberg</i>	37
Proof – <i>Naturi Thomas</i>	45
Underground & Awake – <i>Daniel Guzman</i>	69
The Origins of the Global Iniquity Markets – <i>Kenneth Halpern</i>	87
The Jefferson Verses – <i>Chanda J. Glass</i>	109
Gloriosus Deus – <i>Daniel Guzman</i>	113
Handout – <i>Kenneth Halpern</i>	131
Fare – <i>Chanda J. Glass</i>	137
I Am Jackson Pollack – <i>Jeffrey Steinberg</i>	139
Bad Man – <i>Kenneth Halpern</i>	159

An Audience with the King

Kenneth Halpern

The petitioner had first sought the ear of the king at the tender age of eighteen, though one suspects that this reflected the demands of the law rather than an assessment of expedience. In his mind there had emerged an idea whose brilliance and beauty must be shared with his lord for the benefit of all the land. As was customary, the first dozen solicitations were perfunctorily refused. As years passed the entreaties grew stronger, more urgent. What had started as one idea grew to several, then a multitude. Eventually, a filing system became necessary and much of the man's time was devoted to organization and revision. Rejection no longer hurt him, as it had - viscerally - in the first few years. Rather, it was part of a routine, accepted, anticipated, eagerly awaited. Each refusal constituted an opportunity to improve his planned presentation, expand it, and reconstruct his appeal. With time, he mastered the persuasive arts and his letters grew to be masterpieces of eloquence and vapid rhetoric. For, by necessity he could never divulge the details of his ideas; such wisdom was reserved for the king alone. At each point, he was grateful for past failure; an audience with the king was to be had at most once in a lifetime- and so much more had occurred to him in the interim. Rather, he regretted the youthful folly that had prompted him to prematurely petition. Though as a result he had doubtless already traversed many of the beaurocratic hurdles that impede progress in such affairs, to risk squandering such an opportunity had been unconscionable. However, the danger had passed and he now possessed a certain degree of stoic maturity. He framed speeches and poems, some of adulation, some of recommendation. This was his life and he was content.

Then one day he heard a banging on the door. The man answered the impetuous knocking with a snarl; his work had been interrupted and would take some time to resume. Grumbling, he unlocked the door and

was confronted by a tall man dressed in regal attire and boasting a haughty air. Looking down, the visitor appraised the man's worth with a curt sweep of the eyes and scoffed.

The man bowed and stammered "Are you the king?", realizing the question's absurdity only as it escaped his lips. "No" came the laughing reply, "I am his humblest servant, a mere messenger, yet my distance in station above you is a yawning gulf, vast and forbidding. For some reason, which I cannot fathom" - he snidely began, accompanying his words with a meaningful glance - "your audience with the king has been approved." The messenger presented him with a small sealed envelope, quickly retracting his hand before the man disgraced them both by trying to shake it. "Thank you, thank you" the man shouted after the retreating figure, though doubt already gnawed at his heart.

Trembling, he broke the seal and opened the envelope. Contained within was a small strip of paper commanding him to present himself at the palace two weeks hence at eight o'clock in the evening, after the royal supper. A slow anxiety crept through his body and evolved into the full flush of terror. What would he say? How would he conduct himself? How could a mere commoner converse with the king? Yet he had faith in his work, if not in his person. The king was a man like any other, though elevated in dignity and power. As such, he could be spoken with, reasoned with, even convinced. "But", the man thought, "I must prepare." This was a single opportunity, the culmination of a life's dream, and he would not waste it.

The intervening days were occupied with frenetic preparation. At night there was no time for sleep. By custom no objects could be brought into the sovereign presence, so the man would have to rely solely on his wit and tongue. In addition to his own ideas, analyses, and exigences - a not inconsiderable body unto themselves - vast tomes of ancillary material were committed to memory. Perchance they would be needed to illustrate or refine a point. Perhaps they would even tip the balance in his favor and allow him to prevail upon the king.

When the day arrived, a carriage presented itself at the front door and the man stepped inside. He was disheveled and unshaven, but this

did not concern him, for he focused solely on retaining the monumental body of facts, words, and ideas that filled his being. When he arrived at the palace, he was ushered into a small waiting room. An indeterminate amount of time passed, during which he struggled to remain awake.

A valet kicked him brusquely, startling him awake: "It's your turn!" he barked and commanded the man to rise. Wouldn't he be instructed in proper protocol before entering the august presence? He nearly panicked. The valet, sensing his fear, and either sympathizing or wishing to expedite matters, explained "The king does not stand on formality."

What did those words mean? They alleviated the panic, but answered no questions. He was led into a small ante-chamber containing two guards, ceremonial rather than military, and a chair in which there reclined a robed aristocrat. This was the king. The man wished to avoid a repetition of his earlier faux pas but there could be no mistake this time. He bowed to the floor but was impatiently ordered to rise. "No need for that here" exclaimed the king.

"I, I have so much to tell you" stammered the man, almost choking with emotion. The king smiled, put his arm around him, and led him to a little table. "I know. This is why you are my last interview of the day. I have all evening, and if need be, all night, to hear you out." Then he gazed at the man with an air of genuine interest and warmth. This was majesty. The man thought of all that he had to say and searched for a place to begin, but a weariness crept over him. The king's eyes lulled him to sleep. One of the guards moved as if to roughly awaken him, but the king stayed his hand. "No. Tonight he will sleep in my bed." The man was brought to the great royal bedroom and gently laid in the bed. Though he was unaware of it, the king himself tucked him in. The next morning he was discretely brought home.

The man awoke in his own bed to the horrible realization that he had failed. His one audience had been spent in sleep and he would never have another. Yet he was not distraught. For he understood that he had nothing to say.

Wake Up

Daniel Guzman

Wake up, little girl. Wake up, put on your contact lenses. Put on your clothes, go downstairs and have breakfast. Eat your bowl of cereal and drink your glass of orange juice. Kiss your mother goodbye. Close the front door behind you and wait at the bus stop with your school friends. Tell them about the new movie that you saw. Tell them about the party you went to last Saturday. Get on the school bus and take your seat.

Ride the bus to school. Get off the school bus and walk to your home-room class. Sit down in your seat and greet your school friends. Stand up and say the pledge of allegiance. Sit down and listen to the morning announcements.

Tell a funny joke on your way to first period. Do not laugh when your school friends laugh. Sit down in your first period classroom. Copy down the assignment that your teacher wrote on the blackboard. Turn to a new page in your notebook and begin drawing. Draw a flower. Draw a sun. Draw a kitten. Keep drawing until the girl who sits next to you notices how well you draw, and comments on how much she likes it. Say thank you and offer to draw a kitten for her. Feel your heart beat increase when she says thanks. Feel your skin grow warm and flushed.

Spend the rest of the class period drawing the kitten for the girl. Ignore the sounds of the other students as they work on their daily assignment. Ignore them as they make their usual stupid jokes to each other. Pay attention only to the drawing before you. Keep your ballpoint pen steady as your fingers move the black line along the paper. Hold your breath as you press the point of your pen to make the tiny black pupils in the center of the cat's perfect eyes. Concentrate as you add layer upon layer of pen lines to provide fur to the arch of the old cat's long and graceful back.

Feel your hand move across the paper over and over again in ever-more confident pen strokes.

Take a moment to imagine how the girl will look when you give her your completed drawing. Imagine how her lips will curve into a sweet smile, like that of the cat that you created from your ballpoint pen, from your very soul. Add a name above the head of the cat. Use the name of she who has the sweet smile, she who you love. Write out the words A-N-E-T-T-E in honor of her. Draw a pair of hearts next to that sacred name. Acknowledge this silent confession of your undying love to her, but keep this confession only to yourself. Promise to tell her this love without having to use secret symbols. Believe that she knows this love of yours, and that she shares it, too, but doesn't know how to express it yet. Promise yourself again that one day you will tell her this burning desire that you feel.

Look up from your notebook and realize that the teacher is calling your name for the second time. Look around and see all of your classmates at their desks, the eyes fixated on you, their minds all wondering when you will stop drawing, stop daydreaming, and finally respond to the teacher. Look down at the kitten you drew. Look at the kitten's face, and wonder why the face looks so menacing now, not a smile at all, but a sneer, a sneering cat ready to laugh along with the rest of the classroom. Look at the teacher and feel your face flush, not in love, but in embarrassment. Listen as he reminds you that this class is a requirement for graduation, and that from the way things are going, you may have to be here again this time next year.

Keep your mouth shut when he suggests that perhaps you should stop drawing rainbows and unicorns and start doing your classwork.

Feel the heat on your face dissipate when he focuses on the entire class and informs everyone that there are only five minutes left before the end of class. Feel the anger return when he turns back to tell you that your assignment is due then, too. Open your book and pretend to flip through the pages when he tells you to get to work.

Put the book away when he returns to his desk. Look down at your drawing, which now looks pathetic and hurried, nothing but a mess of

black scratches that resemble a pathetic and stupid cat.

Turn to a new page in your notebook. Begin work on your assignment. Reread the same paragraph in your book four times, then stop. Scream loudly inside your head and scratch out your hatred for the class with your ballpoint pen. Repeat this process until the page looks like a black hole of pen marks. Turn the page in your notebook. Regret not having taken this class in your freshmen year, or your sophomore year. Regret not having this class already done, somewhere in your past already, somewhere easily buried in your memories. Think of the girl next to you and be grateful at least for that sacred love that flows between the two of you, so pure and so true. Remind yourself that one day you and she will be out of this stupid town, and you will love in a place where you and her can be together and not fear ridicule or harassment. Pray that the love that the two of you share can be strong enough to endure these trials. Believe that it will.

Continue writing even after the class bell rings. Ignore the other students as they look at you over their shoulders, as they laugh to each other on their way out the door. Do not look up when the teacher calls your name. Do not look up when he calls your name again. Tear the page out of your notebook. Ignore the tears that are rising in your eyes. Ignore that you feel like throwing up. Scribble your name furiously at the top of the page. Hand the paper to your teacher. Avoid eye contact and walk promptly out of the classroom. Arrive at the door to your next class and realize that you have left your precious notebook, and your drawings, back on your desk.

Enter your second period classroom right as the tardy bell rings. Approach your teacher and ask her for permission to go back to retrieve your notebook. Walk quickly to your seat and cross your arms in frustration.

Sit through roll call, even though she already knows every student by name and does this only because she is stupid and hates everyone. Wait until after she has given the day's reading assignment, then stand up and approach her again. Notice the many photos of smiling children on her small and cluttered desk. Remember the smiling cat in your drawing, as well as the girl, your one true love. Remember that you absolutely need to

get your notebook back before anymore time passes.

Ask the teacher questions about the children in the photographs. Listen intently as she tells you that they are her grandchildren. Nod and tell her that she has beautiful grandchildren and must be very proud of them. Smile when she tells you that, yes, she adores them very much. Say that she looks too young to be a grandmother. Laugh with her. Keep your face pleasant when she tells you that, no, she still will not let you go out of the classroom. Ask her why not, even though you know this line of questioning won't budge her.

Tell her that you need to pick up a notebook from the last class. Shake your head in disagreement when she tells you that you can pick up your notebook after class. Explain to her that your next class is on the other side of the school. Give up the argument. Go back to your seat. Silently curse her for being a stubborn old bitch. Tell yourself that her grandkids look like ugly little trolls.

Do not talk to anyone for the rest of the class period. Imagine your first period teacher reading through your notebook, coming across the drawing of the cat with the letters A-N-E-T-T-E written over its head, then laughing and laughing at your secret. Swear that you will kill him if he finds out. Tell yourself that you can run away and that they won't catch you. Convince yourself you are not afraid of jail if you do something out of love. Repeat this as if you were preparing to tell it to someone like a reporter or a police officer.

Leave immediately after the bell rings. Do not turn in your assignment for the class period. Walk quickly back to your first period class. Become angry at how slow you move. Begin running down the hall. Ignore the comments from the boys standing by the lockers. Ignore the jokes regarding your breasts and legs. Ignore one male student in particular who has made lewd comments to you before. Ignore his wild eyes and his twisted mouth. Move swiftly past him as he continues to stare at you. Ignore the thoughts bubbling in your head that suggest he might lunge out at you, his lips pulled back, his teeth bared. Enter the classroom and find your first period teacher passing out worksheets to the early arrivals.

Take a moment to catch your breath, and then demand that he turn

over your notebook. Stare furiously into his eyes when he tells you that, no, you'll have to wait until the end of the day to pick it up. Imagine that your eyes are drilling through the meaty pulp of his brain when he refuses again after you beg him to give back the notebook. Feel the heat on your face when he tells you that you must leave because his class is going to be taking a test this period, and need this time before the bell to study without your hysterics.

Turn around and nearly run into the tall boy with the hungry mouth. Remember how it feels to be deeply afraid. Remember the time when you were eight and a man had come by from your church to have coffee with your parents. Remember how you had walked in on the three of them after playing with your friends all morning, and the man had turned to look at you, your clothes all sweaty and sticking tight to you like gum stuck in your hair. Remember the look that he gave you. Remember that face, and see it again in the face of this boy before you, exactly the same. Realize now how that expression disturbed you, how it reminded you of an animal, like something that doesn't belong in a locked room with other people. Feel the sweat in your armpits as you are now eight once again, and here is the man, and you are cornered in this place, too paralyzed to move or even scream.

Hear the bell ring and the teacher tell the two of you to quit staring at each other and get moving. Feel your skin prickle as he moves past you, this wolf-man. Feel as his eyes slide over you, the sensation as intense as that of a lighthouse beam turning away from the shore and moving out toward sea.

Walk toward the nurse's office. Beg to be excused from the rest of the day. Sit down on the cot with the sheet of crinkly paper. Wait a few moments as the nurse attends to another student, one with a nosebleed that will not stop dribbling down the front of his t-shirt. Look at the red stains, so bright against the gray cotton. Smell the metallic odor of his fresh blood, and lay down on your back when the nausea rises up. Think of how you are alive, and yet trapped in this body, which is trapped in this school until you graduate or have enough sense to run away. Imagine the way this prison feels, this trap of skin and hair and clothing. Feel your

heart beating, and think of the girl. Visualize her perfect face, her beautiful smile, her eyes. Imagine those eyes, so blue, as if they are looking at you right now. Project your love to that face, feel yourself reach out to her in this school. Find her soul within the barriers of these concrete walls, these oak doors, this bulletproof glass. Reach out to her and feel her in your embrace. Tell her what you feel inside, and hear as she tells you the same. Touch her heart, and know that it is beating for you, that it is alive within the prison of her own body, and that it is waiting for you, to release you from this sentence.

Hear the bell ring. Decide that you are strong enough to walk with the rest of the students to your fourth period class. Slip out quietly from the nurse's office. Ignore the people around you. Walk only with the goal of arriving to your class. Forget that you have no supplies for class, no pen, no paper, no notebook. Feel relieved when you discover a substitute teacher and a video waiting for you in your next class.

Wait for the bell to ring, then go to the cafeteria for lunch. Wait in line regardless of the fact that you have no appetite. Understand that maintaining appearances is essential to survival at this age. Talk with the girl behind you. Tell a funny joke and do not laugh when she laughs. Listen to her tell you about the certain popular boy in school who accidentally got a certain cheerleader pregnant. Tell the girl the rumor about a certain teacher who is on leave because she is in a rehabilitation clinic for an addiction to painkillers. Talk about some popular musicians that are well-known among your age group. Tell her that you have uneasy feelings about the lunch menu for today. Do not laugh when she laughs at your jokes.

Eat quietly at your table. Talk occasionally to your friends. Glance around the cafeteria for a glimpse of the girl with the sweetest smile in the world. Stare in awe at her long brown hair, so straight and perfect. Imagine running your fingers through this soft hair while you discuss favorite movies and actors with her after school, your legs dangling off the edge of her bed like long stems swaying in the breeze.

Walk to your fifth period class. Greet the teacher because she is your favorite teacher in the whole wide world. Remind her again how happy

you are to have a teacher that is as cool as she. Tell her about the difficulty you had with your first period teacher. Smile as she nods attentively and shows sympathy for your problem. Agree when she offers to write you a note to go back to your first period classroom to ask for your notebook again. Remember again how amazing your fifth period teacher is and how great it is to finally have someone normal for a change. Give her a big hug because you know she enjoys hugs and because you wish you could have her for all your classes, for all your school years, until graduation comes to set you free.

Show the hall monitor your pass. Sneer as he lets you move on. Walk to the door of the classroom and moan with frustration when you realize the door is locked and the lights are off. Press your head to the small window to get a better view of the darkened classroom. See the teacher's desk at the far end of the room, and curse yourself for not seeing the notebook. Jiggle the handle, pull on the door, then give up.

Decide to go looking for the girl. Walk past a few classrooms. Find the classroom that she is in. See her face in the third row. Walk slowly past the window, then turn around at the end of the hallway, count to three, and pass by again, slower this time. See her face again as it looks directly at you. Notice her smile as she recognizes you. Walk quickly past the window and continue on towards the girl's bathroom.

Lock the door of the bathroom stall. Read some of the dirty writings on the wall. Stare at one drawing that you made a few months ago, one with the same letters of the name that you wrote in your notebook.

Hear the footsteps as they enter the girl's bathroom. Realize that they do not sound like the soft footsteps of a teenage girl, but rather like the sounds of a teacher, or a very tall student.

Peer through the cracks along the stall door. See the tall boy looking through the stall door at you. Hear his breath come in shallow inhalations. Feel your sweat as it sticks to your armpits and your back. Remember the man who had coffee with your parents. Remember the way he looked at your young body, as if you belonged to him. Remember how you were paralyzed with fright.

Smell the scent of tobacco on the boy's clothing. Remember the man

sitting down with your parents as they smoked their cigarettes and turned to look at you enter the house. Remember how your mother told you not to just stand there all sweaty and dirty with the front door hanging wide open. See the look in your mother's eyes as she notices the man's stares. Remember as your mother quietly excused herself, got up from the table, and walked with you up to your bedroom to help you change out of your clothes.

Hear the boy asking you to come out of your stall. Hear him say that he wants to talk to you. Tell him about invasion of privacy, but do it in a firm and commanding way. Do not be playful with him. Do not flirt, because it will not work with someone like him. Repeat how you consider this to be a criminal act and that you'll have to report him if he doesn't leave. Hear his laughter and then his voice telling you that he is just playing around. Hear him tell you that he likes you a lot and doesn't mean to be so rude. Feel your skin crawl with insects when he tells you that he drew something in your notebook. Tell him that if he has your notebook, then you want it back right now.

Hear a hard, flat thud, then a skidding sound. See the notebook slide under the stall door and come to a stop against the toilet. Reach down slowly, bending your whole body down to grasp the notebook. See the wolf's sneakers and pant legs from your view under the stall, upside down. Rise up, slowly, feeling the blood drain out from your head.

Flip through the notebook past the pages of assignment notes and study guides. Find the page with the drawing of the kitten and the girl's name over the smiling head. Feel relieved that it has not been altered by anyone's hands. Turn the page and stare in shock at the drawing that you see. Run your fingers over it. Feel the deepness of the pen drawings, how much pressure must have been put on each line. Feel the parts where the pen stabbed through the thin paper, where it punctured and bled its ink onto the pages beneath. Realize that this drawing is of you, crudely re-imagined and menacing in the way that it simplifies you into a few thick lines and hairy splotches.

Realize that you are seeing yourself through the eyes of the tall boy and the smoking man, the predator observing his prey. Feel yourself at

this moment both in the bathroom stall and in the kitchen of your home.

See the letters encircling your head like a halo. Realize only a moment later that it is your own name floating above you, and next to it, a pair of hearts, a malnourished copy of your designs from the page before.

Think of the girl. See her face. Imagine her like she was when you saw her in first period. Remember how happy you felt. Feel your heart going out to her now, feel it touching her in that classroom, back there in the third row. See her again from your view through the small window; see her looking at you. Remember that smile, because after all, it was just for you. Close your eyes now, little girl, and dream that the two of you are somewhere else, somewhere far from this bathroom, this school, this town and this life.

Zombie Short

Chanda J. Glass

EXT STREET--NIGHT

People are exiting a movie theater and walking off. Among them is X, a pleasant-looking fellow. He's alone. He zips up his jacket and heads into the night.

EXT STREET--NIGHT

We're a little way down from the theater, X walking toward us in the distance.

In the foreground, there's a figure lurking in one of the apartment building doorways. No one's taking any notice, but everyone's automatically avoiding him, leaving a bubble of space around him.

The figure watches the people pass.

X begins to pass.

CLOSE-UP on X's hairline.

CUT TO the figure, leaping on X, trying to bite him on the head.

X is surprised, but immediately recovers and starts tussling with the figure. X picks up a trashcan lid and smacks the fellow with it hard.

The figure staggers, then comes at X again.

X smacks him a second time with the lid. The figure reels, recovers, makes another lunge.

X gives him a fantastic one-two wallop with the lid. The figure falls, but is still clearly not dead.

X, totally cheesed but not particularly flustered, stands over the figure.

The figure leans a little more into the light. We see that there's something not right with his face--an impression of hollow eyes and gray-green skin.

X rolls his eyes and throws down the lid in disgust, then stalks off down the street.

INT APARTMENT BUILDING--NIGHT

X opens his apartment door and enters.

INT BATHROOM--NIGHT

X enters, stands in front of the mirror, turns on the light. He's muttering to himself, obviously still annoyed about the attack. He glances up and notices that he's bleeding--he's got a little wound on his forehead.

X opens the medicine cabinet, pulls out alcohol and a cotton ball, then closes it again. He puts alcohol on the cotton ball, then dabs gingerly at the little cut.

We can see that he's cursing, still more indignant than in pain.

INT APARTMENT--DAY

The alarm goes off. X sits up slowly in bed. We see he's now a ZOMBIE. He turns his body towards the alarm, looking at it for a beat, then reaches over and turns it off.

INT BATHROOM--DAY

X comes in and stands in front of the mirror. He turns on the light. He stares at his own reflection for a long beat. Then his eyebrows lift slightly. Another beat.

He looks down, only his eyes moving. Another beat. He looks back at his reflection. A tiny frown barely tightens his lips.

He looks over at his toothbrush.

INSERT OF TOOTHBRUSH. It's such an everyday object, obviously used, so normal.

BACK TO X , still staring at the toothbrush. He picks it up. He picks up toothpaste. He holds them in his fists for a beat.

He grips the tube, squeezing a wild squiggle of toothpaste

all over the toothbrush. He keeps holding the toothpaste in his fist as he very deliberately bares his gray zombie teeth and starts brushing them mechanically.

INT APARTMENT BUILDING--DAY

X is exiting his apartment. He's managed to put on his work clothes and knot his tie, but he's rumpled and slightly askew. He's gripping his briefcase in one fist.

He turns his body and stiffly locks the door, his keys jutting out of his other fist.

He pockets the keys and woodenly starts down the stairs.

EXT APARTMENT BUILDING--DAY

X steps outside and pauses for a beat as a person walks by in front of him. His eyes go to the person's head.

CUT TO the person's hairline, enclosing brains within, as it passes by.

CUT TO X his eyes following the head. We HEAR TRAFFIC NOISE, TAXI HORNS, and his eyes flick away back to the street. X begins walking his familiar route to work.

EXT STREET--DAY

X shambles down the street away from us towards the subway stop. No one takes any notice of him.

INT SUBWAY STATION--DAY

X is waiting on the platform for the train. His eyes flick towards the heads of a few fellow commuters.

CLOSE-UP on a couple of hairlines.

CUT TO X still staring at them. We HEAR the TRAIN, and his eyes flick over to the track. He automatically moves toward the yellow line, and the train pulls up.

The doors open and he shuffles through, turning back to stare out the door's glass as the train pulls away.

INT SUBWAY CAR--DAY

X rides alone. No one takes notice of him, but people seem to be automatically leaving him in a bubble of clear space.

EXT SUBWAY STATION--DAY

X comes up the last stair or two onto the street. He stares for a beat before glancing to the side, then wheeling his body that way and shuffling along.

EXT OFFICE BUILDING--DAY

X lurches up and enters the building.

INT OFFICE BUILDING--DAY

X stands with a group of chattering office folk waiting in front of the elevators and wrestling with morning paraphernalia--coffee, folders, bagels, sports sections. Again, no one takes notice of him, but they've all left a good three feet of space around him. He stares up at the elevator numbers as the car descends: 5, 4, 3, 2....

INT X'S OFFICE--DAY

X exits the elevator to the notice of no one. Rows and rows of cubicles fill the floor, the office folk settling in for the day.

X stares for a beat, then lurches along to his own spot.

INT X'S CUBICLE--DAY

X shuffles into his cube. Bits of personality are evident--one or two goofy toys, a few cartoons pinned to the wall, but no photos.

X automatically sits down in his chair. A beat.

He pulls out his briefcase and takes out some papers, puts them on the desk, and turns on his computer.

X's appointments for the day automatically pop up on screen.

CLOSE UP of X's face, his eyes slowly moving as he reads.

INSERT of COMPUTER SCREEN: the last item reads "REMEMBER Project Review and Evaluation 4:00 PM FRIDAY!"

X's lips tighten in a tiny frown.

INT OFFICE BREAKROOM--DAY

X picks up a mug and fills it from the coffee pot; the coffee pours all over his hand and spatters over the counter, but he doesn't seem to notice. He thrusts the pot back on the burner and shuffles out.

INT OFFICE--DAY

X is shuffling back to his cube with his coffee as a COWORKER comes bustling up, his hands full of papers, greeting X without really looking at him. We can see he's talking rapidly to X, but his attention's focused on the papers. X stares at him.

Coworker finishes his request and finally looks up at X.

Coworker's eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. Surprise is immediately shoved off his face by awkward concern.

X looks to the side, then down, zombifically embarrassed, only his eyes moving.

Coworker looks to the side, embarrassed for embarrassing his office bud.

The big awkward silence envelops them completely.

X shuffles slightly and looks at the papers Coworker's holding, then glances back up at the man, then back at the papers again.

Coworker remembers the papers and halfheartedly holds them out to X.

X takes them and starts into his cube.

Coworker says something; X turns his body back towards him.

Coworker pats him on the shoulder, gives him a "tough break, man" sort of expression.

X acknowledges it with the barest of nods, then shuffles back to his desk as Coworker bustles off again.

INT COPY ROOM--DAY

X stands over the copy machine as it spits out copies. It finishes. X looks down, only his eyes moving to turn the same blank, intense stare on the papers.

INT X'S CUBICLE--DAY

X is staring blankly at a report.

INT OFFICE MAILROOM--DAY

X is woodenly putting memos in cubby holes, taking handfuls of them and cramming them into the mailboxes.

INT X'S CUBICLE--DAY

X is staring at a gigantic open folder. Very slowly, he

raises his arm and turns the page.

INT OFFICE HALL--DAY

X stands motionless, waiting alone for the elevator. A few papers slide out of the file he's carrying and drift to the floor. We hear the elevator DING.

INT X'S CUBICLE--DAY

X is staring at another stack of papers. Holding a pen in one fist, he slowly underlines a section in red.

CUT TO: shot of wall clock--one minute till five. As we watch , the hands click to five with a mechanical motion not unlike our hero's.

INT X'S CUBICAL--DAY

Coworker appears, draping himself over X's cube. He's talking rapidly, punctuating the unheard dialogue with the gestures for "you and me, buddy" and drinking; he holds up six fingers and taps his watch.

X watches all this with his usual stare, then gives him a tiny nod.

Coworker slaps the cube wall and nods in acknowledgment, holds up a palm to say bye and bustles off.

X looks back to his computer and shuts it down.

His lips press together slightly--the face of zombie determination.

EXT STREET--DAY

X is lurching along near the scene of last night's attack.

He comes to the apartment building doorway just as someone is coming out, wearing rumpled, slightly askew clothing very much like X's.

The person turns. It's the figure from the attack, and he's a ZOMBIE, too.

X and the zombie stare at each other, motionless for a long beat.

The zombie gives a very slight shrug.

X's lips press together in a tiny frown.

Another beat.

X lunges at the zombie, knocking him back behind the trash cans.

ANGLE ON THE TRASHCANS, shuddering violently as the struggle rages behind them, then suddenly still again.

CUT TO an angle from across the street. A person walks past the trashcans, not noticing anything.

X stands up, licking his chops, his shirt covered with gray-green blood and gore. He adjusts his tie, woodenly

adjusts his shirt, then shuffles away.

EXT STREET--DAY

X lurches along the street away from us, no one taking note of him at all.

INT SPORTS BAR--NIGHT

X and Coworker sit together at the bar, watching a game on the tv. They both have beers in front of them; a bowl of peanuts sits in front of X. Coworker is very into the game, talking enough for both of them. X is still gory, but neither he nor Coworker seem to mind.

A GUY leans across X, reaching over and taking away the bar snacks. X's eyes glance down and notice this as Guy helps himself to a handful of peanuts.

X turns his body towards Guy, revealing his gore-covered shirt and blunt, heavy stare.

Guy slows in his peanut chewing, then stops chewing completely. He pushes the peanuts back in front of X.

X continues to stare at Guy.

Guy spits his mouthful of peanuts into his hand. After a moment's thought, he carefully scrapes the masticated peanuts onto a bar napkin.

ANGLE on X and Coworker as Guy's hand enters the frame and gingerly pushes the napkin full of chewed up peanuts in front

of X next to the bowl.

ANGLE on Guy. Big smile--we're cool here, right?

ANGLE on X and Coworker and Guy, X still staring at Guy. Coworker reacts to something terrific in the game and gives X an enthusiastic smack on the arm. X turns his body back to his bud, then towards the tv.

The moment X turns away, Guy is off his barstool and out of frame.

REVERSE ANGLE to show the back of all three fellows, Guy now four or five barstools away. Coworker throws his arms up wildly, celebrating great news in the game.

INT X'S APARTMENT--DAY

The alarm goes off. X sits up in bed. He turns his body towards the clock, then turns the alarm off.

INT SUBWAY--DAY

X is on the train. Again folk are leaving a bubble of space around him.

A SMALL CHILD is staring at him.

X stares back.

The child hides her face in her mother's shoulder. Her mother pats her absently without noticing X.

X looks away.

INT OFFICE MAILROOM--DAY

X pulls his mail out of his cubby with his fists. The top memo says "PROJECT REVIEW FRIDAY 4:00 PM MAIN CONFERENCE ROOM." X frowns ever so slightly.

INT X'S CUBICLE--DAY

Coworker stands at X's shoulder as they look at something on the computer together. Coworker is talking constantly as usual. X's eyes flick up to Coworker, then back to the screen, then back up to Coworker. Coworker nods and grins, then exits the cube. X turns his body to watch him go.

INT OFFICE--DAY

A few office folk, including X and Coworker, stand around a WORKER'S desk. They're obviously singing with the exception of Worker, who is looking mildly pleased at her desk, and X who stares blankly. One of the folks has a small birthday cake with a lit candle. The singing stops, Worker blows out the candle, and folks clap. X raises his eyebrows slightly.

INT X'S CUBICLE--DAY

X is staring at an unwrapped sandwich on his desk. He gives a tiny frown, then turns back to his computer.

INT ELEVATOR--DAY

X is riding in the elevator with a few other folks. X glances over.

CLOSE-UP on hairline of fellow passenger.

X glances away for a beat. X looks up again, only his eyes moving.

CLOSE-UP on another passenger's hairline.

X glances away again. Again his eyes are pulled up, this time to a

CLOSE-UP of a bald head.

X stares at the head and the delicious brains inside.

REVERSE ANGLE back to the head, a closer shot this time, the bald glory almost filling the frame.

REVERSE TO X, almost overwhelming desire expressed in a slight widening of the eyes. A beat. X begins to move...

The elevator stops with a loud DING. The doors open and the other folks file out, leaving X alone in the elevator. It begins to move again.

INT X'S APARTMENT--NIGHT

X is staring at a bunch of papers by the flickering blue light of the tv.

INT OFFICE--DAY

X shuffles down the aisle, small and alone in a sea of cubicles.

INT X'S CUBICLE--DAY

X is frowning at a chart on his computer. He picks up a hardcopy of another chart and holds it up. He looks from one to the other a few times, his body turning slightly as he does. He glances up, frowning ever so slightly--zombie office frustration.

INT APARTMENT BUILDING--DAY

X opens his mailbox. Bits of mail flutter to the floor. He glances down at them without moving his head.

INT OFFICE SUPPLY ROOM--DAY

X enters and takes a bunch of presentation covers; he carries them out in his fists.

INT OFFICE--DAY

X exits his cubicle, then halts, glancing around. He turns his body to see that someone has pinned four or five paper air fresheners to the outside of his cube. He regards them for a moment, then turns back toward the camera, his eyebrows slightly lifted.

INT BODEGA--DAY

X puts down half a dozen bars of Springtime Soap--the wrapper says "sweetly scented suds" and sports many flowers. The clerk rings them up without even glancing at him.

INT SHOWER--DAY

X stands staring in a huge cloud of sudsy foam.

EXT STREET--DAY

X walks down the street. He stops suddenly, then turns his body to look up at the sign above him. We PULL BACK to see that he's standing in front of a restaurant advertising "BARBACOA" in huge letters.

INT RESTAURANT--DAY

X sits at a table as the barbacoa is placed in front of him. He looks at it for a beat, then glances up into the camera without moving his head--motionless, expressionless joy.

INT X'S APARTMENT--DAY

X is wearing a suit, and is making an attempt to straighten his tie.

INT X'S CUBICLE--DAY

X puts a last piece of paper in his presentation folder. He closes it and puts one hand on it with a tiny smile.

INT OFFICE--DAY

Coworker is standing outside the conference room, obviously waiting for X. He speaks to X, and X gives a very slight nod.

INT CONFERENCE ROOM--DAY

X and Coworker are giving a presentation to a not-so thrilled table of listeners. Coworker is doing the talking. At the head of the table sits their BOSS.

ANGLE on STAFF MEMBER. She looks bored, but she's listening.

ANGLE on Coworker, sensing that he's not capturing the room. He flips the chart page on the nearby easel. X points to things with a pointer as he talks.

ANGLE on the Boss, an unimpressed expression fixed on his face.

Coworker tries a little more charm.

X points with his pointer, then raises his eyebrows slightly.

INT CONFERENCE ROOM--DAY

The meeting is over and only X and Coworker remain. Coworker is talking constantly as they gather up their materials. He looks like he's deliberately staying positive, trying to

convince himself that it went okay as much as he's talking to X.

INT OFFICE--DAY

Coworker says goodbye to X outside his cube. In the background we can see that it's ten after five. Coworker heads for the elevator and X turns into his cube.

INT X'S CUBICLE--DAY

X sets down his presentation materials and turns off his computer, getting ready to go home, when Boss appears by the cube wall, his coat over his arm, apparently on his way out. X turns his body to face him.

Boss says a few things, shaking his head.

X's eyes widen slightly.

Boss says something else.

X stares at him.

Boss shakes his head again as he speaks.

X gives a small frown. His eyes flick up.

ANGLE ON Boss's hairline.

ANGLE ON X his eyes flicking back to Boss's face, then back again to

ANGLE ON Boss's hairline.

PULL BACK to see Boss saying "So I have to say No."

REVERSE to X. A beat.

CUT TO X and Boss, facing each other from an angle down the hall.

X grabs Boss and pulls him into the cube, Boss struggling and being brought down savagely.

INT X'S CUBE--NIGHT

X shoves Boss's bloodstained clothes and coat into his briefcase. X blots up the last few splatters of blood off the desk with a finger, then licks his finger clean. He closes the briefcase and stands up, then pauses. He turns out of the cube and walks up the aisle.

INT BOSS'S OFFICE--NIGHT

X and Coworker's presentation is sitting on Boss's desk. X opens the cover; the title page is stamped "REJECTED."

X tears the title page off, wads it up, and shoves it in his pocket. He opens the desk drawer, picks up a stamp, and stamps the first page of the presentation.

INSERT of the page, now stamped "APPROVED."

ANGLE on the now approved presentation as X exits down the hall.

END CREDITS

INT X'S APARTMENT--NIGHT

X sits on his couch, the blue light of the tv flickering on his face, sucking the blood out of Boss's shirt.

Mmmmm...delicious.

THE END

Little Emma

Kenneth Halpern

I

Little Emma was born shy.
The doctor said her health was weak.
She didn't speak and made no friends.
An episode left her wheelchair bound.
She could not eat and made odd noises.
Her mother loved her and cared for her.
Sometimes she read stories to her.
The words were odd, but this didn't matter.
At twelve, she lost her mother.
They said a truck had crushed her.
A worker took her to an office.
Strangers adopted her.
They were paid some money.
She was not loved but not harmed.

II

Doug loved the lord but rarely spoke to him.
He lived in a small home.
When young, his wife had left him.
She did not say goodbye.
He often cooked pasta and ate alone.
The time for children had passed.
He liked dogs.
When he was forty-seven, his mother died.
He taught school but was distracted.
For fun he wrote essays.
Nobody read them.

I+II

Doug volunteered at the social office.
One day he saw Emma being wheeled in.
He adopted her.
She was twenty and he was fifty five.
They went to the lake together.
They went to the park together.
He read to her and she smiled.
She loved him as a father.
At thirty six she had a stroke.
She died and he buried her.
Every year he visited the grave.
He wrote more essays.
Sometimes he mailed them to editors.
None were published.
At sixty nine he died.
His essays were thrown away.

II+I

Doug once passed Emma on the street.
They did not notice one another.

I

At twenty she was moved to a home.
The nurses washed and fed her.
Nobody talked to her or read to her.
In time, they forgot her name.
At forty-two she had a seizure.
She could no longer see and her arm hurt.
Eventually, she died and was buried.
They wrote off the funeral expenses.

II

At fifty eight he lost his job.
He sold his house and moved.
While moving he fell.
The doctors cost money.
Soon he was poor.
At sixty three he grew sick.
They would not treat him.
After some time he died.
His possessions were sold.
Someone threw out his essays.

Hey You

Jeffrey Steinberg

Such a lovely evening. Dinner and drinks with friends I had not seen in months. But I ate too much. My stomach not only bulges, it talks to me as I stroll across the park. I am trembling. The trees don't whistle at me. The voice of a parrot says "hey you, you are too fat". The truth is men don't look at me anymore. I am stricken with terror on this splendid evening. Why do I think of a parrot at this moment? I know after a certain age, and I'm only forty-two, men think women are asexual. They used to think I was pretty. My body is thirty pounds later. Why am I hot and sweaty? Is that me spinning or the park? I hear a high squeal, a giggling, inside my stomach. It hurts. I can't breathe. I'm not pretty now. I know it. I've fallen out of a ten-story window. Screaming. I lose control. The men do not see me. It hurts. I feel my heart racing. I know where I am but I do not know where to turn. I don't know why everything comes from my mind. I sit down on a park bench, afraid of being afraid. The trees shake. The sound of their laughter echoes off my mind. I cannot remain in the park. I am in constant fear.

I remember that day with Daddy in the forest. I was a deer. I sit on the park bench, desperate for something solid. But I cannot control my arms, my legs, and even my eyes from blinking. A parrot speaks in tongues in my stomach. I know it. I know my life is over. I know my palms are sweaty. I can't swallow. I feel so unnatural. I saw Daddy hold the rifle. I saw Daddy point it at me. I felt my heart race. A deer sprinted across the forest but I see a squirrel bounce across the walk to another section of grass. Daddy fired. The bullet rang in my ears like a cry, wrapping itself around my head. Daddy yelled, "got him". Everything is familiar yet scary, dangerous. Everyone is staring at me. The trees. The squirrels. A few people. I

have to get out of here. Now. Oh god, I am suffocating. I scream as loud as I can. I push my calves into my hamstrings and quadriceps, my legs activate, push me off the bench. But they are jelly legs, trembling. Daddy aimed at the deer again and fired. A dread grips me as I move in a circle, then a second circle. The trees whistle at me. A squirrel offers to take my hand. I wobble away, across the park, to a coffee shop.

Without thinking, I order a black coffee. The man behind the counter asks me what size, I say yes. He asks again. I say yes again. He hands me a large. I do not care. I pay and drop the change into the bottom of my bag. I hear ghosts. It is too scary to take out my wallet. I measure each step, inching over to a chair in the corner. I sit with my back to the wall, staring at nothing, at any movement, at ghosts dancing across the room. There are no trees or squirrels here.

A black man dressed in a torn red plaid wool jacket and stained blue denim jeans sits across from me, sleeping. His slightest movement is just enough to scare me. I know he is looking closely at me. The way his head twitches, resting against his arm. His face is empty. His hands jerk from one knee to the other as he shifts his legs, his shoes scraping the floor every time he readjusts himself, and with each motion something inside me says he will attack. The louder he snores, the scarier this feeling. I'm glued to my chair. I shriek when the man's elbow slides, almost knocking the table over as it flies over the edge. As the table rights itself I stare, trying to make sense of the rattling metal. The man wakes. He stares out of eyes that have seen too much squalor. I want to apologize but I'm not sure why. He stretches and throws his arms out, holds them there for several seconds. I blink my eyes. I swear to you a bird is about to land on one of his arms. I see Daddy's face. The way he pushes his head back on his shoulder and drops his arms so his hands rest on the table, I could see Daddy doing that to me. Beckoning me. Promising me everything is safe. I hear him say there is no bird, but I see the parrot, feel it in the pit of my stomach. Hear it giggle. Daddy is snoring again.

He is asleep. I should feel safer, but I do not. I take off my shoes, thinking that might help. I relax without them on. I want to push my toes under

my leg, but the chair is too firm. So I rest my feet on the cold brick red tiles. A shiver runs through my body. The same feeling I had when I was ten years old and I followed my father into the forest and watched him shoot that deer. I watched the deer run several yards before falling onto the leafy earth, its limbs shuddering, then twitching to a sudden stop. Forever. The few times I went into Daddy's den with my sisters, I saw the rifle mounted over his desk. I never understood why Daddy wanted it there. I asked several times.

"Girls, don't you ever touch Daddy's rifle" he said. "Maybe I'll let you go hunting sometime. Daddy loves his big rifle. Daddy loves to hold it." Of course I had no idea why he wanted it over his desk.

I am the youngest of five sisters and one of my sisters was always with me when I spoke to Daddy. We used to go into the den and look at the rifle, fascinated, but never touched it. What I remembered most was a loud crackling when he fired. How the deer lay still on the ground. A cold breeze whistled through the trees. I was so scared. I could be a deer laying dead on these red tiles, my viscous blood dripping onto the grout. It's late at night now, after 11pm. No one would notice. There's hardly anyone here.

The sleeping man moves into yet another position. His head leans back against the wall and he crosses his legs, his right arm sprawled across the table. He knows I am bad. I can feel it. He knows what is inside my dreams. He knows I wanted a man tonight. And he knows why. And he knows how frustrated I am. Since the divorce. Thirty pounds later.

Daddy said, "Bad girls don't go to heaven."

"Where do they go?" I asked.

"They go to hell and Jesus won't save them. Jesus doesn't like bad girls," he said twisting his mouth. Then he snickered. I thought he was about to say something else, but he turned away.

"Bad girls go to hell," the sleeping man snores.

"I am not bad," I say. No one listens. I repeat the words, barely audible over the man's snoring. I have yet to touch the coffee sitting in front of me. No one else is sitting near me. I feel around for my shoes with my toes. I need them. I'm not sure why, I do. So I push them over. My toes grope the heels first. Something comforts me. Maybe it is my stocking feet touching the leather of the shoe. Maybe I realize there is no blood on the floor. Maybe I realize I am not a deer.

Out of nowhere Charlie Parker begins wailing over the speakers. I wiggle my toes as I did outside Daddy's den. It was one of those things that just felt good, made me feel like I belonged. Daddy listened to Parker when I was a child, and seemed to have every record and tape of his concerts. Why do I think about him when I fall into this trap? He used to play Parker in his den, where he spent most of his time. It seems I cannot get my mind off him even when I am not thinking about him. Daddy would call us in and talk about "the Bird." So much reminds me of him. Maybe it's better to see the whole memory rooted in one place, than in motion, untethered.

I remember the day Daddy called us into his den; remember it well. Daddy said what he always said when he played Parker. "Listen to the Bird." But on that day the bird was not Parker. What he pointed to was a large parrot, at least twelve-inches long, with light grey feathers, a cherry red tail, and a black beak. It sat menacingly in a large cage. I stood with two of my sisters shuddering. And just like that the bird began giggling at us.

"He's an African Congo Grey," Daddy said.

I never went into Daddy's den again, as long as he had that bird. Even when Daddy called me in, I would not go. I stood outside the door, heard the bird talk,

"Hello Burt. Hello Burt. Goodbye bird."

When Daddy opened the door I recoiled, I knew it was Daddy, but I could see the bird lunging at me with his talons exposed. That was some mean bird Daddy had.

"Relax," Daddy said. "The parrot won't hurt you. He's inside his cage."

Then I heard, "Hey You," "Hey You."

Daddy laughed, "He also knows how to say, 'Hey You.' "

Every time I heard the parrot say "Hey You," I shuddered. And we heard it throughout the house. Especially at night.

"Hey You. Hello Burt. Come in. Hello Burt."

That was twenty years ago, but I remember it well. Why the hell are they playing Charlie Parker here? Why do I think of that parrot every time I hear Parker? Of all the music to hear in a coffee house, dammit.

I hear a voice behind me. Heavy footsteps. A thick man in a green coffee-house shirt and black pants whisks around the corner and heads for the sleeping man across from me. I turn my head, perhaps too quickly, and feel a match burning my neck, muscles searing. I put my hand to my neck and rub. I hear the coffee man say loudly, "Hey You." Hell, he's talking to me.

"Hey you," he repeats, and this time the sleeping man stirs.

"You've got to leave," coffee man says. "You can't sleep here. This isn't a hotel."

"You've got some nerve," the sleeping man says. "I just happened to nod off. I'm just..."

"I don't care. You have to leave. Right now."

With a flourish, Charlie Parker hurtles through a rush of notes and splashes into silence. Another song rolls on. I don't care. I hate stupid rules. Rigid rules are even worse. Daddy always made a stink when I refused to come into the den alone. I told him I did not want to see his parrot. Daddy had his rules and it never mattered what happened; when he thought he was right, he was right. He always made me wait, but if I made him wait a minute, I was a stupid idiot, or worse. It feels wrong what they're doing

to this man. He bought a coffee. So what if he sleeps? Why make a stink? Because they can. It's the powerless exercising power over the powerless. Daddy did this thing because he could.

"This is outrageous," the sleeping man growls, "you can't push me around like this. I'm going to call your headquarters and tell them about you. What's your name?"

"Get out of here. You want to call headquarters, be my guest. But you're leaving."

"I've never had this happen before. I'm a paying customer. Okay, I dozed off. So what?"

For a few more minutes it's back and forth until the man gets up, picks up his hat, and reaches down for a large rolling suitcase on the floor. As he slowly walks out, still yelling, another employee comes over, opens the side door, and scrutinizes the sleeping man as though he were a criminal. The man spits on the ground outside the coffee house. The madness does not touch me. A parrot does not fly around this room. Daddy is in the garage simonizing his car. Out of sight, out of mind. The sleeping man has no place to snooze. The bird is back in its cage.

I get up and walk outside. No jelly legs this time. I reach into my bag and take out a cigarette. My fingers are not sweating. Even though there's a breeze, the match quickly ignites the tobacco. I suck in smoke and lean against the cold glass of the doorway. No palpitations. The nicotine coats the back of my throat. Down the street the old man walks slowly, dragging his bag on his way to anywhere else. I doubt he knows where anywhere else is. I do not. From this distance, he could be my lumbering, lonely Daddy. The Daddy none of my sisters like. The Daddy they no longer speak to. The Daddy I am sorry I still speak to. I am not a deer stuck in his bright headlights. He follows me wherever I go. If only could say it doesn't matter. I exhale smoke and study the black sky for a clue. It's empty.

"Hey you." I do not hear his voice at first.

"Hey you, Miss," he says again.

I take the cigarette out of my mouth, and turn. Just for a second I see myself in the glass. Daddy stands behind me strangling a parrot. The coffee man smiles at me. Why is he smiling?

"Yeah?" I say, looking at him. "Do you think I'm too fat?"

"What? No. You left your shoes inside."

Proof

Naturi Thomas

Will slid into a corner booth, ordered a drink and wondered why he had chosen this dim place. Then he remembered – Killian's Pub was where he and Gabby had had their first date. By that time, of course, they'd already had sex twice in her apartment and gotten kicked out of a crosstown cab, but that had been the first time he'd walked down the street with her on his arm and watched the men his age eye him with a combination of envy and glee. *Look at that old dog. Taught himself a new trick.*

She had ordered a rum and Coke with two cherries. The single candle on the table had reflected in her eyes as she took in the dark paneled walls, high booths. One had to walk down a flight of steps to get to Killian's, and only a stream of rush hour feet were visible from the windows above.

"This," she'd stage-whispered, "is the perfect place to begin an affair."

"Oh really, and how many affairs have you had?" He'd smiled indulgently. He'd smiled indulgently a lot in those days.

"Some things you just know." She was 23. When their drinks came, she'd lowered her head to her glass and sipped from the stirrer as though it were a straw. Three more drinks for both of them and he'd had her in the single bathroom downstairs, his tie stuffed in her mouth, his right knee flushing the toilet again and again.

"What's new, kid?" He looked up from his drink to see Vaughn sliding into the seat across from him.

"Is it starting to rain?"

"Well, let's see. I'm wearing my new suede jacket, so of course it's starting to fucking rain." He frowned at the candle, flickering valiantly in

their dim corner. "Think you could've found a place that's a little darker? A cave, perhaps? We could've gone spelunking." The waiter came and Vaughn ordered a shot with his beer. Friday.

"How long have you been waiting to use the word spelunking?"

Vaughn grinned. "Pretty good, huh? That word's gotta be on one of your tests. Which is it, the American Vocabulary Circle Jerk?"

"Actually, vocab is the last thing on my mind right now. We've got our first SCAT coming up."

"Which is...?"

The Standardized Creativity Assesment Test. We're testing kids in grades three, six and nine on right brained thinking-analyzing art and literature. There's questions on the test about inventions. We've even got some riddles."

"What the hell is this for?"

"We don't know yet. First, we have to administer the test across the country. Then, depending on the results, different states and local boards will use the test to assess various objectives." Will sucked a melting cube from his glass. "There's a worry that all the visionaries of tomorrow are having their thought processes deadened by computers, redundant curriculum..."

"...standardized tests.

Will made a face. "How was your week, Tooth Fairy?"

"Nothing national, I'm ashamed to say. The Mandelbaum triplets turn 12 next month. That's three full sets of braces whose owners, if anything like their brother, will need constant adjustments. Maybe I'll be able to put a down on that boat after all."

"How's the hygienist?"

"Who, Cindy?" Vaughn shook his head. "Her very large construction worker boyfriend dropped by yesterday to pick her up. Almost broke my hand when he shook it. I hate those brawny, show-off types. But man, that guy had an overbite you wouldn't believe! You know, I think when she quits, I'll add a new question on the application for her job. 'What's your relationship status and how seriously do you take it?'

Will looked up at the window. Two brown shoes and a cane inched along the wet street. "I wonder if there's some way you could tell. Without asking."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, everybody's going to assume a guy's gonna, you know, be a guy but...never mind."

"No, what?"

Will drained the rest of his drink. "I should wait until I've had a couple more of these." he chuckled. "I think she's cheating on me."

He waited a beat, then looked up. Vaughn's eyes were shocked but not surprised.

"Jesus, Will. Shit."

"Yeah."

"I...wow, I never would've seen that coming. Do you know for sure?"

"I mean, I haven't caught her doing anything. All I know is, it's something I never would've thought about. Suddenly, it's all I can think about."

"Not to make you feel worse or anything, but if any two people looked happy..."

"We had a few problems. *Have*. Jesus, look, I'm in the past tense already."

"Well, don't be. No matter how you feel right now. For all you know, it could be nothing." Vaughn shook out a pack of cigarettes, put one in his mouth. "You don't want to throw everything away for something stupid."

"What are you doing?"

"You know a better way of bringing the waiter over?" Lighting his cigarette with it, Vaughn snuffed out the little candle. Will's eyes focused on the point of light in his best friend's hands. "Are you going to do anything?"

"You say that like not doing anything is an option."

"Well, sometimes these things burn themselves out. I mean, we oughta know, right? On the other hand, a woman Eve's age is at her sexual peak. Well, not my wife but most women..."

Will had held up his hand but it was too dark to see. "Wait a minute.

I'm not talking about..."

"Excuse me, sir." Their waiter relit the candle. "But I'm sure you know, as in every bar in New York City..." Beneath the annoyance, a rich baritone. Actor, at least three years of voice training.

"Guess I forgot. I was so disoriented from thirst, having ordered ten minutes ago." He tossed the cigarette into the Will's empty glass before the waiter whisked it away.

"Vaughn, for God's sakes, I'm not talking about my *wife*. It's Gabby. I think she's fucking some guy behind my back."

Vaughn's laughter was quick and ringing. The place had started to fill up, after-work crowd. They looked up from their martinis and their scotches, neat.

"Oh good. I see I came to the right person."

"I love you, Will Tyler. Even more than Levitran, you keep me young. But a question. Didn't you read the handbook? They always move on, eventually. Gabrielle is not exactly the long-suffering mistress type. Just be grateful: you had springtime for eight months this year."

The waiter returned with the drinks. Will placed his hands against the coolness of the glass. Actually, spring was coming soon, that's why the rain.

"She has no reason to do this. I see her as often as I can. Treat her like the princess her family has deluded her into thinking she is. She told me she doesn't even want a serious relationship that would distract her from her goals. She's got no motive. Unless it's to fuck with me."

"Well, she can't do that."

"Damn right. I'm not some heartsick kid. But I've got an investment here. I've got my pride. And just for safety's sake, I need to know where she's been."

"You're just being practical." Vaughn agreed, considering his beer. He looked up to find Will grinning at him.

"Handbook. Who do you think wrote that fucking handbook?"

"Guess who's not coming to dinner." Eve said, without turning from the stove. Will let the cake box from Milano's drop to the table.

"Oh no, why?"

"Last minute ski trip with her dorm mate. They got some kind of off-season deal." Eve tasted of the stew she was stirring when he kissed her. "I've been all day with the chicken and dumplings and she called an hour ago. Oh Will! And you bought cannoli..." Spying the box, she rested a hand on his back.

"You want a drink?" Will sighed, trudging to the bar in the dining room. Melissa hadn't been home since Christmas. He'd been looking forward to the imitations of her professors, her chronicles of what she deemed, "The 13th Grade." What he marveled about most in his elder child was that she treated life like dinner theatre. Not as involving as one would've preferred, but likeable and usually good for a laugh.

"You smell like you had a couple of drinks already."

"One." he sat back down at the table. Eve glanced up at him as she peeled the saran wrap back from a fruit salad. "Alright, three. Can't lie to you. But Vaughn had something he wanted to talk about. You gotta go drink for drink in a situation like that."

"He and Lauren aren't having problems, are they?"

"No, nothing like that. Vaughn puts Laurie on a pedestal. He knows she's the only one who would put up with him. We owe them a dinner, don't we?"

"We owe everyone a dinner." Eve shook her head, slipping on the cow oven mitts. "With all this food, we should just call them all up and invite them over tonight." She removed a tray of the mini croissants Melissa adored. "I've just been so frantic lately, trying to get this business off the ground." She pulled out a chair and sat across from him, flushed from the oven.

"The Decorating Diva, frantic? Never?"

"Our daughter's not very considerate, Will."

"She's a kid." He shrugged.

"She's a young woman. And she knows the trouble we go to. I was so tempted to say something when she called me, all breathless of course, 'Can't talk long, Mom, kiss, kiss!'"

"Why didn't you?"

"I've been the bad cop for nineteen years. When do we switch off?"

"I'm home!" Toby yelled from the foyer, slamming the door. Will could tell from the cadence of his footsteps that he had not stopped to wipe his feet.

"Why does he do that?" Will hissed. "It's like living with Ricky Ricardo."

"What smells so good?" Toby bounded into the kitchen, lifting the lid and dripping moisture from the pot onto the floor. He then proceeded to toss his wet jacket, guitar case and suspiciously light book bag all over the counter, wrecking the order and charm of the 'Cow County, America' theme the kitchen employed. He snatched up the Milano's box in a blur.

"What's in the box? When's Mel getting here? I want her to hear this song I wrote for the..."

"Toby, Jesus! If you must open the box, at least get a scissor and cut it. Take a second and do something right." He reached for his drink; the cow oven mitts laying beside his glass stared in bug-eyed reproach.

"Scissors are in the drawer by the toaster, sweetie. Just one, okay? I don't want you to spoil your dinner." Eve turned to Will. "Or maybe we don't need to switch off. We just work in different precincts."

"Your sister's not coming, buddy. She went skiing." Will kicked the empty chair towards his son in an effort to be inviting. Toby jumped back, startled.

"I was looking forward to bringing her in for Family Day at the office." Will said to Eve. "I really thought she'd get something out of it this year, being a business major. She's always loved visiting BestTest, getting dressed up, ordering Doris around." Eve was smart not to kick him. Toby would've felt the table shake. Instead, she slipped her bare foot under Will's pant leg, digging her big toenail into his calf until he looked up at his son, who was intent on pushing his pinky through the cream in his cannoli.

"I'd ask Mr. Rock Star over here, but I know he wouldn't be interested."

Toby's head shot up. "No, Dad, I wanna go! I mean, I do think corporate America's an evil that's destroying all of mankind but hey...we

can do lunch."

Eve laughed and Will smiled. She sent him to go wash up. Toby always looked like he needed to wash up.

"You're a good man, Will Tyler."

"You need a pedicure, Eve Tyler." She laughed again. Then she got up to turn off the stew and Will got up to freshen his drink.

In the past, Gabby had not taken disappointment well. She screamed; she threw lamps; she called him a "focking peeg!" in her lilting French accent. Still, such matters were better handled in person. Will had been on Outlook, surveying the cluttered gloom of this week's calendar, when he realized that BestTest Family Day was Wednesday. Hump Day.

He sighed, putting on his coat and Harried Executive expression. He paused before Doris' desk.

"Just realized, I've got to drop in on a principal out in Brooklyn. He's interested in our Achieving is Believing Test Prep, just needs a little nudge."

"Oh, Mr. Tyler, on a Monday too!" his secretary clucked. "You work too hard."

Will sometimes wondered what it was like to be Doris. Years ago she'd outgrown the standard office chairs and had had to have one specially ordered for her. Her desk was arrayed with stuffed animals, pictures of her grandkids, other people's grandkids and a bowl of ever changing candy. If you wanted to know something about somebody at BestTest, you came to Doris. But of Will she suspected nothing, adoring him like the jumbo chocolate chip muffin with butter she ate for breakfast every morning.

"There's no such thing as working too hard, Doris." Will smiled bravely. "Send everyone to voicemail."

The apartment was dark when he let himself in. Will wasn't worried. It was Monday and raining. Gabrielle would be no where but in bed. "Who's that?" she called from the bedroom. Will froze.

Choose one (1) answer to the question below:

Upon your entering her home, girlfriend young enough to be your daughter asks 'Who's that?' If it is true that you're supposed to be the only other person with the fucking key, then it is safe to assume:

- A) She's cheating on you
- B) She's a woman alone in the city, just protecting herself.
- C) She's cheating on you.
- D) She's made and distributed copies of the key to an assortment of young hardbodies she has no intention of sleeping with, you cuckold.

"Who else would it be?" Will asked lightly. As he reached the end of the hall, the bedroom door slammed in his face.

"Not yet! Why did you not call first, *cheri*? Go and make yourself a drink."

There was nothing in the fridge but beer and individually wrapped cheese. For a gently reared Parisian girl, Gabby had a shocking love of Velveeta. He took a bottle and one of the slender cigarettes she smoked for appearances out onto the fire escape, seated himself on the ledge out of sight and waited. Whoever she had in her bedroom would try to sneak out here, assuming Will would be in the living room. He ran through the list of suspects: Josh, her brilliant but moody scene study partner or Skylar, who threw parties at his loft in Williamsburg Saturday nights, when Will would be in his study, nodding off over the family's investments...

Tentative footsteps stopped before the window. Will waited a moment, then drew up the blinds.

Gabby stood before him naked, pink nipples peering up at him. Her

long, black hair, hung in two clumps from her hands.

He climbed back inside. "What did you do?"

She had been crying. She let the hair fall from her hands to touch his shirt. "You were standing in the rain. Why? You are soaked." The moment she said it, he began to shiver. No wonder he hadn't been able to light that cigarette.

In the shower, he turned her this way and that, washing away the hair with his hands. She was as uninvolved in this as if she'd been a child. Finally, she said:

"After I did my scene, my teacher said to me: 'Don't lose the accent. Keep your hair long. You might have a shot.'" Her imitation of an American accent was flat and nasal. Or was that the way they really sounded?

"What about your partner...what's his name?"

"Oh, he loved Josh! 'So real! I forgot you were my student. I only weesh Sam Shepard himself were here!'" She leaned her wet head against his chest. She had cut her hair into a fairly even pageboy. It was charming, framed the round loveliness of her face but still, a man could not wrap himself up in it, could not let his eyes half close as she arched over him, pretending the black curtain of her hair was night itself.

"Maybe he just doesn't like girls. Is he a fruit?"

"A fruit, Weel?" she rolled her eyes. "He was only cruel to me. He always is! As though I am so bad I do not even deserve to be criticized seriously. I should call Wednesday morning, when he has office hours, give him a piece of my brain."

He smiled, stroking her neck. "That reminds me. Toby's coming to work with me Wednesday, so we're not going to be able to have lunch." Lunch, that was their name for it.

Her eyes slid down to her pink shower pouf, her lips pursed as though she were solving a not too difficult math problem. "I understand. *C'est la vie.*"

"*C'est la vie? Pas la guerre?*"

"Aïe! You sound like a chambermaid."

He pulled her close to him. "That's what I'd like to see you in, a

little French maid's outfit." He growled into her ear. She was supposed to giggle, but merely sighed.

"Oh Weel." She pulled away to turn off the shower.

Vaughn was pretty enthusiastic about the Pittsburgh Diet. You could eat anything you wanted, except for fruit, vegetables and marzipan, and you had to jog twenty miles a week.

"It sounds like ego, making you paranoid." Vaughn said, as they stretched by the side of the track. He began sweating right away. "There's always that point in a relationship when the axis shifts and you're no longer the center of the universe."

"Axis my ass. When I cancelled for tomorrow, you should've seen her—not even a flicker. Used to be, I was five minutes late she'd turn into the Tasmanian Devil."

"What you two need is a vacation. Take her upstate to some little inn. Have breakfast in bed, walk in the woods. A wife, you only have to sweep off her feet once. With a mistress, it's an endless fucking process."

"Maybe she's feeling neglected. I have been busy lately."

"Either that or you hire the private investigator I play poker with. Have her followed."

"Or I could put tracking devices in her thongs. Seriously, maybe it is me, maybe I'm still smarting over...let me ask you, have you ever been totally flattened by a woman? I mean, just laid out by a blow you didn't see coming?"

"Nope."

"Oh c'mon..."

"You don't believe me?"

"You're 5'8, you have a hairline that started receding like high tide our sophomore year; there must've been at least one woman who wasn't throwing her panties at you."

Vaughn grinned. Insults made him feel loved. "Why? What happened to you?"

"There was this woman. Two years ago. Beyond beautiful, smart,

funny. Valerie. She was so tall and blond, I kept calling her Valkyrie. We danced all night at this bar in the Village and I don't even think there was a jukebox. We made out by a payphone and then she went into the ladies' room to get freshened up. We were going to go back to her place. I waited by the door. Right by the door the whole time. She never came out."

"Maybe she's still in there."

"I went in, after about forty minutes. There was a window facing an alley, wide open. She'd climbed out a window to get away from me."

They stopped in the middle of the track, grabbing their thighs, gasping for breath.

"How many times have we gone around?"

"Almost once. You know what? Fuck her. Fuck 'em all."

"Fuck Pittsburgh too."

While Melissa had always had the ease of a polished statement, Toby was a stammered question to which the answer, in his father's mind, was usually 'no'. As his son loped through the throng at Grand Central, Will had to restrain himself from telling him to tuck in his shirt, smooth out his shirt, dear God, why was he wearing that shirt?

"He's so excited, honey." Eve had whispered, as she handed him his briefcase by the door. "Just remember, he's willing to suffer eight hours in Corporate America just to spend the day with his dad."

Well, what about what he was giving up? Will thought of the slow, raindrop shape Gabby's breasts took when she crawled towards him on the bed. "Don't worry." he dropped a kiss on his wife's forehead. "We'll have fun."

Four hours later, he needed a drink. Toby had spent the morning spinning dervishly in Will's swivel chair and crashing the laptop twice in an attempt to download music from a group called Chocolate Chip Nipple. He refused to mix with the other teenagers who'd come in for Family Day—athletic looking boys in crisp rugby shirts. Finally, Will ordered him to ask Doris if she needed help filing so he could make a conference call. He shut the door behind him and dialed Gabby's number.

It gave him an almost homesick feeling, the thought of a Wednesday

without Soho, especially the brick walled loft that had been in her family for decades. While his house seemed choked with knickknacks and photos taken on every single day the children had spent on earth, Gabby's was all sun and hardwood floors. Walking with her through the cobbled streets, pulling her onto his lap in a café, was like having the years drop from him. Until once again, he was Billy: a lean, rakish youth with his entire life ahead of him, rather than William F. Tyler, Regional Vice President of BestTest Incorporated, owner of a pouting stomach no amount of crunches could cheer.

Her answering machine picked up. He left a slow message—sometimes she screened. He deleted some e-mail. Tried again and hung up before the machine picked up. Rifled through his phone messages, placing the ones that ended in exclamation points on top. Tried again. His son's voice carried over her ringing phone.

"You know what my Dad used to be before he became a corporate stooge?" Toby was perched on Doris' desk, long legs swinging. "He was a teacher. He taught in the South Bronx and he had 39 kids in his class and none of them had ever heard of Shakespeare and at the end of the year, they put on a play for the whole school. Romeo and Juliet. That's how good he was."

This week, Doris had jelly beans in her candy bowl. Her fingers moved from bowl to mouth as she kept her eyes on Toby. "Who played Juliet?" she asked.

"I don't know, probably some girl. But the point is, my Dad was making a difference and then he sold out to do this, to make tests those same students would be doomed to fail. Don't you think that sucks, Doris?"

His secretary noticed Will in the doorway and placed a warning hand on Toby's knee. "What were you saying before, sweetie? About stooges? My favorite was always Curly."

"I know a good place on Lexington about ten blocks up." Will told his son in the cab. "Famous deli, they serve the most overstuffed..."

"Wait, can we go to the Village? That's where there's the best Thai food. And I know a pizza place that has a garden out back. Anyway, I'm

a vegetarian, Dad, remember? It's been two weeks now."

It wasn't until they'd gotten out by Washington Square and Toby began to lead that Will wondered how he even knew Greenwich Village. This part of the city had never been his mother's cup of tea and even an occasional outing with school would not have given him the confidence to negotiate the twisting streets and busy intersections like he did.

He's been coming here without permission, Will fumed, glaring as his son paused in a record shop window. He'd probably been cutting school with those scruffy friends of his. Until last year he wasn't even allowed to take the bus to the mall and here he was, coming to city! Often enough to have favorite restaurants, the sneaky little shit. Will closed his eyes and turned away, taking a deep breath. When he opened them, he saw his girlfriend step from a cab across the street, through the door of a bistro. As she entered, a man's hand reached out from inside and rested lightly on the small of her back. Then the door closed behind them.

"Will, it's freezing in here!" Eve stepped into the bathroom, just as he was finishing his shower.

"Hot water cut off midway." He hated himself not for lying, but for needing a cold shower that night because he hadn't had his day. His body was programmed for Wednesdays and he couldn't believe he still wanted that scheming little bitch after what he'd seen this afternoon. Or thought he'd seen. He turned off the faucet, staring down at the goose bumps on his wet skin. He sucked in his stomach out of habit. "Shit! Honey, I forgot..."

"I left you a towel on the sink." Eve chided from their room. "Again."

"I'm sorry, I'm distracted." Will sighed as he got into bed, resisting the urge to pull the comforter over his head. "There's a lot I'm dealing with at work, which my tie-dyed guest didn't make any easier."

"Well, at least Toby had a good day." Eve had gotten into bed with her Dream Box—a lap-sized chest full of pictures she'd cut from home magazines, museum postcards and squares of soft-colored fabric. Whenever she began a new decorating project, she would sift through these, then

bade herself to dream of her client's house. Her voice at these times would take on a softer timbre, as though snippets of beauty had flowed through her hands to places deep within her.

"He tell you he sat in on a board meeting?"

Eve smiled, shaking her head. "Maybe that's what he was writing about. When you two got home, he said he knew what he was going to use as his editorial; he's been locked in his room all night."

"I wish he showed that kind of enthusiasm for algebra. Any of his subjects. Gym, for God's sake."

"He tries."

"You know," Will opened his eyes, propping his pillow behind his back. "What goes on in those meetings is confidential. I mean, he can write about it in a general way..."

"Always looking over your shoulder." Out in the hall, the phone started to ring. "I doubt the SAT people read the Woodrow Wilson Wailer."

"Dad, It's Uncle Vaughn!"

"Goodness, at this hour?" It was 10:15. "I do hope it's nothing with him and Lauren. They're the happiest couple we know."

"Why don't you take your time getting back to me, fuckhead." Will hissed into the receiver. The light bulb in the hall was dying. From Toby's room wafted Bob Marley and the smell of socks.

"Sorry. I'm a little tied up at the office, heh-heh."

"Cindy?"

"Turns out construction workers aren't such good listeners."

"No one tops orthodontists, of course. What'd you say at home?"

"Furnace."

"It's March."

"Exactly. I can't start blaming the air conditioning until June."

"What his name, that detective you told me about at the track?" Will paused to look about the flickering hallway. "I saw her with some guy today. Well, some guy's hand. I want to have her followed."

Why? If he already knew. Vaughn cleared his throat. "She's in the bathroom right now, putting on her make-up. We've got awhile. Talk to

me."

"There's nothing to say. I just want to see the guy who's replacing me. God help him."

"I'll e-mail you Keith's info right now. I'll send him one too, tell him to expect your call."

"I guess you're busy tomorrow."

"You're damn right! I'm going to be on the phone with the super about this damn furnace, always acting up every time I get new support staff." He laughed. Will didn't. "Of course, man. I'll go with you."

"I have to admit," detective Keith Yamamoto stood up from his desk. "This is a new one." He had listened without comment while Will had laid out his case, his eyes on Gabby's black and white headshot. It was the only picture Will had of her with her clothes on.

"Fortunately, surveillance in a case like this should be fairly simple."

"How soon can I get pictures?"

"It's hard to say. Affairs, by their nature are unpredictable." Yamamoto was a big man in a Hawaiian shirt. He reminded Will of a bouncer until he walked across his small, cluttered office and began to feed his fish. Will had expected more of a James Bond layout: sleek and glossy with all sorts of surveillance equipment. Instead two of the walls were lined with bookshelves filled with dusty psychoanalytic texts. The kind you wonder if your therapist has ever actually read. The office was unusual in that you had to walk through it to reach what looked like a smaller waiting area. Through the half-open door, Will could see a couch, fresh flowers on a low table, a box of tissues by the lamp. "That must be the Crying Room." Vaughn had quipped.

"Won't she get...suspicious if she notices some guy following her?" He stopped himself from saying 'scared'.

"In my eight years in the field, a subject has never suspected they were being tracked. If they did, it only seemed to encourage them." The big man chuckled, screwing the top back on the fish food. "Besides, I'm going to have my partner accompany me."

"So, she's going to have two guys following her?"

"My partner is a woman: blonde and friendly and very girl next door. We pretend we're together. A couple attracts much less suspicion.

"Gabby's an actress. She's got a sixth sense if there's a camera in the room."

"Mobile surveillance is more sophisticated than the average person would like to think. One can hide a camera in a pen, a purse, on the body."

"Have any of your clients ever been wrong?" Vaughn stood up, went to study the fish. Will cleared his throat. "I guess we should be going. But that reminds me, I know you have my number..."

"I'll contact you via e-mail, Mr. Tyler. Or if you prefer, through my friend Vaughn here." Will thought the big man held his gaze a second longer than necessary. "In situations such as this, only a fool would be indiscreet."

"I'm starved. What are you in the mood for?" Vaughn slowed by a drive-thru. "McDonald's or food?"

The only pub they could find had a sticky counter and an old man snoring over a mug. The bartender dried a shot glass for several minutes before he came and took their order.

A TV fuzzed overhead. Daytime commercials: floor wax. Slip-and-fall lawyers.

"I'm tempted to say it can't get any worse than this. But whenever a character says that in a movie, a piano falls on his head."

"What are you going to do when you get the pictures?"

"One night, last winter, I took her ice skating. She'd never been. No snow in Paris. The whole evening, I think she was trying to tell me she loved me. Every time I thought she was going to say it, I kissed her until she lost her breath."

"Hey, buddy!" Vaughn pounded his hand on the bar. "Could you turn up the TV?"

"Oh, excuse me! Am I boring you?" Vaughn put a hand on Will's elbow, pointed up at the screen. The bartender was pushing the volume up with the end of a broom.

"...in the usually sleepy town when students of Woodrow Wilson

High School held a walk-out, protesting the administration of the Standardized Creativity Assessment Test, otherwise know as the SCAT. The controversial test, which includes..." The camera zoomed from the anchorwoman, across the protesters, to where Toby stood atop the Wilson High sign, bullhorn in hand. The sea of teenage heads and fists below him were lifted to the figure of their leader.

It felt good, to yank open the door, kick it shut behind him. His tossed coat nearly hit Eve in the face as she came out the kitchen. She raced behind him up the stairs.

"Will...Will! Listen to me..."

Will turned on her so quickly she shrank back a step. "I'm done listening to you about this ingrateful little fuck! 14 years of nothing but trouble. It's over!"

"You're drunk!"

"Not too drunk to get on the phone with that military school tomorrow."

He turned and climbed the stairs two at a time, giddy with rage. He opened the door to his son's room forgetting to steel himself for the chaos of clothes and papers littering the floor. He had been planning to yank his son from the bed, slam him down on his feet and slap the spit out of his mouth. For once and for all, and fuck Dr. Terry T. Brazleton and his own memories of trying to become a man in his father's house.

Instead, Toby was standing in the middle of the room, facing the open door. Will, caught off-guard, stopped short.

"You son of a bitch."

"I'm 15, Dad."

"I don't give a..."

"You just told Mom I've been fourteen years of trouble. Well, I'm fifteen."

Will smiled. "I forgot. The genius failed kindergarten." He waited to see his son wince before continuing.

"Do you know what my day was like? I've got reporters outside my building. I've got a disciplinary meeting with my boss next week, for

which he's making a special trip out from Texas. *Texas*, Toby. I've got employees sneering at me behind their folders in the hallway." He walked closer to his son, until he could see the wiry hairs on his upper lip. "I am 18 years from retirement, boy. Did you ever stop to think what happens to this family if I lose my job? You know Melissa's in school don't you? Don't you?" He saw his own spittle fly from his mouth. "I wish to God we had stopped at your sister!"

"Will!" Eve screamed from the doorway, before her hand went to her mouth, ruining any illusion the three of them might have held that what Will had just said was from anger alone.

"Maybe I should've been like her." Toby whispered. "And cheat on all your stupid tests. Almost every test we took in school."

"You're a liar."

"Am I?" Toby's voice cracked whenever he raised it. "Think about it, Dad. When we were younger, Melissa wasn't much better of a student than I am. Then she gets to junior high and all of a sudden, she's acing every exam, including the useless ones your company puts out."

"She grew up and buckled down."

"She cheated! There's a whole network of students on the Web. They steal the answers to tests and exams, then they trade them. And guess which ones Melissa had access to?" Will didn't know what his face looked like at that point, but this time, it was Toby's turn to smile. "You really think she liked hanging out at your job? You think she was straightening your office at home for that lousy five bucks you used to give her?"

Will turned away to see a poster Bob Marley, grinning at him through a haze of smoke. "One thing I know about your sister, she's loyal. She never would've betrayed you like this. Any of us. And if she was cheating, she helped you cheat too. Which makes you just as guilty as she is."

"She tried. I told her no. Ask her yourself. She got upset. She was like, 'Don't you want to go to a good college? Don't you want to be successful like Dad?'"

"And what did Saint Toby say to that?"

"I said that if successful is what you are, then it's the last thing I want

to be."

It'd taken only four days. Will made an appointment to see Yamamoto after work. He drove to his office first thing the next morning

Yamamoto sounded surprised but buzzed him in. Wordlessly, they exchanged envelopes. My money for my life, Will thought. The door to the smaller room was closed this time, making the room seem impossibly cramped and airless. He didn't know how Yamamoto stood it, trapped in this little box all day. He sat down.

"Can I offer you some coffee?"

Will traced his finger along the chip in the mug as Yamamoto pulled the wastepaper basket close and began rifling through a stack of mail. This was no place for small talk: 'So, how's the family...?'

"Look at this, Mr. Tyler. People say fish have no feelings but..." When the big man rose and walked to the tank, five colorful fish swam up to him, tails swishing. "I just fed them an hour ago. They're not hungry. They feel love, like the rest of us." He scratched the bowl with his finger.

"I can't help but wonder what you think of me." Will said. "A middle aged black man chasing after some French twat who's playing him for a fool. I know it shouldn't matter."

"This is where I'm supposed to say something Zen and non-judgemental, yes?" Yamamoto sat down, his big hands folded on the desk. "You're right. It doesn't matter."

"Just for the record, my wife is beautiful."

"I know." said Yamamoto. He drew back. Will stared at him. He looked to his left, then rose. Yamamoto raised a hand, but dropped it as Will turned and opened the side door.

The lights were off in the small room. It took Will's eyes a moment to make her out, the tall blonde rigid on the couch.

"Valerie. Made it out of the bathroom, I see."

Fill in the blank with the best possible answer

Upon a chance reunion with the woman who could have destroyed one's marriage, one should _____

- A) Reach out and shake her until her bleached head snaps off.**
- B) Feign a heart attack. When she approaches in concern, see A.**
- C) Ask her to a light lunch.**

"Wanna hear something funny?" Will leaned across the table. For months, I would be sitting at my desk and I'd just get this feeling that you were out there. I'd take a cab downtown and walk all around the neighborhood near that bar. That's how I met my girlfriend actually." He chuckled, crumbling a warm breadstick in his hands. "She came up to me and said, 'You've walked down this street three times, are you looking for something?' And I said, "Yeah, you." Will winked at Valerie over the rim of his glass, the vaguely balsamic taste of the Pinot souring his throat.

"My husband cheated on me our entire relationship." Valerie said. "'Wait him out.' my mother would advise. 'Your father was like that too, but not anymore.' My Dad's 73. He's had a triple bypass. He can't even eat pizza anymore. One day, I get a phone call. 'Will you please, please leave my husband alone?' Turns out he had another wife in Connecticut.

"From then on, all I wanted out of life was to make you bastards suffer. The decoy job was a godsend. Women would hire me to tempt their husbands, see if they would cheat, given the chance. I thought those women would feel liberated, that they'd take me out for drinks. They'd sit on the couch and cry like little girls. Some would storm out, vowing to get a divorce. They'd leave the pictures on the table." She drained her wine. "You're wondering about your wife, Eva. I remember her..."

"Eve." Will felt his face grow hot.

"She was the only one who didn't look at the pictures. She held the

envelope on her lap, but she didn't open it. She said, 'I can't. I know I'm not enough for him. The knowing is almost more than I can bear. The proof would kill me.'"

Will stood. He fumbled for his wallet, throwing some bills on the table.

"I only do surveillance now. Keith and I are going to be married in June." Valerie half stood as she spoke. "I'm sorry..." When Will had walked out, she picked up the carafe and filled her glass as one should never, nearly to the brim.

He wondered why he'd never gotten around to taking out the swing set. It hadn't been used in ages, got in the way when they had summer parties. He sat on a swing before dinner, drink in hand, pushing himself idly with his feet.

Toby came through the sliding door. He didn't shut it behind him but for once, Will said nothing. If all went well during next week's interview at Battle Rock Academy, that would soon not be a problem.

When Toby sat down at the top of the slide, his feet almost touched the bottom. As a child, he would hold his arms out in front of him as he swooshed down, yelling "Supermaan!"

"I hope you didn't come out here to try to talk me out of anything."

"If I was, I would've waited 'til your third drink."

Will stopped the swing. It'd rained earlier and the ground was soft beneath his feet.

"Remember when you were teaching in the Bronx and I came to class with you? I wanted to watch rehearsals. You were doing the scene where Mercutio gets stabbed and dies in Romeo's arms. Remember what happened that day?"

"Tyrone." Will murmured.

"Yeah, the kid playing Romeo. He freaked out and started shaking Mercutio. Started yelling, 'Ray-Ray! Don't die! I called 911, just hold on, man! Hold on...' Mercutio freaked out and ran. Then Romeo started crying. All by himself in the middle of the stage. You walked up there, real slow. Tough Mr. Tyler. You took him in your arms, remember that?"

Some of the girls had started crying too, the boys were all looking at their sneakers. And you said to them, "You guys think you're gangsters. You think you're thugs. Well, you're not. Just for surviving your lives, you're heroes."

He swung his legs around, jumped off. "I'll go to that Battle School, Dad. I'll make you proud of me." He paused in the doorway, without turning. "You know, you're still my hero. Just in a different way."

Gabby always showered after yoga. As Will waited for her, he spread the pictures out on the bed. Her walking with her acting teacher through Central Park, the two of them kissing by the Boathouse, her head on his shoulder as they paused at a bridge. When she saw them, Gabby immediately started wailing. She threw her wet towel in his face and ran naked to the fire escape, threatening to throw herself off. Will yanked her back into the living room. They fell struggling to the ground. He unzipped his pants, pushing himself inside of her. "Don't leave," she whispered afterwards, as he carried her to bed. When he threw back the comforter, the photos scattered like leaves. He held her hand until she fell asleep. Walked through the dark streets of Soho for a while, then hailed a cab home.

Steam from the shower surrounded him like ghosts. Tomorrow was the meeting with Mr. McCaw. The boss wasn't speaking to him directly, but through his secretary. Doris' candy bowl had been empty all week.

But he wasn't thinking of that. He was thinking of his name. Years ago, it'd given him a feeling of strength when he'd walked up and introduced himself to a woman, or to a man sitting behind a desk as big as the front porch he'd played on as a boy. But when he'd been that boy, it seemed they'd only named him to hasten their demands. "Will, you listen to me. Will you go study. Will you gimme that report card! Will you watch the way you talk to me!"

"Will you shut up?" he whispered, breathing in a mouthful of steam. "Shut the fuck up."

"Will," The door opened and Eve emerged from the darkness of their bedroom. When he'd crept in, she'd been asleep. She sighed. "Why do

you do this?"

He took a step back and almost slipped, his foot shrieking against the tub. His hand found the bar. He stood for a moment, listening to the finish line beat of his heart, then turned off the water. It would've been better to slide open the shower door, but his arm wouldn't move.

"Shame on you, Will Tyler." His breath fogged the glass. "The day of the big test and you are unfuckingprepared." He chuckled and the figure of his wife took a step toward him. He pressed his palm against the glass and it stopped. "You want answers, right? And you deserve them. You deserve everything, baby. Except what I've been handing you. And don't think I don't walk with that every second.

"So I'm going to give you a choice. I can give you that much. You ready?" He waited. She didn't speak. He leaned his forehead against the glass.

A) I say to you, 'I don't know myself. Why I sleep with other women, I mean. And I beg you for mercy. I beg for forgiveness. And I swear I'll never do it again.'

B) You don't even wait for that. You scream at me. You slap my face. You run away so that I have to chase you. Like I used to chase you. And when I catch you I swear I'll never let you go, I swear I'll never do it again.

C) Or I say, "Help me, baby. Please. Because some nights I dream I'm lost in this forest of legs and breasts and eyes that answer before I ask. But I wake up to Monday morning every goddamn day of my life. And I'm tired. I need your help. I swear I won't do it anymore.

D) (He could hear her breathing. Or was it his own?) I swear I won't do it anymore because I...I've found someone. And I love her. We're meant for each other.

After a moment, he opened his eyes. He was still there. When he slid open the shower door, Eve took another step towards him. Her lips

parted a long time before she spoke.

"I meant," she whispered. "Why do you take a shower and always forget to bring a towel."

She held it out to him, which did no good; he could not figure what in the world came next.



Underground & Awake.

The first
8 parts of
a nonlinear
surreal graphic
novel cycle.

by Daniel Guzman

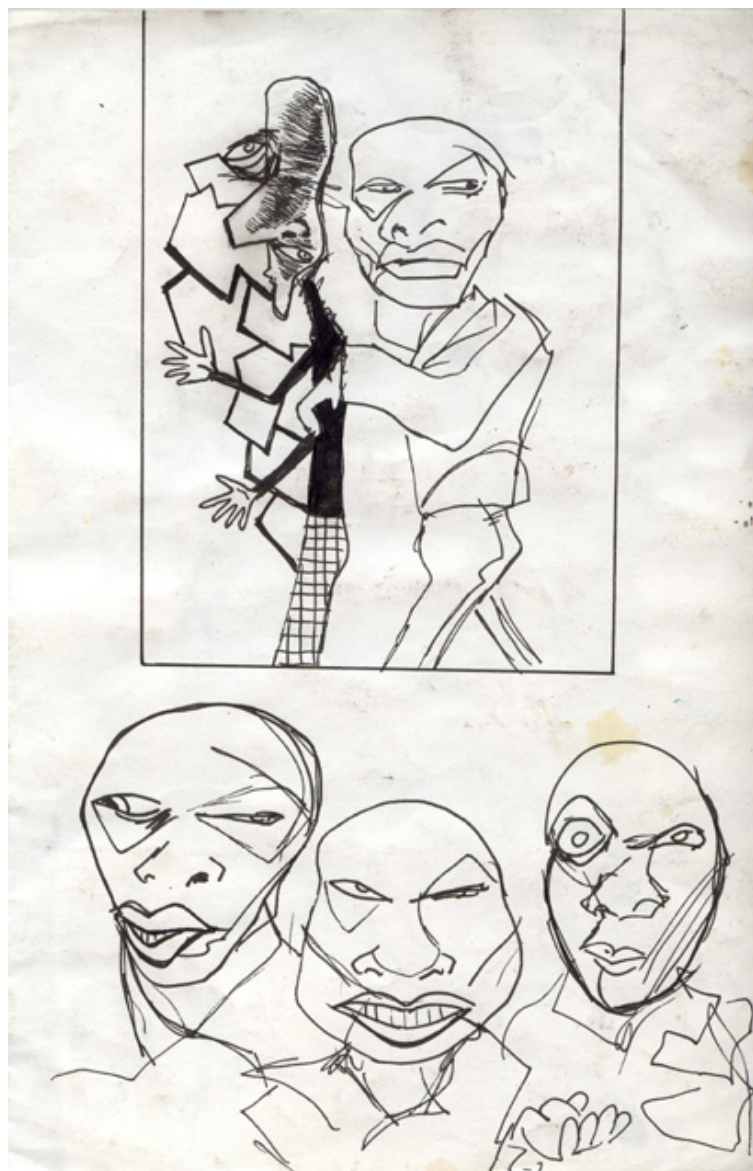




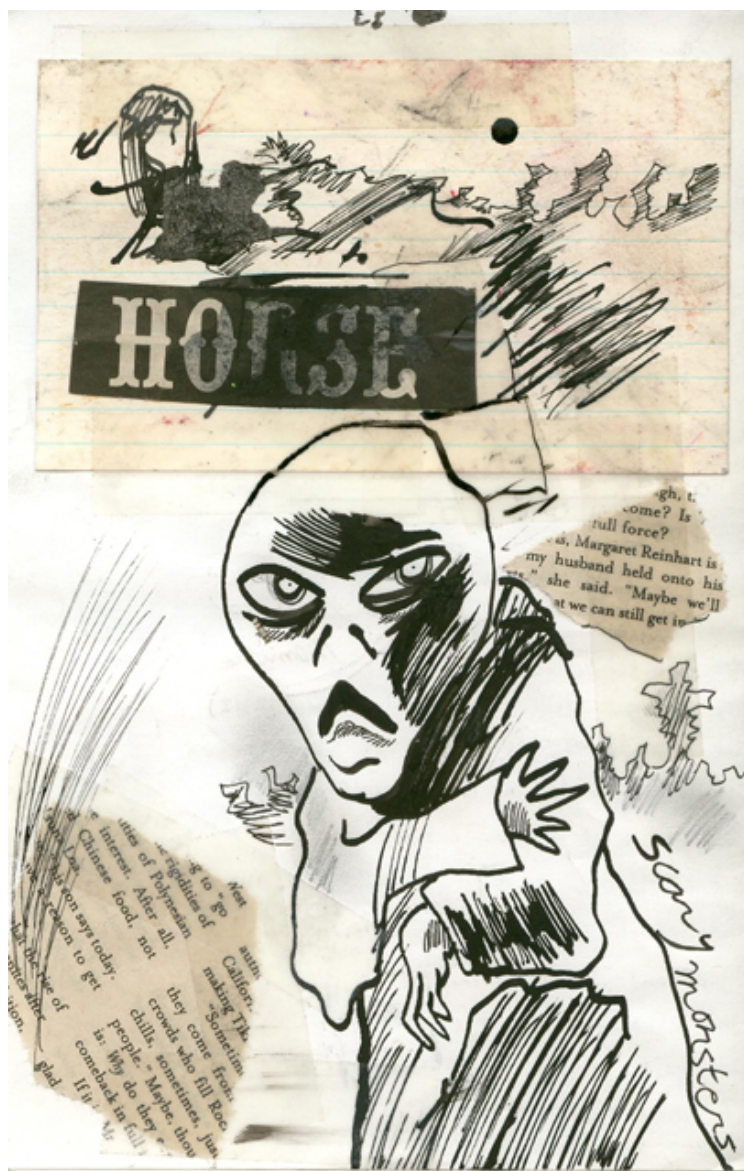












The Origin of the Global Iniquity Markets

A Scholarly Essay from The Encyclopedia™(with annotations)

Kenneth Halpern

Social Foundations

When society finally came to know itself, certain problems which had hitherto eluded remedy were understood to constitute a natural part of its being. They are no more likely to be eradicated than the shortcomings of individual men, and attempts to do so enjoyed the same success. Once crime had been accepted as an inevitable and important part of the social fabric, ideological programs to eliminate it were no longer pursued. This is not to say that conventional mechanisms of suppression and redress were abandoned. Rather, the necessity of its existence was recognized. The structure and nature of law enforcement largely remained unchanged; however the imperceptible philosophical underpinnings had materially transformed. This resulted in both the adoption of more reasonable metrics of efficacy and a pragmatic approach to the allocation of resources. The performance of programs and officials was now judged against realistic goals rather than the extreme results that zealotry demands. Individual moral culpability remained, of course, and criminals were punished as ever. It is not our purpose to expound on the ensuing evolution of the penal code. Rather, we focus on the economic implications of this renaissance. To that end, we only consider crimes or criminal enterprises which have pecuniary motives. The effect of other activity is ancillary, and primarily manifests itself through an influence on laws and practices.

Early Evolution of Contracts

Most economically motivated crime is disorganized, consisting of innumerable acts of unplanned and petty theft. It represents a baseline noise whose level strongly reflects overall economic conditions and the local social distribution of wealth, and is not of direct interest from a market per-

spective. However, broader ventures such as complex heists, white collar crime, or ongoing criminal enterprises often require capital. Much like any business, they cannot start without a seed. Funds may be obtained by conventional methods, such as the aforementioned minor crime, but those often prove slow and risky. The probability of detection is far greater during the commission of several small crimes than a single large one. Smart criminals think big¹. Naturally, no legitimate investors would fund such an endeavor if responsibility can be assigned to them. Fear of prosecution is often what prevents these individuals from becoming criminals themselves, and it would not behoove them to place their fate in the hands of strangers with no particular sense of loyalty. However once crime was understood to be an integral part of human intercourse and politicians were no longer blinded by doctrine, a remarkable new perspective arose. Why should only criminals benefit from crime? If a fixed amount of crime will occur despite the best efforts of law enforcement then why not allow ordinary citizens to reap the benefits of criminal enterprises²? The natural way to accomplish this is by immunizing investors against prosecution. This was first effected through the Baswort-Stega act. Though later amended in various minor ways, that law has essentially survived intact to the present day - largely due to its simplicity. Individuals can legally invest in particular criminal enterprises as long as they (i) have a clear contract, (ii) don't possess substantive details of the crimes to take place, and (iii) are not directly involved in the commission of the crimes or related activities.

The only practical mechanism by which all parties can be brought together in such a manner is through the agency of crime brokers. The latter are large companies that serve as middlemen, maintaining anonymity on both

¹The trademark of one of the large anonymous criminal organizations in current operation.

²That this could be achieved without increasing the level of crime required considerable academic analysis. However, the reinvestment of legitimate proceeds into law enforcement through the introduction of a criminal investment tax proved surprisingly successful in this regard. Several decades of empirical data and research have demonstrated that fluctuations in the base rate of crime are almost entirely dependent on external phenomena and the system is self-limiting from a resource standpoint. See Ruger, et al, 2186 *Journal of Financial Politics* v.26, p.327 for an excellent review of the subject.

sides and matching individual investors with specific ventures. The extent of an investor's knowledge consists of a prospectus describing the proposed activities in general terms.

The Speculative Parties hereby pledge the sum of \$20,000 to be immediately communicated through the Broker to the Active Party, less a contractual brokerage fee of \$1500, for the purpose of engaging in the proposed Enterprise described below. Upon completion of the proposed Enterprise and in consideration of this investment, the Active Party will remit to the Speculative Parties from any net profit a sum equal to the greater of \$65,250 and 20% of the proceeds. Notwithstanding any other part of this agreement, the Active Party's obligation shall not exceed the entirety of its net profit from the specific Enterprise referred to herein. In the event that the Enterprise is cancelled, the Active Party shall assume responsibility for the entire brokerage fee, and return to the Speculative Parties the original investment sum of \$20,000 plus interest compounded at 8.5% per annum and measured from the date on this contract. This shall be accomplished no later than 30 calendar days from the Cancellation Date. The Enterprise shall be deemed to have been cancelled if not completed within 14 calendar days of the Target Date unless specifically provided for in the prospectus. The Speculative Parties agree that in the event of apprehension, the Active Party may use any remaining capital for the purpose of legal defense. The Speculative Parties understand all risks and may not hold any other party liable for damages under any circumstances excepting violation of anonymity by the Broker. In the event of nonpayment by the Active Party, the Broker shall not be held liable for any expected monies. No efforts at collection by the Broker on behalf of the Speculative Parties shall be deemed an abjuration of this immunity. The Speculative Parties shall not seek to establish the identity of the Active party nor shall they seek further detail of the activities described herein. This contract and the accompanying prospectus, their content, and existence are privileged and may not be disclosed, alone or in conjunction with other public information, nor may they be used in any manner that may adversely affect the Active Party. In all cases, as specified by law, the Speculative Parties shall not be liable for the actions of the Active Party.

The kidnapping of a child for a ransom of \$400,000 to take place within the next three months. The family in question is known to be of good financial standing and should easily be able to pay. Participants have experience in several prior such kidnappings and are familiar with various techniques for maximizing the probability of success. Strong possibility of violence. Investment will be used for scouting, surveillance, site acquisition, and possible sustained maintenance costs.

An excerpt from an actual contract. Most of the language is boilerplate³

³The numbers listed may seem high for historical sums, but the reader should recall that periodic recalibration of currencies was a common practice until a mean reverting system

The critical component necessary to make the entire arrangement possible was a law protecting broker-client confidentiality. This was first addressed in CBPA-OC, the Crime Broker Protection Act of 2118, a rather specialized piece of legislation, and later enumerated under the Husmann Communications Clarification Act of 2124 as one of the fourteen Class I privileged relationships that are considered inviolate⁴. This effectively placed it on par with spousal privilege until the demotion of the latter after the abuses resulting from generalized marriage contracts (see Appendix A).

Under no circumstance can a judge demand information from brokerage firms. This often proves difficult to bear when a particularly egregious crime has been committed. In fact, it is believed that the sample proposal above was the contract underlying the Bonhaffer kidnapping, in which an eight year old girl was mutilated and left to starve in a trunk when the family could not pay. During the three week period involved, the brokerage firm could have provided relevant information but did not do so because it would have violated the contract. Any such disclosure could have impaired the kidnappers' chances of success. Terribly callous as such a silence may appear, it is necessary. A breach of trust would allow resolution of a few immediate cases but result in the dissolution of the entire system. Stated more succinctly, this is information the police would not have had were the broker absent. The presence of human agency does not change anything. And according to the underlying social view, while the kidnapping in question may not have occurred were financing unavailable, different crimes would. Perhaps the active party would have robbed several convenience stores to raise the money. The concern of society is that the level remain manageable; the details are irrelevant. We do not care what is contained within the bottle as long as it does not spill out⁵.

was adopted. The reference level has not significantly changed in over 200 years.

⁴The need for explicit assignment of this right arose from the Supreme Court case of *Adriane Brown vs Grace Capital Brokers, LLC*. The court issued a narrow ruling which preserved broker-client confidentiality in that case but allowed further challenges. The Husmann act addressed this, and subsequent court rulings (most notably *Merk & Larson vs Clear Conscience Fiduciary, Inc*) have upheld its constitutionality.

⁵Initially, the major religious organs spoke vehemently against the criminal markets. However, in 2204 it was discovered that the single largest investor was the Vatican. Soon

Certain ironies are inevitable. An individual can inadvertently fund a crime in which he or his family is the victim. The most famous instance was that of Carl Sidonha, a case that inaugurated a heated public debate which ultimately reaffirmed the sanctity of the broker-client relationship.

By their nature, the criminal markets constitute a font of tragedy and yield myriad cautionary tales. Perhaps one of the most touching is that of Charles Sidonha, a Columbia Professor and father of two. As his older son approached college age, it quickly grew apparent that institutions comparable to that at which he taught lay beyond their economic means, an absurdity common in that profession. The young criminal enterprise market offered one of the few reasonable mechanisms by which a man of his station could amass the funds necessary to ensure a quality education for his son. After consultation with a financial advisor, he decided to invest in a number of criminal ventures. The first two involved an auto theft ring and an isolated attempt to smuggle prophylactics from Iran. These yielded mixed results. The car thefts proved lucrative, while the prophylactic smugglers proved characteristically violent and unreliable. After an unsuccessful attempt at interdiction by the Department of the Exterior, they dispersed and defaulted on their obligations. This experience almost deterred Dr. Sidonha from further investment. However, financial exigency proved a strong motivator and he ventured one more attempt, choosing to invest in a promising series of kidnappings. Shortly thereafter, both of his sons disappeared along with several classmates. Ransom notes followed, threatening the progressive amputation of body parts were timely payment not forthcoming. Several of the families paid and saw their children repatriated, but Dr. Sidonha could not – partly because his money had been invested. The timing appeared more than coincidental, and he drew the natural conclusion. From contact with the other victims' families, he knew that a number of them had paid. Therefore he begged the intermediary broker to advance him part of the return from the venture or offer a remission of the Active Party's obligation in return for the release of his son. They perfunctorily refused. In desperation, he went to the police but they could do nothing. As the successive deadlines passed, he received a slow stream of packages containing parts of his sons. He could not even console himself financially because he had violated confidentiality and forfeit the profit.

A selection from Bockord's *Popular Tales from the 11th Bench*

thereafter official religious opposition ceased. As with any social issue there remain vociferous opponents, but they have been marginalized.

Equity Exchanges, Pools, and Funds

Once individual investors were allowed to divest themselves of culpability, corporations endeavored to followed suit⁶. However, no simple metric for risk assessment existed, a prerequisite for significant corporate entry into any business. By their nature, criminals are hardly trustworthy.

This issue was addressed through the advent of a new institution. While an independent and largely unregulated over-the-counter criminal funding market still exists, the majority of current investment is effected through criminal enterprise exchanges. The first of these aptly emerged in Chicago. The exchanges allow the trading of pools of individual enterprise contracts and assign them quality ratings based on past performance of the participants. Criminals with a record of success and reliability can command competitive terms from their investors. The motive now existed for there to indeed be honor amongst thieves. Or at least between thieves and their underwriters. Large professional societies formed to serve as buffers. Some are managed by traditional syndicates, with according levels of violence⁷, while others closely resemble unions. Often, membership requires a lengthy application and approval process⁸

⁶This required little effort, as they already possess the rights of citizens. However, the considerable capital they command posed a problem. Brokerage firms were geared toward individual transactions and could not handle large investments in a simple manner. A few corporations engaged managers, often erstwhile brokers, to make myriad small investments, but in most cases this was infeasible.

⁷It was also possible for investors to have the broker retain a collection agency. However, depending on the methods used, the latter could be classified as a criminal enterprise itself. In one sensational case, an investor was convicted for an amputation committed by such an agency. Immunity does not extend to efforts at collection, and the practice of using criminal agencies was quickly abandoned.

⁸Such groups are not protected by any laws, and hence are subject to the usual betrayals and infiltration. However, the better funded organizations employ their capital to protect against this to the extent possible. Despite all precautions, spectacular collapses have occurred. Large criminal organizations tend to be efficient at generating revenue, benefiting from high capitalization and the immunity it can buy, but are also more susceptible to detection than their smaller counterparts. Simple statistical analysis demonstrates an exponential increase of the probability of apprehension with the number of participants. Investments also are susceptible to hidden correlations. Often, disparate ventures are managed by the same

The most spectacular example of the effect of hidden correlations was the Barruto crash of 2127. For many years, the Greenwich Cosa Nostra had proved impervious to prosecution. Under the leadership of Almadar Barruto it had grown into the most powerful criminal organization in the United States. Naturally, this success translated into arrogance, and opportunities arose for infiltration. In April, 2127 over 340 individuals were arrested and successfully prosecuted, leading to 43 sentences of Capital Punishment with Duress and the seizure of over \$4 trillion of assets. Among the affected operations were several drug smuggling rings, a major arms importer, three universities that had served as money launderers, one private hospital, and a well-known department store chain. In the ensuing financial meltdown, a number of prominent corporations were bankrupted, along with two county governments (most notably, the exclusive enclave of Paterson, NJ found itself impoverished overnight). They had all invested in highly leveraged portfolios that had deceptively appeared diverse. Risk assessment is difficult in the world of crime.

The Barruto Crash

In the usual interplay between individual investors and corporations, the public also wished to enjoy the stability of pools. Criminal enterprise funds were born. These are high quality pools with large prospectuses warning "unsophisticated investors" of every conceivable risk except the extreme boredom of reading such prospectuses. As the general populace remained unscathed, there arose a large variety of funds with differing goals and levels of risk. Today, over thirty thousand such funds are available. Some are termed "socially conscious" and focus on non-violent crime, crime that doesn't involve the elderly, or crime that only hurts insurance companies and large corporations. Many funds solely invest in other funds. Such "funds of funds" offer greater diversity, though they largely have been supplanted by the Global Iniquity Indices.

As criminal enterprise funds grew ubiquitous, many institutions began to view them as a means to hedge various social and economic risks. This particularly applied to those involved in or affected by criminal activity, such as insurance companies, political parties, hospitals, and law enforcement. Geographically local funds have proved an excellent protection for

large organization, a relationship that understandably is obscured. This problem is accentuated by the necessary level of secrecy. As a result, seemingly diverse investment portfolios may be exposed to significant specific risks.

police departments⁹, as the means to fight crime grow in proportion to the amount of it.

Naturally, a large host of structured and derivative products evolved as well (see Appendix C for a detailed discussion). Today, iniquity-related trading accounts for over 90% of all market activity.

Bubbles and Scandals

While investment was based on individual contracts, capitalization issues did not arise. However once liquid criminal equity and debt markets had been established, large institutional investors altered the landscape. The introduction of vast reservoirs of capital lowered yields and drove a number of speculative bubbles.

After the collapse of a minor bubble in the Institutional Religion sector, investors were wary of equity and sought alternate investment vehicles. Negative interest rates simultaneously provided ready cash for speculation and a dearth of high yield fixed income instruments. A number of Wall Street firms, beginning with Serpinsky Associates, responded to the demand for high yields by introducing and aggressively marketing the higher coupon, lower credit pieces of structured criminal equity products. This was accomplished masterfully, and the demand for "junk crime" soon greatly outweighed the supply. A decline in the risk premium propagated through the entire criminal debt market. At the peak of the craze, criminal enterprises could borrow at better rates than established corporations or municipal governments. The market's saturation and growing capitalization led to another issue as well. The motives which induce criminal enterprises to honor their contractual obligations require a modest scope. With boundless capital available, the size of individual operations grew dramatically. Existing credit models did not account for the exponentially increasing probability of default with size. A track record is irrelevant if one can retire after a single crime, and greed is stronger than fear. The public frenzy had obscured the credit grades as well, allowing inexperienced and unproven hoods to raise unwarranted amounts of capital, and rendering obsolete the established system of reputation and approval. Moreover, the very syndicates that had hitherto overseen those small operations now found it profitable to directly engage in large ventures themselves. (con't)

The Bubble of the 30's

⁹They supplement revenue from the criminal enterprise taxes. The latter is collected and allocated by the federal government, which is notoriously unreliable in such matters.

By the 2130's, the iniquity markets, as they had now come to be known, comprised over 80% of economic investment. This set the stage for the scandal of 2141 which plunged the economy into chaos.

Certain anomalies followed. Large venerable firms such as Axion Dynamics were purchased using capital from the bubble. This allowed arbitrary expansion of the criminal markets, as their debt effectively absorbed part of the ordinary equity market. Some enterprises engaged in wholly legitimate activities, using their favorable borrowing rates to finance ordinary corporations.

A minor scandal arose when Luthtor Corporation, a major supplier of polymeric computer components, was found to have borrowed through a fictitious criminal enterprise subsidiary, using the money solely for legitimate purposes. Guilty of an infraction in so doing, they posited that they had in fact engaged in criminal enterprise. It was quickly noted that the chartered activity involved meat smuggling and lay far afield of financial fraud. Regardless, such a paradoxical argument would clearly have failed the Turing test, resulting in a default adverse judgment. However, this attempt proved an inspiration for the far cleverer Serpinsky scandal.

The inevitable collapse was expedited by a predictably unpredictable piece of malfeasance. Apparently, Serpinsky Associates had been actively engaged in fraud, misrepresenting risk to its clients. Worse yet, it had surreptitiously underwritten its own criminal activity. This violated the core contractual obligations separating investors from participants, but was in fact behavior consistent with a criminal enterprise engaged in fraud. Because of the market bubble, Serpinsky Associates had been able to obtain ten to one leverage on its debt and could absorb substantial amounts of money. It had reinvested this in itself, creating a bubble in its own stock and paying executives and traders enormous bonuses. When the dust settled they had made \$490 billion, while the economy lost about \$2.2 trillion in the subsequent economic meltdown. Historians have analyzed the complex tangle of legal agreements and subsidiaries involved and reached a consensus that no individual guilt could be attached to the executives of Serpinsky Associates, though many of their actions certainly skirted gray areas of the law. Despite this, and as is common when the public's coffers have suffered, the two most prominent figures in the scandal, Jack Cheng and Arthur Beyopold, were excoriated, tried, and convicted.

The bubble of the 30's (con't)

A slew of remedial legislation followed, from which two major pieces ultimately emerged. The first was the Pitzer-Sandrif act, which explicitly established the types of underlying activities allowed, their sizes, and myr-

iad other operational details, inaugurating a trend toward the inordinately specific and complex code already typical of other markets. Today there are close to one million pages of criminal enterprise code and the system has necessarily been placed under the CompLaw mandate.

As the legal system grew in complexity, the natural balance between mandatory and discretionary judgment grew inoperable. In a world where vast resources aim to circumvent principle, and precision is the necessary byproduct of scale, a fair covering of all contingencies was required. Ambiguity could not be tolerated and human involvement, though important, devolved into an executive function. In fact the word judiciary came to belie its own meaning, for no judgment could be exercised. Every set of facts, once determined by a jury, must result in a single invariate outcome. The natural mechanism for this was to automate the legal system. However, the cost proved prohibitive and the project was continually deferred. By the 2250's, the body of law in most areas had far exceeded the comprehension of any human. A number of notable public inconsistencies arose and pressure mounted for legislative reform. The CompLaw initiative was born. Beginning in 2261, specific areas of law were codified as computer programs. Over the next twenty years, almost all areas of law were converted. The only exception was federal Tax Law, which proved to violate Godel's hypothesis and could not be resolved by any computer. This continued to be administered in an impressionistic manner. Today, the human readable legal code has been discarded and all new legislation is proposed and voted upon as computer code.

The CompLaw Initiative

The second law was the Iniquity Market Oversight (IMO) Act, which itself has two major components. First, it effectively granted the Attorney General's office control over the admissible level of crime. Social theory establishes that a minimum equilibrium level is necessary and unpreventable. Were it socially or economically desirable to do so, higher levels can be induced by throttling law enforcement efforts and controlling the criminal tax rate. Rather than separate these mechanisms, they were concentrated in the hands of the Attorney General. This allows control of criminal credit spreads through market capitalization and serves as a valuable economic lever. In fact, the Attorney General soon became a predominantly economic figure, his earlier duties largely assumed by the FBI. The second effect of the IMO was to establish the Iniquity Exchange Commission (IEC) to regulate the markets themselves. Notably, the IMO is the first official

use of the term "Iniquity Market"¹⁰.

The IEC

In a theoretical sense, the iniquity markets consist of two separate, supposedly decoupled, components: the underlying activities, and the markets. There had always been the possibility of overlap or feedback, but the establishment of the IEC with a set of rules that could be broken by investors led to the real possibility that some firms would function in both capacities¹¹.

The IEC was modeled on its elder siblings, the SEC and REC. Initially it was manned by economists and focused solely on creating a fair, productive mechanism to address the myriad conflicts arising from such a complex financial and legal framework. In this capacity, it functioned more as arbiter and consultant than policeman. However, with time its character changed. In keeping with the theory behind the iniquity markets, it is inevitable that there is a certain degree of corruption and misbehavior. As long as the level remains below a certain threshold, internal regulations and remediation suffice. However, egregious cases of excess result in scandal and popular outcry. Internal market controls are declared inadequate and draconian legislation is introduced to pander to the public's appetite for reform, whereas the observed instance is simply a statistical fluctuation. The IEC grew to deem itself an instrument of public indignation in an ambiguous ideological struggle, and rapidly devolved into a procrustian watchdog. However, its ascent was short lived. In attempting to usurp authority from the FBI, it found the latter far more experienced at such maneuvers and consequently was discredited and absorbed by that agency.

¹⁰This has been adopted as the formal name for all such investment venues, though "criminal enterprise market" remains in common use as well.

¹¹In fact, there are funds that solely invest in criminal violations of IEC rules. Of course, confidentiality prohibits the funds or the IEC from knowing the identity of the malefactors. It is likely that in some cases this is the parent company of the fund itself, an excellent way of leveraging capital and an act that is specifically illegal.

The Global and Emerging Markets

For close to sixty years the iniquity markets were a uniquely American phenomenon, frowned upon by the remainder of the civilized world. However the underlying ideas eventually propagated, as did a clear perception of the economic benefits to be derived. China, Thailand, and Argentina were the first to adopt analogous systems. Eventually, less developed regions such as Western Europe followed suit. A few countries, most notably Canada, lack the necessary level of crime to develop a functioning market. Naturally, the distinctions between various countries' markets faded over time and, with the emergence of large multi-national criminal enterprises, true globalization was achieved. Distinctions between the legal systems of the leading countries also vanished as the stricter nations found themselves unable to compete. In order to attract criminal activity, they needed to adopt a more permissive attitude.

In many of the less developed emerging markets, the distinction between criminals and the government is blurred. Often the two have an uneasy collaboration, sometimes they are the same. Oddly, politically unstable countries find it easier to attract criminal enterprise investment than legitimate business. The short horizon of such ventures renders them immune to insurgence and strife. In fact, they often benefit from it. It is also more difficult for the government to arbitrarily interfere with foreign investment or default on debt.

Because criminal enterprise has certain unpleasant concomitant qualities, most affluent individuals prefer to invest overseas. In recent times, the leading nations have all maintained close to the minimum socially admissible crime levels¹². Emerging market crime has proved sufficiently lucrative to satisfy the market appetite for now, though demand may move the Attorney General to raise the crime rate in the near future.

¹²Of course, there is more wealth to steal in economically advanced nations. On one occasion, Bangladesh attempted to fund crime in the United States in violation of legal limits, effectively establishing a black market in crime. This was treated severely as an act of war.

The most remarkable instance of a national government defrauding investors is that of Sweden. The improbability of the culprit greatly aided the endeavor and permitted the affair to achieve a scale that astonished even its perpetrator. A weaker nation, Sweden had never satisfactorily regulated crime. As a result, criminal operation largely went unchecked and a thriving market developed. In 2234, Orkund Avson assumed the position of Minister of Domestic Tranquility. His first act was the creation of the SCG, an undercover agency modeled after the American FBI. It's mandate was the infiltration of organized crime, but corruption and bureaucracy rapidly eroded it into a farce. The failure of a major new initiative to quell crime emboldened criminals, and the society rapidly descended into chaos. A large corporate police presence by firms with financial interests prevented a complete meltdown and the country was slowly brought back to a state of normalcy. However, the lesson had been learned and Sweden's criminal enterprise market grew dramatically. The foreign private police charged exorbitant fees to maintain order, and none of the profit was reinjected into Sweden. This changed on June 14, 2237. At that time, Orkund ordered a crackdown by the SCG. It had successfully feigned incompetence for 3 years to detect the roots of all major criminal organizations in the country. In one day (termed Bloody Wednesday), 43,276 criminals were executed and \$1.3 trillion of assets confiscated – much of which represented foreign capital. Condemnation was universal, and few pointed out that these monies had been dedicated to the pillage of the Swedish people. Rather, accusations of conspiracy were vetted. Orkund was charged with economic terrorism and condemned by the UN in absentia. Sweden refused to hand him over. After some months of negotiation and threats, the UN finally voted to take action and a limited sanction was imposed (see Appendix B for a description of the sanction system). The virus took a week to kill 24 million individuals and cripple or neurologically impair most of the remaining 60 million. Another 31 days allowed reemergence of a healthy subset of the population, in this case approximately 2 million individuals. The French firm Vingt-Anneu won the contract to rebuild and manage the nation. Though Orkund's motives remain the subject of perennial controversy, the message had a clear effect. There has been no recurrence.

The Swedish Sanction

The potential for manipulation of foreign governments through criminal investment-induced instability was fairly evident from an early stage in market development, but was formally postulated by Art Houst¹³ in 2227. The first acknowledged effort in this direction can be credited to the administration of Arthur Zao. It is likely that prior to that point the global criminal markets had not achieved sufficient size to merit attention; however, intelligence reports indicate that such considerations were clearly on

¹³Proceedings of the Societe Political, Winter 2227, page 411.

the horizon. The CIA's initial ventures were cautious and half-hearted, achieved little of note, and discouraged further efforts for some time. In 2241 the US made its first full attempt to undermine a country, in this case Costa Rica.

The first attempt by the US to subvert a sovereign nation through manipulation of the iniquity markets took place in 2241. Arms, drugs, and religion had served the Agency well for over three hundred years, and the markets represented a potent new tool. To avoid a repetition of earlier debacles and prove the efficacy of criminal market subversion, the government injected far more capital than was necessary. Success followed, but at a high cost. Costa Rican society degenerated and the currency inflated to astronomical levels. For several years, the country boasted the highest murder rate per capita in the world and proved a hotbed for insurgent movements. Eventually the regime was overthrown and, after a decade of civil war, a sympathetic government found its way to power.

The Costa Rican Fiasco

Similar attempts have been made, more or less successfully, by other nations. Most notably, England and France have invested heavily in one another's criminal markets in a continuation of their perpetual strife. This accomplished little as both markets were saturated and highly regulated. International law does not address the practice of criminal investment subversion and it is left to each country to guard its own economy.

A word should be said about the only known attempt to subvert the American economy. This was authored by Rupert Holmes' regime in Australia. America considered this an act of war and prepared to respond unilaterally, since the UN could take no official stance without appearing inconsistent. The world feared a repetition of the Belgian fiasco; however, Australia surprisingly escaped military rebuke. It experienced a coup, arrested and executed Holmes and the entire parliament, and abjectly apologized for its behavior before Congress could authorize action. The sheer audacity of the attempt and the rapid expiation of guilt led America to declare that it had been the work of a madman and show uncharacteristic clemency. Nonetheless, appearances dictated that Australia be penalized. It was demoted to provincial status for several years before quietly being restored.

The Australian Situation

Current State

“War is the extension of politics” and crime is the extension of economics. This is now true in a very real sense. Short sighted economic interests frequently lobby to increase crime and eliminate law enforcement. However, such incentives must be weighed against the benefits of social stability. At some level of permissiveness, the ability to collect revenue from criminal enterprises is itself impaired and random baseline crime interferes with the professional activities of skilled criminals. The Attorney General’s office has managed to balance these concerns and achieve a reasonable compromise so far.

Today, the global iniquity markets see close to \$40 trillion of annual trading. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the financial professionals involved in these markets are no less scrupulous than their more traditional ilk. Somewhat less surprising is the complex interaction between markets and the underlying ventures that has blurred the line between financial firms and criminal enterprises. With advances in social and mathematical understanding, the levels of abstraction will continue to grow until securitization itself is a pure and platonic notion, decoupled from all else. Perhaps even the concept of securitization will itself be securitized. One can only wonder what the next exciting step along this path will reveal.

Appendix A: Generalized Marriage Contracts

The first Generalized Marriage Contract was invented in 2142 as a means to insulate certain corporate transactions from inconvenient scrutiny and the prosecution this might engender. Though the institution did not endure, it is worth examining both the spectacular arc of its life, and the significant philosophical issues it raised. In fact, it was the presence of these hitherto unexplored aspects of econosocial philosophy, and society's inability to adequately address them, that led to its artificial and premature demise. Had the novelty been allowed to pursue its natural course to completion, we could very well live in a different society. The world moves forward in unexpected leaps of genius, if it has the courage to allow them.

To understand the nature and advent of the Generalized Marriage Contract, it is necessary to examine the hierarchy of privileged relationships that resulted from our intricate legal system. Each protection was gleaned from countless disparate laws and cases, and as such there was no simple foundation for the enumeration until its explicit codification in the Husmann Act. The primary protected relationships are, in increasing order of sanctity: corporate communications, doctor-patient, priest-confessor, psychiatrist-patient, laird-thrall, national security, and spousal. The critical element to note is that all but the last two are imperfect and may be circumvented in a variety of circumstances.

The Generalized Marriage Contract was a mechanism to move corporate communications to the level of marital speech. In order to enjoy the highest level of protection afforded by the law, firms formed spousal relationships with their clients. As corporations were legally considered to possess the same rights and obligations as individuals, this odd interpretation was surprisingly effective. By forming multiple subsidiary corporations on both the client and broker sides, any issues of polygamy could be avoided. Gender specification was not a real issue because marriage is allowed between any combination of sexes; formally the partner corporations simply assumed gender roles. Actual marriage certificates were is-

sued and notarized by judges, complete with standard symmetric prenuptial agreements. Upon dissolution of the relationships, formal divorces were granted, or to ease the assumption of assets in the case of default, a death certificate could be issued for one of the partners. This practice could have evolved into a standard piece of corporate law with interesting ramifications elsewhere, much as the incarnation of corporations had redefined the path of economic development two centuries earlier. However the dangers of widespread misuse proved fatal. In particular, there arose the abuse termed "inversion", a use of similar tactics by individuals for the purposes of forming multiple real marriages. The consequent accessibility of polygamy raised a moral furor and, rather than solely address those contingencies, lawmakers explicitly forbade all such unions. However, they failed to address the broader issue of Generalized Marriage Contracts as abstract vehicles.

A similar approach could be taken to any business or personal relationship. The world began to fill with myriad entities designed as protective interfaces between individuals. Naturally, this concerned the government as it impaired surveillance. However, the difficulty and expense of creating Generalized Marriage Contracts limited their ubiquity and the vast majority remained affiliated with large corporations. The matter would have ended there, with well-endowed lobbying efforts thwarting legislative action. However, the entire dynamic changed when Jorge Hasberg invented MB technology. Aptly named Marital Bliss, this program generated automatic spousal wrappers around every piece of information transmitted electronically. Integrated with encryption, this posed a major threat to surveillance and prosecution. Previously, the government could subpoena encrypted information deemed material to an investigation. The potential for all information to be both indecipherable and legally inaccessible was unacceptable. A progressive outcry developed, fueled by a few highly publicized abuses. The Quayman-Speeger act of 2148 decisively put an end to the entire matter. It's wording was so strong that for some years even the status of traditional marriage remained unclear and that venerable institution has never recovered.

Appendix B: Punitive Response Tiers

The organic philosophy of morals arose in the late 22nd century in opposition to the Pasquian Second Humanistic ethics prevalent at the time. The premise of organic morality is that one must view actions in the context of their appropriate scale. Derived from the theory of hierarchical complexity endemic to scientific inference, it posits that the laws governing interactions amongst equals vary at different levels. Cells, men, families, cities, corporations, and nations each engage their own. An interaction cannot be morally judged unless it is between equals or of sufficient scope to be effectively so. A man may not commit a moral transgression against a cell. A city may destroy individuals without moral implication, and so on. This is logical and avoids the distasteful inconvenience of tallying individual deaths in a world of exponentially increasing size and complexity. The deaths of hundreds of millions today is comparable to the deaths of tens of millions in the 20th century or the deaths of hundreds in ancient Norway. Indeed, the grand epics of old involve minor skirmishes among handfuls of men. An enormity in one time and place is a triviality in another. In modern times, we speak of city-level deaths. The annihilation of a hundred cities is morally comparable to the deaths of a hundred men in the fourteenth century. It is likely that we will soon grow accustomed to national deaths as well.

The Organic Theory of Morals

A brief review of the levels of sanction may shed some light on the relative perceived severity of the transgression for which they are applied. According to UN charter revision 1288b, passed in 2173, there are 4 levels of official sanction:

(1) Reprimand: Aimed at inducing small scale economic disruption, this is usually a holding penalty to induce cooperation or reprimand misbehavior. A number of options exist: short term sporadic bombing of civilian targets, destruction of a major industrial facility, or application of an incommunicable biochemical agent designed to induce crippling or encumbering ailments. Reprimands may be applied repeatedly, with increasing severity as needed.

(2) Rebuke: This is an isolated warning and cannot serve as either punishment or censure. It is analogous to the traditional "shot across the bow". Most commonly, this has involved geographically localized nuclear bombardment such as the destruction of one major city. On several occasions,

an incommunicable biochemical agent has been employed to randomly sterilize or impair a large fraction of the populace.

(3) Censure: This serves as either a defensive or lesser punitive response rather than a prohibitive one, and aims to remove regenerative capabilities for one generation. The usual mechanisms are large scale nuclear bombardment or the release of a lethal biological agent. The target is a 90% reduction in population, removal of all military and industrial capacity, and cultural extirpation. To this end, specially engineered biological agents have been developed. The most common is G50-31, a virus engineered to cease replication after 50 cycles or 31 days. This allows saturation of approximately 10 million hosts at a viral load of 100 million on average. After expiration the virus lyses and poses no threat, allowing for safe application with proper quarantine procedures.

(4) Penal: The most severe response entails complete extermination of every human being in the country, as well as all citizens abroad. The latter can prove troublesome. Generally, a genetic proximity test is used for ethnically homogenous populations and a simpler descent test otherwise. In practice, the application of these is left to individual countries.

The rarity of the penal sanction arises from practical considerations, as its application proves extraordinarily expensive and dangerous. The willingness of the UN to apply various levels of sanction has been amply demonstrated and there is no reform value in destroying an entire nation, so little can be said in favor of a frequent application of penal sanction¹⁴.

¹⁴For a dissenting opinion on this see Proskauer, et al in the *Journal of American Psychology* Issue 412, page 67.

The only instance of penal sanction so far occurred in 2254 in the infancy of the sanction system and was later repudiated in 2262 by UN vote. In that case, France, Canada, and Lebanon were in rotation chairing the security council. Israel had been characteristically petulant in arguing against tariffs on technology outsourcing to its Arab population, widely acknowledged to be amongst the best and cheapest computer engineers in the world. In an instance of ill-timed hyperbole the Minister of France proposed a Full Sanction against Israel. Despite his attempts to retract it, procedure dictated that the proposition be voted upon. Israel had generated a great deal of ill will over the years because of its belligerent Prime Minister, and a number of UN members felt they would make a harmless point by voting in favor of the proposal. In an exhibition of the dangers of closed voting, these members as well as Israel's perpetual enemies proved a slim majority and the sanction was carried. UN guidelines provided no mechanism for repeal, but the US signaled a clear displeasure with the outcome and threatened to unilaterally defend Israel. The borders were irradiatively sealed pending action, but nothing happened for a year while the US negotiated a solution. As an agreement appeared to be in sight, the population of Israel began to sicken and die. Apparently, 3 contagions had been released - two immediately after the edict and one within the last week. Their communicability, incubation times, and onset speeds were engineered to guarantee that nobody escaped. Within a month, the entire population was dead. Most countries surrendered members of the condemned population for UN processing but several did not. The United States was furious, but could not risk incurring significant economic damage through purely retributive action. The entire exercise proved quite costly, however, as the UN was required to stockpile large quantities of engineered anti-viral agents in case quarantine proved ineffective.

The Israeli Case of Penal Sanction

Appendix C: Emergence of the Debt Markets, Structured Products, and Derivatives

Criminal enterprise contracts confer beneficial ownership in each venture's profits but also can be viewed as providing a return on the investment capital. As such, they possess characteristics of both equity and debt¹⁵. Although the first liquid markets happened to focus on the former, debt markets soon followed suit. Criminal enterprise pools and funds behave much like their corporate equity counterparts, though the underlying associations are of shorter duration. Equity instruments are notoriously difficult to analyze, particularly when based on such transient and heterogeneous activities. This limited the appeal of the criminal enterprise market, and most conservative institutional investors would not participate. Naturally, a solution was needed. As a result, the major rating agencies began to rate pools of criminal enterprises¹⁶.

Beginning with Kyrkos Brothers, a number of top tier financial firms began to underwrite criminal enterprise debt offerings. Each such institution adopted a set of complex models to compute an appropriate yield from the aggregate parameters of the underlying contracts¹⁷. Through a combination of hedging and diversification, they could minimize risk in a manner inaccessible to small investors. The behavior and risk of a bond can be specified using a few standard parameters¹⁸. Aside from a few minor features such as embedded options, a credit spread universally characterizes the premium that investors demand due to non-market risks¹⁹. Thus the

¹⁵A telling oddity is that despite the form of the contract, investors typically refer to criminal enterprises by their "effective yield" – a decidedly debt-like perspective.

¹⁶Though it would appear more natural to assess the underlying entities, the necessary information to do so is inaccessible.

¹⁷Many models were developed to compute such yields, the most famous being the Doolan-Sterwitz algorithm. It and the Kween ratio are the standard means of pricing a bond portfolio.

¹⁸The key economic parameters of any pool are the expected return if successful (ρ), the risk of default (ξ), the risk of abandonment (η), and the risk of failure (κ). In addition, each pool is classified by a number of qualitative characteristics: type of crime, level of violence, geography, etc., rendering it directly comparable to counterparts in other markets.

¹⁹Interest rate risk is common to all bonds of a given duration and is embedded in the base

resulting debt offerings are amenable to analysis using a plethora of existing tools.

Within four years of its advent, the criminal debt market had grown to subsume 90% of all traded volume. Because debt pools are large, specific, and underwritten by particular banks, such activity is entirely negotiated. Small investors may participate through the purchase of shares in debt funds, introducing yet another alternation of the debt-equity structure. It should be noted that the emergence of separate debt and equity markets was rather artificial. Investors prefer instruments analogous to those with which they are familiar. However unnatural in this case, the dichotomy has persisted.

As with most markets, a number of derivative instruments evolved. The first of these were structured obligations, tiered by risk. A CCO, or collateralized crime obligation, consists of a set of pools with repayment priority allocated to investors in a specific order. More complex products followed, the most notorious being the Inverse Principal Only bond which acts as an insurance policy and only pays that portion of the initial investment that is lost in each venture²⁰. Traders created CCOs or attempted to recombine them into underlying pools as conditions dictated. Futures and more esoteric derivatives also emerged, but these remain illiquid and highly speculative.

"risk-free" yield required by the market, whereas the credit spread distinguishes between bonds of a given duration.

²⁰ Originally structured as a hedging instrument, this bond has an unjustly pernicious reputation. This arose from several instances of injudicious speculation, the most spectacular of which resulted in the complete loss of Harvard's legendary endowment.

The Jefferson Verses

Chanda J. Glass

*The individuated soul **refracts** itself into a smaller unit that includes all of the qualities necessary for experiencing within a specific range of time and space. Each individuated soul has countless such refractions that are functioning in concert with it at all times.*

–Machaelle Small Wright

Dancing in the Shadows of the Moon

Morning After

Your picaresque bootheels come clattering up and suddenly with this cue I can remember last night. I know I am staring, but I am spinning back through the colors of dream— how the brown of your hair became something intense, how the brown of your eyes scalded to gold... I am dumb tongue. How do I say, *I dreamed you last night, and your eye had been blacked because of me*— I am fighting not to touch my hand to your face, to prove to myself that no violent purple red swelling exists, that you are unmarked and that I have done nothing to earn you the wound that in the dream had almost shut your eye sealed— it betrayed other dark, hidden bruises and the crack in a rib, though you said nothing and only looked sad. I blink. I cannot throw off this vision of you. It's imposed above your real face and stares back at me, still not angry, only unhappy, resigned and innocent surely as I of all things accused, and again I have to pull myself back, to keep my hand down instead of letting it fly to your face to comfort, soothe damage that does not exist. I blink; he does not leave. How long will he remain? How long will he stay with you, pulled across your real face, making casual chat problematic, this hurt doppleganger who knew me so well in the dream, who still tried hard to smile, understood.

Rendezvous

Tonight you do not fade in, nor do you appear, for there is no perceivable seam between last dream and here: you simply are. There is no background. I do not see a floor. It's just you and me, standing together in this comfortable light— the gist is that we are connected, so I see you clearly, though it's been three years since I last spoke your name. Something is wrong. Your stance isn't right: you've hurt your back, and it's bad. I realize I know how each unguarded move starts the spasming hiss, muscles convulsed in a bright purple sting, why you hold yourself rigid, untiltingly firm, with a lift to your shoulders not usually there. You see what I know, and give your old grin. You say, *Yes, it's good to see you, too. Yes, it's been a long time.* You answer questions I do not need to ask. You tell me you're just checking in, that your back will be fine, that you do not think of me, either. The good light gets warmer, the warm light turns soft, and our skins glow the same shade of gold brown. I feel the shift. There is only a moment before we each turn away, back into our lives, away from this locus, this root, this white center space where we both begin. I lift my hand. *Don't be a stranger* I say, and you laugh, like I made a great joke, like the idea that you could is absurd.

Night Out

Last night you showed up for the third time. You're in New Orleans now, and this is why you've come to stand in front of the dream me with your folded arms and your casual grin hanging just over your shirtcollar's arc. We are walking past houses. Each house has a fence, most of them filigree iron, most of them painted an unnamable white that glows in the purple blue air and soundlessly lights the thriving deep green of each contained silent yard. You talk with your hands, and the light from the fences strobes through your gesturing fingers. You are wearing your boots. They keep time with your talk. You say you're in love with the trees here; they have a softness, you say. *Like grandfathers*. You laugh, though I am certain I did not speak aloud, and the sound is relaxed and rolls out of your chest. The white of your eye starts to glow like the fences. The click of your boots is somehow a part of these houses, these yards, and I realize we have the same gait, that you echo my stride, both our steps falling in perfect clean time, completely unmeasured but matched. We walk all night. I do not take your hand, and we talk as we move: easy, untouching, together.

Gloriosus Deus

Daniel Guzman

I

The streetlights change. Red, yellow, green. Cars stop, engines humming. The lights change again. Cars pass, moving quickly.

Pedestrians at the intersection, waiting for the lights to change. Commuters at the station, waiting for the train. Passengers listening for their connecting flight. Riders at the bus depot. Voyagers climbing aboard their ship.

Red, yellow, green. The lights change. Cars move, tires squeal. Sounds of impact. Sounds of sirens approaching.

Ambulances arriving. Red and white lights. A crowd forms. The paramedics part the onlookers, moving towards the center of the crowd; the formation is tight as they approach closer to the heart, the source of interest, the tightly packed gem. The place of one man's departure from this intersection, this station, this airport, this depot, this shore, this life. And so it begins again.

II

Chris awoke to the sound of wood planks breaking. He opened his eyes and saw the blue sky; he saw a sun that did not burn his eyes, although he looked straight into it.

He sat up and catalogued his surroundings. Blue sky, desert surroundings. He was in a box, an open coffin hammered together with nails and wood boards. Pieces of broken planks lay within the coffin and on the dry ground.

He looked towards the east and saw a mountain range that did not seem like any he had seen before. He turned his head and saw a man,

a dark-skinned man similar in age; he appeared indigenous to these surroundings, naked except for the garments covering his genitals. The tall man held a wood plank that he had torn off with his fingers. He set the board down and approached the coffin.

"You are dead," the stranger said - calmly, not as a threat; he was merely stating a fact.

Chris stared perplexed. "Why did I die?" he asked finally.

"The question of 'Why' is irrelevant and stupid," the man said. He stood relaxed beside the pine box. "Ask me 'How' instead."

Chris still stood in his coffin, unaware of he unusual he must have looked to a passing stranger, if there had been anyone else in this desert. He ran his pale, stiff fingers across the wood and thought for a moment. "Alright. How did I die?"

"You were crossing the street," the man said. "The driver of the car did not see you."

"I don't remember this."

"The police notified your wife."

"My wife . . . I had a wife?"

"Yes," the man said. He looked like an Aborigine, or perhaps an African. There are so many deserts in the world. Chris remembered watching a movie in which he saw a man like this. He wore the expected uniform of such men, the loincloth, the bulging muscles, the large lips, the flat nose, the eyes trained on the mysteries of the beyond, mysteries that someone like Chris could only begin to fathom, like a traveler standing at the base of a mountain. Perhaps there would be a lesson learned, some divine proverb should the two men converse long enough.

"Were there many people at the funeral?"

"Your family and friends."

"Did anyone cry?"

"Your mother and wife cried."

"Who was I?"

Kurt touched his fingers to Chris's chest and forehead, like a man offering a royal title. "Your name was Chris. You were a well-regarded

Literature Professor at a university in the city. Many of your students were in attendance at the burial. They wrote detailed accounts of the service, the lowering of the casket, the number of people present. Your death was considered a tragedy – you were thirty-three years old."

Chris climbed out of the coffin. He regarded his new companion. The man was tall and lean. Athletic. Chris was short and overweight and dressed in his burial suit. He felt stitches in his scalp, itching like head lice. His joints were stiff and unaccustomed to movement. Apparently, his mouth had been sewn shut; however, someone had removed the thread-work before he awoke.

"What's your name?" Chris asked.

"I am whatever you wish to call me."

"I'll call you Kurt, after my favorite musician. I remember some of my favorite CD's and movies, at least."

"I humbly thank you for naming me," Kurt said.

"This doesn't bother you? I've just given you a name. I've imposed my Western lifestyle, more specifically, the name of a deceased white musician, on your native identity. Do you now secretly harbor resentment?"

"No. I inhabit this body because you decided it to be so." Kurt turned to look at the mountain in the distance. In the haze of the noonday sun, it appeared like a mirage.

"I don't understand," Chris said.

"My entire existence is for but one purpose: I have been instructed to guide you there." Kurt pointed to the mountain. "I am to instruct you of your duties, now that you are deceased. And to prepare you for the apotheosis."

Chris approached his guide. "This is confusing, Kurt."

"You are to complete your duties and evaluate your life. Then, you are to provide revisions."

"I still don't understand."

"This is expected," Kurt said. He placed a hand on Chris's shoulder. The expression conveyed a level of empathy that Chris had not expected. "This is how you requested things to be. You wanted me to be cryptic and

vague. Eventually, you will comprehend more, at which point you will feel rewarded for your patience and persistence." He turned and walked away, not stopping to see if Chris would follow. Chris looked back at the wooden box. Soon, the planks would bleach from the harsh light of the desert sun. The boards would rot, reduce to simpler compounds. Chris was dead and his body was destined for the same fate, whether he followed his guide or not.

While the burial suit he wore was not his own, he recognized the black dress shoes from a Christmas morning. They were a gift from his wife - his widow, Chris mused, considering this new marital status. A different box to check on applications and renewal forms.

Chris removed his shoes and left them by the coffin. He ran barefoot until he caught up with Kurt, who now carried a walking stick. After a few minutes of silent travel, the aborigine began whistling a song. At first, Chris thought it was some local song, something rich with tribal history. Soon, however, he recognized it as being a popular composition created from Kurt's namesake many years ago. He hadn't heard the song in nearly a decade.

III

"I think I once read a comic book where this happened," Chris said as they walked.

Kurt said, "Please elaborate."

"I mean, this. Two people walking in the desert, walking towards a mountain. One is recently deceased, full of questions. The other is mystical, enigmatic in his responses."

"Mountains have always been a place of wonder," Kurt said. "They have been looked on as the homes of gods, the source of divine insight and transformation."

"I'm trying to remember which comic book it was. I think it was Action Man, or Captain Hero. . ."

Chris stopped walking and looked ahead. Kurt turned and watched as Chris's face changed from contemplation to awe. They had arrived at the base of the mountain.

"Amazing," said Chris.

"Yes."

"It looks like it could scrape the sun."

"High places have always been considered a source of power."

"I taught a class on this once," said Chris. "High places are the homes of gods."

"The military advantage," said Kurt.

"The Tower of Babel."

"Mount Olympus."

"Asgard."

"The World Trade Center."

"I remember the comic book now," said Chris. "It was Captain Hero, issue #71, June 1989. The first comic book I ever read. My parents bought it for me because I was sick in bed for nearly a week. I threw up two times earlier that morning. When I woke up again, there it was. In that issue, Captain Hero was shot through the heart by a bullet and had a near-death experience. He walked with a guide to a great mountain. There, he fought with the Angel of Death to regain his life."

Kurt kneeled on the desert ground and drew the letters K and U on the surface.

He said, "You kept that comic book until 1991, when your mother threw it out."

"She mistook my box of comic books for another box, one with some old clothing," Chris said.

"You cried for a substantial part of the afternoon."

"A child crying for lost fantasies, Kurt. Silly stories."

"You cried, nonetheless." Kurt drew an R and a T. He stood and looked at his handiwork. "This is a strange phenomenon."

"What is?" Chris asked. He read the name KURT on the dry ground.

"The phenomenon of identity. The necessity to differentiate one thing from another. Are we not all the same, regardless of existence or non-existence? Are we not all markings, mere signatures, imprinted for a time in the dusty surface?"

"Why do you ask these questions?" Chris asked.

"Why is a stupid question," Kurt repeated. "Ask me 'how' instead."

"All right."

Kurt wiped the letters away with his bare foot. "I am not asking these questions. You are. There is no separation between us. It is you who is fascinated by identity. Your death is only a death of the living body you assigned yourself to be in. But this," he motioned to the burial suit, the stitches, the walking dead that was Chris's body, "is not your death. You are losing your identity. To you, this is of great concern."

"But it isn't, is it?" Chris asked. "Kurt, tell me the truth. Please." He looked at the sun, that which did not blind him. He wanted to feel the heat. The suit he wore must be stifling hot for any other man, any living man. But not him.

"You are the one that knows the answer," Kurt said.

"I'm remembering more of my life."

"This is expected."

"My marriage. I had a wife."

"Yes."

"My first kiss."

"And what else?"

"My birth," Chris said. His eyes widened as he recalled the darkness. The nutrient-rich fluids. The movement through the birth canal. The hands, reaching for him, extracting him. The vibrations were frightening, foreign. He longed for that one familiar sensation, the drumming of his mother's heartbeat. However, that was gone. Chris looked directly into the sun. He did not need to blink anymore; however, he continued doing this out of habit. Then, he took a breath, although this, too, was unnecessary.

"And what else?" Kurt asked.

"I remember the lives of my parents. I can remember my mother's first day in college, and earlier still, her first day in elementary school. I remember my father's prom night and the day he first spoke."

"And what else?"

Chris looked away from the sun. He did not wish to recall any more memories that were not his own. He looked at the ground, and where Kurt had written his name, his new name, Chris now saw a magazine. He kneeled and picked it up. Although dead, he felt the fine grains of the newsprint paper on his fingertips. Though his eyes were numb to changes in light, to any sensation, they ravenously absorbed the four-color illustrations, the absurd gymnasts leaping across rooftops in theatrical capes and masks. A grand opera performed in the realms above the affairs of men. The silly stories, so familiar, and yet, made new under these present circumstances.

The issue was Captain Hero, #71.

He turned to Kurt and was about to ask him why this, of all things, this specific comic book was in the middle of the desert, why now, why here, when he thought of Kurt's most likely of responses, and then thought better of asking the question.

IV

Chris sat on a rock and finished reading the comic book, while Kurt, the traveler, the aborigine, walked across the horizon. When the wanderer returned, Chris stood up and set the magazine on the rock. Kurt gestured at the comic book, and Chris handed it to him. Western culture invading once again. The man looked over the colorful pages and laughed.

"And what happens in the end?" Kurt asked. "You piqued my interest."

"It's not how I remember it," Chris said.

"Is it more to your liking?"

"It's better now."

"How so?"

"In the version that I read years ago, Captain Hero receives help from the Phantom Creature, a mystical guide that resides between the known universes. Captain Hero is unable to defeat the Angel of Death on his own. The Phantom Creature provides the Captain with the Doomsday Spear, which he uses to stab the Angel through the heart."

"And the Angel dies?"

"Or goes back to the Hereafter, Hades, Valhalla. . .the comic never explains that. There is a flash of white light, and then Captain Hero is back in the alleyway. He still has the assassin's bullet in his chest, but now it's two inches away from his heart."

Kurt flipped to the end of the comic book. "And he lives?"

"Yes, he flies back to the Justice Tower and gets help from the team's resident doctor."

"And how does the story end this time?"

Chris extended his hand, and Kurt gave him the comic book. He turned to the last page and said, "He pushes the Angel to his death. Just like before. Once again, we have the flash of light. However, Captain Hero doesn't reappear in the alleyway. He walks down the mountain and keeps walking throughout the desert for all eternity."

"I see."

"He stays dead."

Chris sat down on the rock again. He flipped through the comic book. "It makes better sense this way, Kurt. You see, Captain Hero doesn't like what he does. Consider it. He flies around and stops petty criminals. He wrestles with costumed villains with crooked minds. However, he is incapable of making any lasting change in society. Here," he said and showed the aborigine a page. Kurt examined the comic panel. "In that panel, Captain Hero is flying back to the Tower after saving Boston from Dr. Diablo. He gets the call on his earpiece. The new experimental space shuttle is about to crash into the White House. And what does Captain Hero do? Do you see it?"

Kurt looked closer. "He sighs."

"Yes," Chris said, then turned the page. He showed Kurt another panel. "And there. After Captain Hero defeats the Monster Man with his Hammer of Justice, what does Captain Hero say?"

"He says, 'You've caused enough damage for one day. I should just leave you here to rot.'"

"Frustration," Chris said. "To him, death was a release. He was free of his duties as Earth's perpetual janitor, cleaning up after mankind's latest dark urge."

"And he wandered the desert as a spirit."

"In this version, yes."

"Yes," Kurt said. "Do you understand why we walked to this mountain?"

"You already told me, I am to make revisions."

"What else do you remember?"

"I remember other lifetimes. You know, I say this without feeling terrified, although in life, I would certainly have been. I was once a French king. I was the first monk slaughtered by the Vikings. I was a pharaoh's favorite lover. I was a maiden sacrificed in the Punic Wars. I was a poet in Nova Scotia. I was a stillborn baby in Guatemala. I was a bear. I was a fish."

"You were much more," Kurt said. He took back the comic book. He smiled at the pictures. They amused him. "You were all things, living, dead, fictional, factual, imagined, and unimagined."

"Everything. The rocks and the air I breathed. I was the clouds and the ozone." He pointed to the mountain. "That mountain, there." Chris said, "That mountain is the end of the world, isn't it?"

"Yes," Kurt said.

"And we are going to climb it."

"Yes."

"What happened to my wife? After I died, I mean. I need a reason to climb, Kurt."

Kurt tapped his walking stick on the ground. "What happens to anyone?"

"She remarried."

"Yes."

"She was happier?"

"On occasion."

Chris asked no more questions; he turned and began climbing. After a few feet, however, he paused, and with his hands still gripping the precipice, he asked Kurt, "How long did it take for other people to move on?"

"Your university hired a new professor before the end of the term."

"They had told me I was irreplaceable."

"Your parents grieved for six months. Your mother still keeps a picture of you under her pillow."

"Of course."

"Your wife. . ."

"Yes, go on. Who did she marry? This is important."

"Your best friend."

"The fucker."

"He consoled her throughout the funeral."

"He fondled her, I'm sure. While they lowered me into the ground."

"He was your best friend."

"I have no friends. I have rivals in close proximity."

Chris turned his attention back to the mountain. He looked up at the sky and saw four dark objects circling high above. Birds, perhaps. They were the only shadows in the brilliant blue. The light of the sun met the rock surface and accentuated the sloping obstacles that the two climbers would face. Chris did not enjoy the idea of falling, regardless of whether he was already dead. His humanity had not slipped far enough that he could not still recognize the presence of fear.

Kurt climbed up to join his companion. He left his walking stick beside a rock at the base of the mountain. Chris observed the aborigine's muscles bulge under the strain of the climb. They were of similar age, but Chris had allowed for his flesh to achieve a considerable gain about the midsection. He did not prefer this, although he did not prefer the alternative of exercise, either.

The ground grew distant. Chris said, "Am I to walk through a wall of fire upon reaching the summit?"

"You will see."

"Am I to wrestle the Angel of Death?"

"No."

"Am I to sacrifice my son to God?"

"You have no son."

"I also have no God."

Kurt said, "You will discover what waits at the top of the summit when you achieve the top of the summit."

"Death does not elicit patience in men, I suppose."

"Apparently not," Kurt said.

V

Chris stood and wiped the dirt off of his burial suit. Kurt reached the summit a moment later.

Chris looked around. The top of the mountain was a rocky plateau; flat, like the desert surface. Chris picked up a stone and tossed it over the ledge. He watched as the small object drifted down to the amber desert far below. Curiously, the tremendous heights made him lightheaded. Were he to fall, would he have to climb all the way up again to receive his enlightenment?

Then Chris turned to address Kurt, and saw the mysterious guide standing next to a third person. This man dressed in regal clothing, theatrical in their bright, flowing colors. It made Chris think of a Greek god. His uniform had a generous helping of red and blue. A long golden cape issued forth from his shoulders and floated behind him in the growing wind. The mask on his face was used to protect his secret identity, a fact that Chris knew from reading the stories long ago.

"Am I now to wrestle my childhood hero?" Chris asked.

"Jacob had his angel," Kurt said. "Hercules had his lion. You have Captain Hero."

"I was a well-regarded Professor of Literature," Chris said. "I held a Masters in Religion and a PhD in Literature."

"Yes," Kurt said. "This is all true."

Chris went on, angrily, "I read from the manuscripts of Kafka, Borges, Hemingway, Joyce. I traveled to London to pay my respects to the Bard's place of birth. I've studied all the major religions. I've poured over the works of Homer and Dante, the secret books of the Bible, the altars of a hundred dead gods, the myths of divine footprints, Ayers Rock, the division between Heaven and Earth, the stories of Mayans, Navajos, Romans,

Egyptians, Vikings, Babylonians, Mesopotamians, Cro-Magnon. I worshipped at the feet of almighty knowledge and human mystery, bound to no deity, and yet, to all of them, as well."

"Yes. And it all began with a comic book purchased during a week-long illness."

"The fascination?"

"The silly stories."

"I would ask the question of why, Kurt, but I already know your response."

Then, the winds blew across the desert far below, and soon, it reached upward and touched the men congregated on the summit. The air became like electricity.

"There was a great earthquake," Kurt said, just as the ground began to shake. The tremor lasted for about a minute. When the trembling ceased, Kurt continued speaking. As he did, the events that he described began to unfold all about the desert sky.

"The sun turned to black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to the earth as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. And the sky receded like a scroll, rolling up into darkness."

When Kurt finished, Chris saw a throne appear behind the fictional Captain Hero, and around the throne were four living creatures bearing multiple wings; they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. As the creatures approached, Kurt, the aborigine, spoke again:

"The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings."

Lightning flashed and thunder blazed. Chris heard the rocks rumbling beneath his feet, and then the entire summit shuddered. He felt tremendous air pressure pushing down on his body, and the mountain was rising, climbing the heavens like a tower. Higher and higher it went, passing cloud banks and piercing through the atmosphere. The stars had all fallen to earth, leaving the tower in a sea of darkness, save for the seven

lamps that now burned before the empty throne.

Chris approached his guide, now dressed in a robe of white. The living creatures moved about near the throne and the men, but they did not dare approach beyond the lamps. Captain Hero stood silently, a stoic statue awaiting the command that would bring it to life. His hands were to his sides, and in one, his right hand, he carried his weapon, his Hammer of Justice. Chris pointed to the sacred article.

"Did you know that the Hammer of Justice was based on the hammer wielded by the Norse God of Thunder?" Chris asked the two men. "The writer of Captain Hero wanted to add a mythical quality to his character. Originally, the Captain was to have a thunderbolt like Zeus, the God of Gods in Greek mythology. However, the comic book publishers believed that the hammer would make for a better-looking toy, more marketable, more accessible for a generation of boys whose fathers were out fighting the War or working jobs with long shifts. Captain Hero, the working-class avenger. This was also why his secret identity was Joe Smith, average construction worker. Unlike other superheroes of the time, the Captain was a character that young boys could relate to. The American dream of hard work and ingenuity."

Chris looked at Captain Hero. "You were chosen to be white based on this color having a 'universal quality'. We all know the cultural image that is projected. The super-ego, the collective dream unconsciousness. Tall, healthy, young, vibrant, white male. A superhero is not old, is not muddled by race or sex, is not superior to normal man, merely exceptional, like a long-distance runner or an astronaut. His powers are extraordinary, but in such a way that a young reader could imagine that given equal circumstances, he too could achieve those great heights. This is not at all unlike classic myths, ancient deities, religious icons."

"I defeated the Monster Man," Captain Hero said.

"Yes. You also defeated Dr. Diablo," Chris said.

"And the Death-Maker."

"The Colossal Skeleton."

"Orangu-Man."

"The Iron Assassin."

"He is the one who shot me through the heart," Captain Hero said. "With a magic bullet. I would have died were it not for the aid of the Phantom Creature and his Doomsday Spear. I defeated the Angel of Death."

Then, the living creatures approached the glow of the torches. Kurt looked to them, nodded, and the creatures at last drew closer.

Chris recalled his days teaching literature at the university. He remembered the rows of young faces staring at him. Each began just like him.

"Before I read Dostoyevsky, I read Captain Hero. Had I been born in a different age, it would have been the stories of Hector and Achilles. Of Ulysses. Of Gilgamesh."

"In early Persian myths," Kurt said, "there was the story of Seyavash."

"And there's the story of Beowulf."

"And Romulus and Remus."

"Yes. And so on," Chris said. "These are all stories. Some that we believe to be fact. Some that are not. Myths. However, to a young mind, it is not whether it is real. It is whether or not it captures our attention."

The living creatures stared with their many eyes. Captain Hero stood in silent expectation. His moment had almost arrived.

"I think I am supposed to realize something now," Chris said. "I've done this before."

"You have realized this time and again," Kurt said.

"Yes. I've realized this hundreds of times, I think. Thousands upon thousands of times. However, I always struggle at this moment."

"You discover a truth," Kurt said. "Only in death do you become aware of how it all ties together." Chris looked about him, and in the darkness, stars appeared from hidden places.

"Man writes. . . no, no, man writes to reflect his society. No, this is not. . . Man writes to reflect the shape of creation. Yes. Man writes myths, and these myths reflect his understanding of the universe, his understanding of morals, of truth, of beauty. And as he understands more, his myths change to encompass the ever-deepening mystery. We change from mountains to Justice Towers. We evolve from saviors to superheroes.

We transform devils to Monster Men and Iron Assassins."

And, so it began again. The god was in his heaven once more.

Chris approached Captain Hero, and studied the man's face. Here was the ideal American dream manifestation; a young boy's fantasy. Piercing eyes, strong, jutting chin, a gladiator that was prepared to battle Grendel, Satan, the Persian army, the invading conquistadors.

"The hero must have a 'universal quality'," Chris said. "A man that can be defined in broad terms so that all in his society can relate. He carries the weight of his people on his shoulders. Sometimes this means that he is to die, perhaps in battle, or by a sword, or a bullet, or on a cross, or by his own hand. His inner struggle reflects that of the society as well. Some heroes are stoic, some are passionate and wild-eyed. Some take lovers, some remain celibate. The parameters are defined by the culture, the audience. The ones who believe."

Chris motioned at Captain Hero's hammer, and the childhood idol handed over the coveted weapon. The hammer felt as if it would erupt into flames in Chris's hands. He felt searing pain, and yet could not let go. His mind and heart swelled with majestic thoughts, epic battles and noble journeys that took generations to complete. He saw the Justice Tower hanging in the darkness of space, a rainbow bridging it to the world of men. He saw prophets foretell the arrival of the superheroes. He saw men die in wars, and with their last breath, calling out the name of a comic book character.

Then he gripped the hammer tightly, and the heat left the weapon and poured into his veins. His stagnant blood coursed with living flame. He recalled every life, every moment, for he was all these lives, and they were all him. He recalled stealing fire to aid mankind. He remembered saying that the people did not know what they were doing, as the life drained out of him for the hundredth thousandth time. And with each death, he understood a little more about the world he had created.

The living creatures approached Chris and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."

Chris closed his eyes, and he could see through the many eyes of

the living creatures. He saw through the eyes of Kurt and Captain Hero, his fictional creations. He felt the rocky surface of the mountain-tower as it supported their bodies. He felt the rain in the heavens and the dust on the earth. He felt the heartbeats of all of his living souls, and of the cold stiffness of the dead bodies he had left behind, like a creature leaving behind its cocoon.

He opened his eyes upon the darkness, and saw a sea of glass before him. In the sea stood every living person that had passed through the threshold of death by whatever means. They all passed through and had all, in turn, had their own guide waiting for them, waiting to reveal to them their task of revision.

"I understand now," Chris said. "Every time it is different, the face of my guide changes based on my life's perception of the world. However, each time I assume the throne once more to evaluate the shape of things, and to make necessary changes."

"Yes," Kurt said, his face glowing with the unending love he had for his master. "Welcome home, infinite one."

"Thank you, my loyal guide," Chris said. "I thoroughly enjoyed this life as 'Chris'. I've enjoyed quite a few of my lives in recent times. Many glorious lovers. Many exceptional battles. I like your current appearance, my loyal servant. The noble savage from Chris's childhood films. And what do you think of your name, 'Kurt'? Do you remember that life? That time with the band?"

"You are all things," Kurt said. "You already know the answer."

"Yes, I suppose I do. Now, what shall we revise this time?"

"All lives are yours. They are all but parts of your living face. No matter how great or how small a revision you make, you will be back here again soon enough to make another one."

"Yes, but I liked 'Chris'. He was special. His insight to the world. His fascinations. That comic book. I remember when I wrote that comic book, as well. The issue was late in getting published. My editor was furious." He laughed, and the living creatures laughed with him.

Kurt looked over at Captain Hero. "Perhaps it is time for a new belief. A new religion, oh holy one. Allow that the champions that occupied

Chris's childhood take on a larger role in your ever-changing world. Your recent religions have been, quite frankly, too boring. Too focused on the doctrines."

"Yes. They take themselves too seriously."

"Yes, sir. Very much so."

Chris turned to Captain Hero. "So it will be. The revisions have been made. Your epic battles with the Monster Man, with the Colossal Skeleton, with the Iron Assassin, will be the new stories of wonder for all the world. I have elevated your myths from the realm of childhood fantasies to that of a global religion. All current religions still exist. However, instead of these superheroes being introduced in a comic book, I have altered history so that they appear in reality. I have selected the date of their first sightings to be June, 1989, in honor of the comic book issue that no longer exists. Such childhood memories must be sacrificed so that a greater good can be achieved.

"In the ensuing years since the superheroes' arrival on Earth in 1989, many villains rose up to challenge them. The world has learned to trust the heroes and turn to them for guidance. In this past year, the religion has at last received the respect it needed from the world community. We are now in the Golden Age of the superheroes' reign. As we speak, more and more churches are forming, believers are gathering in rapidly growing numbers, and the Justice Tower stands to unite all the world under its lighthouse beacon. The Vatican, Jerusalem, Mecca, the Buddhist and Hindu temples, all places of worship will fade in popularity, their numbers draining into my new religion. The stories of Captain Hero, Lady Excitement, Kid Wonder and the rest of the gods will soon surpass all other beliefs and will reign for a thousand years. I have selected a blind man in Spain, a televangelist in Minnesota, and a prophet in India to begin writing the sacred texts for your bible. This codex will be available to the faithful before the year's end. It will stay on the top position of the Best-seller's list for the next hundred years, unchallenged and unflagging in its sales. I have spoken, and so it will be."

Captain Hero bowed. "I am your humble servant, oh wondrous Father."

And the living creatures bowed and shouted praise as the Everlasting Father handed Captain Hero his Hammer of Justice. Let there be true change in the world below, they chanted. Let the adventures of these superheroes be the new stories of mankind. Let the earth tremble as they pass over rooftops, over oceans and land. Let the torches blaze, and the trumpets sound.

Kurt bowed before his Creator, and with an undying love, said, "The grace of Captain Hero be with his people." And all gathered, and the heavens and earth said **Amen**.

Handout

Kenneth Halpern

Eric shuddered awake, jerking his head about as he instinctively sought to anchor himself in time and space. He had been dozing, never a wise idea on the subway. A cursory check, imagined to be discrete, proved that his wallet was still there. It was impossible to probe further without overtly revealing his mistrust of those around him. Subway etiquette demands a cynical repression of the clear suspicion with which passengers regard one another.

His memories slowly returned, like profligate roommates after a night of indulgences. He was on a train traveling to an afternoon party. This was a part of town that he never frequented and he carried detailed directions to the destination.

Take the Bracken Street exit.

Had he passed Bracken Street? He had failed to see any signs at the two stops since his awakening, and the interior of the car was impressively devoid of information. Even the train number was absent. Such sterility had an intentional quality.

The car itself was well populated, boasting at least 17 travelers. In the far corner, a man mumbled curses at a woman until she moved in disgust.

"You bitch, disrespecting me. Ten years ago, I would have done things to you. Now, I've got a job and you disrespecting me. Like the fucking 50's. You bitch..."

The epithets continued unabated, even after she primly commented that he was "An ugly person" and relocated to a nearby seat.

Eric's attention reverted to his end of the car. Again he felt his pocket. The wallet was still there. The man standing next to him wasn't a pickpocket who counted on his abusive partner to distract people while he plied his trade. It was just a legitimate and isolated instance of subway anger.

The train stopped. The windows had located themselves to carefully obscure any observation of the station name. When the train started, he began to feel a little panic. Perhaps he had missed his stop and was traveling through the hinterlands of the ghetto. Eventually, he would be forced to get out, cross to the other side of the track and wait indefinitely for the return train while all manner of unsavory characters greeted the opportunity to violate his person.

He hadn't risen from his seat to check the sign because he would immediately lose it to one of the rapacious individuals hovering over him. They wouldn't take the interspersed vacant spots but would eagerly claim a coveted end seat. The closest one could come to privacy on a train was to have human contact on one side only. Of course, there was always the danger that someone would stand inconveniently close - intruding on one's space with their elbow or bag. But statistics proved that the end seat was still more desirable.

Eric was about to query his neighbor, violating a core taboo of subway travel, when he was forestalled by the opening of an end door. A loud man burst into the car and immediately launched into a rehearsed monologue.

"Thank you ladies and gentleman and sorry to interrupt..."

Sorry, my ass. He'd be sorry if that 240 pound bouncer ejected him from the car for his trouble.

"I am a victim of a rare blood disorder. My family is gone and my em-

ployer is gone."

Odd wording. Obviously not a native English speaker. You'd think the agencies that hired these bums would at least train them correctly.

"Any bit of food or money would be greatly appreciated."

Of course. How about a rotten sandwich. Eric smiled at the thought of bringing spoiled food onto the subway to hand out to these guys. Cruel, but they were really a nuisance. In fact, panhandling was illegal - as the sole official sign in the car clearly indicated. This made them criminals.

.... suffering....

Something about suffering blah blah. These guys always had a sob story. Really quite annoying. If people didn't lie so brazenly then honest folk wouldn't be as suspicious and the occasional deserving individual would find charity forthcoming. This was the real tragedy: a city whose dwellers have a reputation for callous indifference, but who are simply observing a reasonable cynicism born of constant deception. If others are always attempting to fool you then it is difficult to separate truth from fiction and you eventually stop trying. It is the only way to survive. He thought sadly of an innocent tourist stranded in the city begging for help. As he was allowed to suffer and starve he could thank the countless thieves and liars for creating this fate.

Wait, the man wasn't talking about his own suffering. He was asking for suffering.

"Any little bit of suffering helps." he repeated as he paced the aisle.

What will these guys think of next? Eric pointedly looked away with an air of disgust. The man smiled as he passed, a knowing glance between savvy urbanites. Three passengers away, he stopped in front of a woman on the opposite side. She was dressed like a tourist and bore herself with a casual simplicity that evinced an ignorance of the deadly seriousness city

life.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have any suffering," she replied in a charming rural accent, smiling disarmingly as she spoke.

Stupid tourists. Don't make eye contact because then he'll mark you as a sucker and never let go.

The man wasn't deterred. "Anything. A scrap, a little piece. Whatever you have will help." She turned to her son, a young bumpkin of a boy sitting next to her with a vacant grin on his face. Was he aware of what was happening? Was he aware of anything?

She suddenly doled out a ferocious smack across the face. Small rivulets of blood streamed down his cheek where her nails had cut flesh. The man smiled and seemed happier. "That's really all I have, I'm afraid" she apologized. He wasn't quite ready to give up.

Damned tourists. The reason these obtrusive bums exist is because there's always one dumb tourist to give them something, to make it worthwhile to intrude on everyone's day with their obnoxious spiel. It was the same with spam and telemarketers. Some dumb old granny in the boondocks actually would buy stuff, justifying those villains' horrible behavior and causing millions to suffer. Away with these fools, traitors, and vagabonds. Let them all rot in hell together, changing places periodically that they may fully understand their misery.

The woman was thinking, contemplating whether she had anything to give the man. Suddenly she smiled. She looked around and asked "Does anyone have a scissor or knife?" A man nearby rolled his eyes, reached into his jacket and produced a cigar cutter. She appeared delighted and thanked him profusely. Then, she set to work on her left index finger. Apparently she was not very strong and it took quite some effort. Her face was set in determination laced with a tinge of excruciating pain. Of course, the vagabond did not offer to help. Always taking, never giving.

After a minute and several squeezes, the finger was finally severed - albeit far from cleanly. Strips of skin tangled as she yanked the finger off. She offered it to the man and he nodded in thanks, placing it in his pocket. Without a pause he launched back into his speech, proceeding along the car toward the far door.

The woman stuck the stub of her finger into her purse, glancing about in embarrassment at the mess she had created. She returned the cigar cutter to her neighbor. He took it with annoyed, pursed lips, quickly wiping it off on his shirt before returning it to the jacket pocket.

Bloody tourists, thought Eric.

Fare

Chanda J. Glass

He's got a face like Saturday rain.
He's on the C train
headed downtown,
so he's going
somewhere
but there's no hint of where
no briefcase or paper or daypack or book.
He's all empty hands.
No one calls his name.
He is so solitary
it's hard to imagine
anyone
waiting for him
anywhere,
let alone
someone
rushing forward into his jacket black arms
striking light
in his rain-gray face.

I Am Jackson Pollack

Jeffrey Steinberg

I

I step out of Autumn Rhythms 30, a pack of Camels in the pocket of my black shirt, and a bottle of Johnny Walker Black dangling from my hand against my black jeans. I am Jackson Pollock, the man in the late 1940s and 1950s who was the greatest living painter of them all; the man Life Magazine called 'Jack the Dripper' in a cover story in the late forties. Since my death I've had to be content to let my paintings speak for me.

Until Reo Zaretsky.

Reo Zaretsky likes my paintings and sees his life come alive on my canvas. And he keeps coming back every few weeks to look into the soul of AR30, my drip painting from 1950, which hangs on an entire wall in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That's how we know one another. He sits on the flat leather bench positioned directly in front of me. He looks for hours at a time. At first, I do not know what to expect of him. Then he starts coming regularly, every week.

Reo swaggers around the corner. He stares silently at me squatting below AR30. A few seconds of pensive meditation, then some words, and we have the beginnings of a conversation through the colors and striations on the canvas. And I leap out of the painting, pull a chair over in front of me, and sit down. Beneath the paint he sees a different museum of fractured angles through my words, my brushstrokes, my irascibility.

Tell me the story out loud, so I can write it down, Reo says, before even hello. I hear it more as a request than a command. This is your only chance to come alive, he says.

I am alive, I say, here I am. I chug a mouthful of Scotch. Reo twirls his blue pen.

He's so young. Time was I was as young as him. When I was the greatest painter in the world. But time passes too quickly. And then it happened. I drove my Oldsmobile convertible off the road in '56 and killed myself along with Edith Metzger who sat behind me in the back seat. I was forty-four years old. This last memory remains as dazzling in its color as the moment the car swerved out of control and slammed head-on into a mongrel of an oak tree. How the hell does an oak grow where it should never have been in the first place? The only saving grace is somehow, sitting beside me, Ruth survived. But she became a mistress without her lover.

I learned too late great painters are not great drivers when too much Scotch swirls inside their brains. The oak came closer and closer in a dreamlike slow motion as I heard Ruth Kligman scream. And then my world, our world, flipped over in one thunderous, murderous bang. Wood splintered in all directions. What I knew was this twisted, mangled shell of a Cadillac seemed an outgrowth of the thick tree trunk, and shards of glass glistened in my body. Paint clotted over my eyes, like dribblets of red spaghetti, and I saw broken paintbrushes in a pool of black pigment. I would miss Ruth's touch on my neck and the sweetness of her breath. No turpentine to clean the brushes one last time.

Now my clotted eyes are open, again. I cannot control my story anymore. Reo reaches into his pocket and fingers a small red Swiss pocket knife, he opens it and clips one of his fingernails. I study how his fingers grasp it, as if he would lose his grip on life if he let go; how such an innocuous object in the right hands could become a murderous weapon.

You know, I don't know what I'd do without this knife, I use it all the time, he says. As if it's an innocent toy. I do not say you could kill me. I do not. But I see it, the thin, barely visible silver blade assuming gargantuan proportions in his mind. He writes in blue ink: the knife threatens the gentility of the museum. Then Reo says, lets shatter the civility of this place. These damn people sauntering from one painting to the next, whispering, as if the painters might hear them. Hell, they're not even looking, are they? This is not a fucking tennis match, he yells into the cavernous space.

I want a story about being a great artist. Can you write that Reo? I was

a great artist I yell. Then I light a cigarette. Talk about satisfying. When I created my masterpieces, the paint cans and the paintbrushes were in my hands. Now, the blue pen is in your hand.

Regardless, I feel more alive than I have in almost fifty years. I wonder if he will let me hold the knife and plunge it into de Kooning. It's just a thought, but a delicious one.

Reo sees me come to life chain-smoking one cigarette after another. Swigging a Scotch. We all have our needs. I blow smoke at de Kooning, reach out and slash and jab at his painting, relish our eternal argument. De Kooning is still an important irritant in my life. And now I can say anything I want; he can't answer me. The museum would put a de Kooning on the wall next to AR30. But, unlike de Kooning, my paintings breathe, they traffic in hidden meanings, in the smoky lines of tar and nicotine, and in the pains I battle with every breath.

Reo normally dresses in black when he comes to see me. In a sport jacket, jeans, and casual leather shoes. Today, for contrast, he wears a dark gray open collared shirt. Says he prefers dark, saturated colors, as if I give a shit. He tells me lots of stuff, little of it matters, but I don't ridicule him out loud. Instead, I challenge him: let me speak my mind. After all, isn't the essence of abstract expressionism that the paintbrush is a weapon, a voice? To be avant-garde, left-wing, and alcoholic all in the same breath. All in the same stroke. I'm a culture hero, after all.

I am utterly fascinated by your flings of blacks and color combinations, he says.

Who isn't? I say. I dripped flourishes of sand and broken glass to create a fabric of involuted meaning deeper and deeper inside my paintings. Reo stares at the midpoint, and says, is that ketchup dripping? Of all things, I can't believe he mentions ketchup. Of all the secrets of the world to envision inside my work, I want to take that knife from him and...well, carve out his heart and pour ketchup all over it. Ketchup. Everyone knows de Kooning loved ketchup.

Tell me about the little man you turn over like a bottle of Heinz, Reo says.

Don't you know Life Magazine ran an article on me and said I was 'a

culture hero'?

Shit, Reo says, Heinz Ketchup? What could be more American than that?

I have to laugh. Only I think about ketchup and de Kooning in the same breath. de Kooning, once, when he was really drunk, accused me of wanting to empty his blood onto a canvas. Even if I could change sanguinary red into mauve and fuchsia, would I turn a man upside down? I might punch him. Provoke him. Make him punch me in the gut. Might offer him a cigarette, anything to plug into the on/off valve into a violent past. But turn a guy upside down? Empty his guts onto the canvas. Not an American culture hero.

Reo takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. Anything further than a foot from his face becomes an impressionist painting. So without glasses, AR30 comes alive in a completely different way. All its meanings are unclear. Or, maybe I'm wrong.

Reo stands up, walks around the sturdy bench, and throws out his arms, thrashing. The exertion shakes the poetry from his thoughts. Like paint chipped from an old workbench. I read Reo's thoughts. Outrageous, I say. He thinks about stealing my masterpiece. How fucking dare you! I kick the long plain beige wall that separates sections of the museum and on which AR30 hangs, and I scream, rattling the paintings. I almost put my foot through the wall.

Reo laughs, don't be an idiot. It's only fiction. I wouldn't steal your painting.

You can't write this, I tell him. He points his blue pen at me and shakes his arm. You can't write you're going to steal paintings here. You're wasting your time. You can't do that.

He turns his back to me for a moment, walks off to the Ellsworth Kelly paintings off to the side. They suck, I yell, Kelly had no imagination, look at them, just solid colors. Shit, even you could've painted that Reo. Takes no skill. No creativity.

The truth. I do not talk to everyone who looks at my paintings. I want commitment, a decisive quality. You have it, Reo, I say, you know greatness when you see it.

I whisper, you look good for a man in your thirties.

Reo cleans his glasses, rubs them on a tissue he takes out of his pocket.

Don't get me wrong. You see, I adore women, live female flesh, ask Ruth Kligman, ask my wife Lee Krasner (on second thought, forget her...). But I also admire ruggedly handsome cowboys on horseback ponying up to a hitching post at a bar, like the old days back in those small Wyoming towns. And Reo, with his unkempt light blonde wavy hair, aquiline nose, and scruffy beard, could have been one of those men. He has that hungry look. What horrifies me is he could ever think of stealing my painting. That would be like death, like losing a lover. I can't paint her again. What would I do without him?

Then again, his desperate desire feels like a delight that courses through my body. After all the jokes and innuendoes, the gossip about my life, about me and Ruth, it touches me how badly he wants me.

Take it, I laugh, just you try to fuck me over.

He is doing what so many people do in front of my work: dream. See things I never put there. Stand in one place for twenty minutes. I think every artist would rather you look not at all than glance for a second thinking you've seen their message. Be on your way. We're talking to you; practice listening.

Reo listens. And stares at my painting. He stands, takes a few steps, and looks at AR30 from an angle on the de Kooning side. He takes his glasses off, and surprises me. For intertwined in crooked lines, drips of paint, and layered curlicues he sees the rough outline of his Grandfather's smile. The large, bulbous nose, the full pale cheeks pulled taut, and deeply set brown eyes were protected by a furry brow that overlaid a sadness Reo saw when he looked deeper into those brown eyes radiating such suspicious fear. The old man was tough as nails and trusted no one but he loved his grandson.

Reo had spent many weekend mornings beside his grandfather thirty-five years ago in the two-story brick building across from St. Mary's Park in the Bronx. As he looked into the painting all those hours blended together into one composite morning. The hug from Grandfather as he came in the door, the smell of Old Spice Aftershave the old man always wore, and then a piece of candy or a chocolate bar stuck into Reo's hand and he

would always say, Reo I'll fly you to the moon, you and me, we're going to the moon.

They walked into the first floor and Reo saw machinery and buckets of fresh paint and brushes and cans of turpentine and benzene, shelves of aluminum sheets of all sizes, and stands of two by four oak beams all lined up neatly, with wood shavings beside them on the floor alongside scattered strips of plastic and off to the side, electric saws and machines to bend and shape metal, and in the middle of the large room, he saw Grandfather's workbench come alive.

Then he watched Grandfather work, between the workbench and the windows, at one of the easels. Watched him apply white paint to a piece of wood already primed with white primer, making it an even brighter white. After it dried and Grandfather painted fine blue pinstripes running vertically across the wood. Before hand-lettering 'Property of the New York Yankees,' in dark blue letters and 'Do Not Touch' in red paint below it, he varnished the whole piece of wood. Finished.

Reo sucks in the sweet but strong, liquory fragrance of varnish as though it lingers in the air of the museum. He sees Pollock pacing back and forth and he tells him to relax and Pollock says, I'll relax when you're back with me again. Why have you left?

Can I finish my thought? Reo says, let me enjoy this moment and as he says the words he hears Grandfather's voice telling him to clean some of the brushes he had just used. Use the turpentine, he said, soak them, and later you'll rub some Vaseline on, so they'll soften. Reo loved the smell of the syrupy turpentine in their metallic cans. He poured some into empty paint cans and swished the brushes around, the liquid bubbling, before everything settled and the brushes soaked.

Reo liked to inhale the sweet aromas when he opened the bottles of thin, oily benzene, or the syrupy turpentine, or the cans of varnish. He heard the old man talk about the moon, or Grandfather's raspy, throaty voice hammering out commands, paint this board with white primer, sweep that corner, pick up pieces of plastic and metal on the floor, and then a sweet sucking candy and a kindly smile, a pat on the head. It felt good to watch a master at work. He loved to feel a part of it. Loved to cover the drippings of paint all over the oak boards, even as the drippings still

showed through the thin primer. Loved it when he could put on the three Philco radios. Loved that they all played the same station, the music bouncing off the painted brick walls.

Come, Grandfather yelled, watch me. And Reo came over to an easel that held a piece of wood already primed and painted, and watched Grandfather move a fine, pointy brush, in his right hand, as if a calligrapher. A loose turn of his wrist deliberately twisted to hand-letter a thousand different signs. Reo stood there intoxicated by the smell of the paint, and the simplicity of the technique, the way he leaned on a ballstick to balance his hand. Afterward they worked around the bench.

Hardened paint was everywhere on the five by fifteen foot wooden workbench. Reo liked to run his hand over the rough encrusted colors as well as the soft, grimy portions of the surface dragging the dripped lines of reds, swirls of blacks, dots of whites, and blotches of blue and green at his whim, feeling the pigment chafe his fingers as he wrote a secret message on the board that only he could read, only he could remember. The workbench was a Pollock-like mess and Reo saw art, a slice of life. He could hear Grandfather bark, stop that, you're making a mess. And then, come in here for a piece of candy. Here, how about a sour ball? he said in a hoarse voice. Don't tell your Dad.

Grandfather always had sugary candies to trickle over the workbench. Sometimes he used the bench as a palette to mix colors until they were just right. There were many large blotches of paint. Sometimes Grandfather let Reo drip paint over a piece of wood before they primed it white. Nothing unconscious about what they did. It looked just like my drip paintings. The first time Reo saw my paintings in a magazine he made the connection. But up close, close enough to run his fingers along the surface of AR30, he lost himself inside Grandfather's shop.

He wanted Grandfather's workbench for himself. But it was massive and he had nowhere to store it except in his mind. I understand why he is coming to see me. To look at my painting is to remember Grandfather. He slowly twirls the red pen, then writes that the workbench is a part of him that got away, letting the pen squiggle over the page, red lines running every which way, even some curves. I think he will cry. A real feeling. You find yourself then it disappears. Or it comes and you've got to drink

whiskey to stoke the fire. Otherwise you might lose it. Pain is like that. Seeing Grandfather in AR30 is your whiskey. As long as I am on that wall you see yourself ten years old. I have that effect on people.

II

A cute brunette in her early thirties with a small nose and ruby red lips approaches Reo. His head swivels to hear the tap-tap rhythm on the floor just as she trips over his book bag walking past the de Kooning to his right. I hold my breath for a second, afraid she might go head first into me but she stops within an arm's length. I want to reach out and kiss her large delicious hazel eyes, and those cheekbones.

I want to hit her, show her who's boss, just for a second—provocative eyes or not. Reo jumps up and, helping her to her feet, says hello. I would've needed at least four whiskeys plus some beers before I could do that. You know, to reconcile me the artist with me the person—even today, years after I died—it's a big deal. Being me is one thing but the artist is someone else. There's a horror knowing the two me's don't fit together. Reo sees the artist, god bless him. I still see the drunk. It's easier to see myself that way. Easier not to hear the demands. Clarity is the edge of that penknife in his pocket.

She sits beside Reo and introduces herself. "I know who you're Eliza," he says and whispers to me, "this is not a chance meeting. I met her online."

This Eliza gazes at my painting and Reo kisses her on the cheek. She acts as if a fly has landed on her, as if it were a momentary discomfort. What are you looking at? She asks Reo.

My God, women used to know my prowess, I'm Jackson Pollock, I scream. I'm a great artist.

This is a Jackson Pollock, Reo says. He used to be... And she interrupts, so he's a used-to-be. Do we have to . . . , and then Reo interrupts her. Eliza, forget the painting, you look great, and he takes her hand and kisses her on the lips.

Who's this painting by? She asks again.

Now I'm pissed. I yell at Reo, you're an ordinary Joe. You're not a culture hero like me. Not many culture heroes around anymore. Reo

looks askance as I pace toward him.

Reo frowns, gives in, and thinks, okay, you're a culture hero Jackson Pollock. Reo, what kind of a name is that? What is it? A dance? Eliza asks. She bolts off the bench and clicks her pointy leather boots against the wooden floor. Her hips sway, straining the tight denim of her faded blue jeans. She has such a silky gait I almost jump out of the painting.

"Artistic, creative, retro, ..." rubs his hands nervously along his pants. She listens. I wonder if she sniffs out my nuances? Does she see the allure? The way paint settles on my canvas? She looks amorously at the way it splattered on the surface. Reo sits, frustrated. She slow dances my painting, reaching out her arms to me. I feel tension in Reo's body. He stiffens when she almost brushes her fingers against my texture, when she grinds as if she's throwing paint at the canvas too, as if she's ordaining it, sanctifying it, as if the hard reds and rigid blues turn her on, and inspire her to slow dance from one end of the painting to the other, clicking her boots to some imaginary beat all her own.

What the hell are you doing? Reo grabs her arm, but cannot pull all five-seven of her away from me. You lout, let her appreciate me, I almost yell.

You're mine, get away from him, Reo says, surprising her. Or is she annoyed?

She puts a hand on her hip, relax man, I'm looking at the painting. This isn't the Internet. Give me some room to breathe. What is it with this painting?

She walks closer, inspecting the painting as if she's looking for a chink in my armor. She shakes her head and a weave of light auburn fiber flares out, undulating, revealing golden threads sparkling beneath her shoulders, and then she turns away from the painting to him. The explosion of light at that moment drives Reo to her. He stops short of touching her but looks in the depths of her hazel eyes. He says nothing. She gives him a quick, easy smile.

I don't think she is promising anything more than intelligent conversation. But Reo swoons. The blue pen coils and he writes he could be comfortable with her sense of style the next thirty years. He puts the pen down. Their kiss is more intense. I am not amused.

Her eyes rip him open, exposing his longings. He wants to fuck her on the workbench smearing paint all over her luscious breasts. They are sweet juicy pears – that’s how I imagine them. She examines him scrupulously, intensely, yet briefly, and walks to de Kooning. Reo’s blue pen twitches. Goddammit.

She seems to compare me to de Kooning. To a man who liked ketchup on everything. I want her to come back here. But she stands beside the de Kooning, flaunting herself. The slightest shake of her body and hell, I feel sick. I grab the bottle with both hands and suck down as much Scotch as is humanly possible in ten seconds, gasping for air when I’m through. After half a century I’d forgotten how irritating women can be.

How can you let her walk away from me, from my painting? And for de Kooning? I say to Reo. Give me the penknife, I’ll convince her of the error of her ways.

I’m not drunk. We’ve kissed. I don’t want to. She... , Reo says. She might call me a fool. Laugh at me. Shit happens, you know.

Not likely, not looking at my painting she won’t, I say. I’m the one who’s terrified. You know Ruth Kligman survived that car crash. She was the only one. And I left her forever. Hell. I left her. I didn’t want to; she was so lovely.

Thud. Whoomph. Blackness. No more Pollock.

Fuck you, you’re a fool, I’ve said it. You set up and don’t finish. Is that your style? Say something to her.

You want to get out of here? Reo finds his voice. Have some dinner?

Dinner? Hmmm... she thinks for a moment. Yes, I’d like that.

Reo struts over, stands in front of me, his hands in his pockets. She likes me, see?

Stay with me another half an hour and we’re through for the day, I say, please.

Eliza needs me. She’s hungry. You’re not hungry, you’re just thirsty.

Come, she says, her lips seem fuller. I want to see Degas.

“Can I meet you in say, twenty minutes?” Reo says, then faces Eliza for a second.

You don’t want to see Degas with me? What are you looking at?

I’ll still be here in twenty minutes when you come back, Reo says.

What is it with you and this painting Reo?

Look, I'm doing some analytic work, that's all there is, Reo lies.

Say good bye to me Reo, I say.

She leads him behind the wall, away from me so I cannot see what will happen. I hear no sounds, but I imagine. When they come back Eliza sashays off, her boots clicking with every step she takes. Reo looks stronger. He turns to me with a peaceful expression on his face and pulls the Swiss knife out of his pocket. Opens it. The blade is a thin silver inch, yet glistens in the low light. He thrusts it into the air as if it's a rapier, and cuts a piece of skin off his finger as he moves his hands in unison. Deliberately. To see what it would feel like. A droplet of blood spills, and then another on the pale ash floor.

"I saw a Jackson Pollock Installation last week at the New Museum in Chelsea."

What is this? Should I know? You live in strange times I tell him. There was only one Jackson Pollock and it was fucking horrible enough to be me. Sometimes I could only be me after someone punched me in the gut a couple of times. After I begged for more feelings and rouse my anger, let the feelings percolate inside until they bubbled over and I forgot about memories. Just remember who I really am, not why.

Reo talks about a computer. What does some machine, a television set, know about pain? Or my folly? How can a machine possibly draw like me? My art comes from deep inside my psyche. From seething pain and anger. There's not a chance in hell I'll ever understand what it all means: why I scream when I paint; why I throw paint brushes and paint at the canvas; and why this past of mine burns like a bright flame inside the canvas.

Reo talks about installations and programs executing instruction sets on screens that adjust to movement, with pixel grids that explode, and colors that dance into each other horizontally across a screen.

I yawn, how fucking boring. I tell him to shut the fuck up.

Reo says only great artists are mimicked this way. You should be proud they're recognizing you.

Who the fuck is recognizing me, I ask, and what the hell's interesting

about a machine trying to mimic me. I'm the one who's interesting. I'm the culture hero. Reo isn't whirling that blue pen now.

It's about high tech in a museum art show that includes you Jackson, Reo says.

Pixel grids. Make-believe representations. What about the real thing? I say. It makes me think of museums as zoos—a place to cage ideas. A form of protection: sanitize the rebellion, and airbrush the hideous. The real Jackson Pollock can't get out and enrage the general population with his ideas. No one will ever call me 'Jack the Dripper,' again. My time's come and gone. There's a word I've heard, a replacement, a new material that's coming. Plastics. It's so plastic.

I slug several gulps of Scotch. Shit. Why don't you write any scenes for me in a bar? I ask. You know, me amongst the guys; Motherwell, Baziotes, and de Kooning. I light a cigarette and suck in the smoke, exhale it violently, streams of smoke rushing from my nose. I need this reassurance, I say, the whole fucking world is out of whack, at least when I smoke I taste something real. Not plastic.

You taste death, Reo says. The harsh taste of death, death in lingering blue smoke, death waiting to grab you. Besides, you'd hold production up in a drunken rage.

Did you know I dribbled whiskey on my canvases accidentally. Small drops of caramel mixed in with the paint. Made for some interesting combinations.

I want to swing at him. But I'm too drunk. Reo jabs his blue pen at me and I swing, miss badly, lose my balance, fall into the wall, and bang my face. Pain. He laughs at me, the swine, advises me to keep my fists at my side, unless I'm painting.

You threw the lines of paint into the air real well, but using your fists, different story, Reo says. You're pretty awkward with those fists. The laws of energy and fluid motion are against you. Besides, you prefer I remember you for your fists, or paintings? As a charlatan, or an artist?

I drag on the cigarette again and slur, I'm a fucking artist. The greatest artist, but the words are no longer as clear as they were when he first got here an hour or so ago.

You know Pollock, the press said that even though the installation

was great, it was not Jackson Pollock. Not even close. This makes my day. Makes me think the whole thing about pixies is pure unadulterated bullshit.

Thank you, I scream. Distant murmurs rumble through the gallery. The guard changes the angle of his stare, scratching under his arm in a sustained rhythm before shuffling his feet. These guards..., you could piss on the wall and they wouldn't know why it smelled.

Eliza creeps back into Reo's head. I see his devilish leer at the thought of her on his workbench. He imagines her smearing paint on his arm. Her fingers hot like an iron branding his skin. He opens his eyes.

Reo let me read his words. Take a look, Reo yells. See, I write it in blue ink, see, I write: flatten the world. See a two-dimensional optical illusion plagiarizing text. Stop, think culture clash and nihilism on a painted canvas. Abstract Hieronymus Bosch. Your theme Pollock is theme the impossibility of finding a theme, your theme is the eternal search for meaning in a nihilistic void. Bullshit is what I say to that, bullshit, I assert.

But Reo continues, I see so much in your work, there's so much to imagine on the canvas. I see dead bodies, and body parts wearing sad faces, and alliterations with tears dripping. He says miscegenation as if a trumpeter blows out a staccato burst. And then another burst, incest. All these bizarre things, Reo writes them down, and yells, I see inside your art. I always believed we see what we desperately needed to see – ourselves inside the art. Parts of us wrapped in cellophane like packages of red chopped-meat. He twirls the blue pen for a moment and ponders the texture and smell of raw chopped-meat. Thinks about constituent elements like those mornings with Grandfather all those weekends ago when he felt loved and he could taste raw chop-meat with salt sprinkled over it. The word he is searching for is hermeneutics. Reo is so wrapped up inside he doesn't hear me say, open your eyes. He licks salt off his lips. He lifts his head to the painting. Spins the blue pen down and all those images in play like a cheap cinema splatter off the page. Hell, I'll tell you, I can see your thoughts. Do you hear me? He looks at me. My fists sweat pain.

His fingers grip the side of the cushions. You should be thrilled there is so much to see inside your work, he says, fingering his arm to feel the spots he thought Eliza touched.

Like I need your...I'm a great fucking artist.
"You drank yourself to death. You know that? Right?"

III

Here I am, Eliza returns and digs her strong fingers into Reo's muscles. He relaxes to the idea of needing her body. He lets his fingers knead her freshly-powdered arm feeling the underlying soft undulations, and then he places a teasing kiss on her neck, and he breathes a perfumed flirtation on the nape of her neck. His eyelids close. Her body brushes against his, as though she were applying a coat of fresh paint to his workbench.

Don't tell her about me, I say. Talk about my art, not me.

Me and you, we could. . . , Reo starts to tell Eliza.

You son of a bitch, I told you..., and it was as though the colors on the canvas spoke.

Please stop it, right now, Reo quickly says.

You want me to stop touching you? she asks.

Stop writing, I say. Stop twirling your pen.

What'd you say? She asks.

Don't fuck with me, I shriek, loud enough to rattle his composure.

I see new shit all the time, Reo explains, wiping the sweat on his brow. Her lips glisten.

What's wrong with you? she says. Why are you shaking your head like that?

Let's get out of here, Reo says. I'm, you know, overloaded.

You are so full of shit, I say, as he reaches out to touch her hand.

You want me to stop touching you? I thought you were enjoying it, Eliza says. What's wrong?

You wouldn't believe me if I told you, Reo says, touching her hand.

Talk to me, she says, running her fingers through her hair.

I haven't felt like this in a long time, so . . . so wanted.

I'm lost. I thought you were angry. Weren't you angry?

I mumble sometimes when I'm moved, and you move me Eliza, really.

Get her out of here before I lose my temper, I scream. Reo stops.

You should've slapped her, I say again, but then change my tone. She's hot. She likes you. Even if she has no taste in art.

So she's not an art critic. . . , Reo says.

Fuck, Reo fumes to himself. I'm not de Kooning, get off my back. If you can't shut up we're leaving. You're ruining my night.

Tell her how beautiful her eyes are. If you won't slap her, kiss her, I say.

She beckons to him. He follows her off to the side.

What are you doing? Eliza asks as he comes over to her.

Writing about looking at Pollock looking at me.

I cringe, he's revealing my secrets.

You're writing about looking at Pollock looking at you?

Oh Christ, he's going to betray me! Tell the world he hears me talk. Don't you tell that little slut a damn thing about me. Kiss her some more. It shuts them up all the time.

Why no words about me? She collects her lovely strands of hair, shakes her head, and gathers them again into a ponytail.

Oh, those gorgeous eyes, Reo says. Some people think Pollock was subversive . . . ,

You didn't answer me, she says, this is not subversive, pointing to AR30.

I am pissed. Me, subversive, shit. Accusing me of being manipulated by godless machines, televisions, telling me people were copying my style, and thinking about stealing my painting. Who the fuck are you? You're out to get me. Maybe you're the subversive, Reo.

Reo kisses Eliza. The kiss is a long wrap in cellophane and she digs her pink nails into his arm and caresses the back of his neck like she didn't want it to end.

You kissed her because I told you to, would you kill her if I asked you to? Would you steal my paintings? Do you believe me? I'm lying. Telling the truth. I'm lying.

Reo shakes his head like a cat, ears flapping, and saliva dripped from the corner of his mouth. His head hurts as it hadn't for quite a while. Eliza sees him become an animal in heat, out of sync, on the wrong path without a guide, and she slowly backed away.

Pollock's talking to me. Has been talking to me.

You're crazy. I thought you were before but now I know for sure. Reo rubs his head as she speaks.

You didn't care about me, I say. "You're like me..."

No I'm not like you. I'm not, Reo says. Do you see me slugging Scotch every minute? Or smoking cigarettes incessantly?

Doesn't matter, you want to fuck her, but without whiskey, it's a crazy idea. Without whiskey, life's one fucked up place. And you told her I spoke to you. The last person I spoke to was Ruth, in that Oldsmobile. Do you what I'd write Ruth if I could?

Reo looks at me befuddled, and all he can say is stop drinking that Scotch, you're drunk.

I don't give a rat's ass. I'd tell Ruth that I'm still the greatest painter, but now I'm looking for a slow journey, no more fast cars to nowhere. A slow journey that leads anywhere other than whiskey breathe at 5am on some Manhattan street, with me shouting obscenities into the wind, or puking all over the street, or slumped against some building looking like those goddamn bums on the Bowery. I'm not some fucking bum.

Then I see Reo reach into his pocket and take out the Swiss Army knife again. It's not enough to threaten anyone, just enough to slit open an envelope. He opens the blade and screams at me.

Goddammit, Pollock, you're driving me crazy, this is the last fucking time I come here. That's it, you can vegetate inside your paintings the rest of your life. Culture hero. What a goddamn joke. You weren't even the greatest painter of your time. You know who's recognized as the best of your New York group?

He smiles at me like sandpaper. I know that look, the look of smug self-satisfaction.

De Kooning? No. That's not possible. Please, tell me it isn't so.

De Kooning, Reo says staccato. You should be lucky they put you beside de Kooning. They only gave you the better position because AR30 is a bigger picture.

Why you little... I am stopped by a wild panic in his blue eyes.

Eliza inches away, unsure who Reo has become. The shimmering silver of the blade startles her. A wave of fear bolts her feet to the floor. She hugs the wall beside de Kooning.

He won't save you baby girl, I whisper, as I rush over to her. I'm not calm. I can't do anything about Reo, he's crazy. I can't help her so I shuffle over to my painting and brace myself.

Reo extends his arms and returns to me, standing in front of my painting, his arms thrashing, one violent parry after another. He slashes at me.

Put your fucking blue pen down, I scream. Stop. You're out of control. But he doesn't listen. His hands jerk, leaving a blue trail across the page. He scribbles down words as fast as his mind processes them.

I drift into de Kooning's mess, to hide. The scythe is a knife. The cut is a quick thrust into and out of the fabric. The words are written in blood. I scream in horror, I want to stay in one piece. Please, Reo..., I plead.

Eliza screams, stop. Don't, don't do it.

He slashes at me again and again chopping up the ideas. He yells, this is the way writing is written, instead of rich colors and patterns, rich actions and emotions, evocative language. Anything to captivate the reader.

The cotton canvas is now a series of cuts and slithers that fold into each other like a warped piece of melted plastic. A series of confetti strips hanging at wretched angles to each other, in illogical shapes, are a nihilist's delight. Like salt on red meat.

I pound fists against the screwball collage of colored strips. Finally I can use my fists for something constructive and as I pummel away, I fall to the floor with a thud. A Hieronymus Bosch battlefield of awkward figurines lopping off heads and arms and legs comes alive in Reo's head as he studies me struggling to get up. Knives twist into carcasses and spout rills of red ink. I look behind to see how much I'm bleeding. I'm not, but for the first time in this museum I ache to fist the wall. I long to taste dribblets of blood from the shredded canvas. The ugly sound of rending is a siren cry for help.

I am sitting on the floor. I cannot move. Light a cigarette. Pour some more Scotch into my bloodstream. Are there two Reos? Or one? I'm not sure. I rest my palms against the wall behind me and take pleasure I might be leaving my smudge marks on the wall. That damn wall.

Reo hears Eliza the second time and stops, wiping sweat off his brow. He twirls his blue pen, walks over to the painting and mumbles, well, Pollock, happy now...you. Reo smiles. Eliza, look, he says, directing his

comments to the other wall where she stands. Nothing's been destroyed. Yet.

I'm writing this scene as we go, the AR30's still what it was. Even your reactions, I'm writing them as you speak. I changed my mind a minute ago and went in a different direction. I can do anything I write about, Reo boasts, and there is that blue pen following his arm as he gesticulates across the empty space, as if he is painting his own word picture.

Who am I? Why do you want me? she asks. Take me back Reo.

I take it all back, for you, Eliza, he says, holding her arm and softly massaging as he places the pen down on the paper. It's just action in a story, me thinking out loud, Reo goes on.

He picks up the pen and turns to Eliza. He put his arm on her waist and kisses her again, harder this time. And longer. He whispers, I have to reverse everything from the beginning. You know how stories work. I had to get the knife out. Glistening. And act nuts. Had to. Had to make the character get off the damned bench. Get him moving. Show the silver of the knife in action. You're beautiful and sexy, Eliza. You spiced the whole story up. It's why you're here.

You used me, she says.

Used you, Reo says, musing, well, yes, but so what, here you are, you're the reason for a lot of this story. I made you a star. When we do the movie, we'll get...

Jennifer Lopez, I like her, Eliza says.

Okay, Reo says. You're hot, she's hot, and Reo stretches his arms akimbo, releasing energy.

Now can I tell you to fuck off? she laughs. Eliza comes so close Reo can smell the wintergreen mint on her breath. So close, he kisses her satiny smooth neck. He needs a more intense language to continue the seduction.

Kiss me again, she whispers. They kiss slowly, wrapping around each other, arms twisting around each other's back, her hands moving to his face, one of his hands grabbing her ass. And when the kiss finishes Reo sits down and grabs the blue pen. Eliza stands beside him. But he writes nothing.

He cannot write the lines for me. I still sit in the corner between the

de Kooning and my painting. Motionless. Drunk. It's not time to leave, Reo would've let me shout. It's time to write a new scene. You get the goddamn girl; such a Hollywood copout ending. I can't believe it, are the words I would've said if Reo had written them. Reo would've wanted to hear me slur those words. Instead Reo thinks them; does not write them; and I have nothing to say.

"History's written by winners darling," Reo says to Eliza. In tomorrow's paper this never happened. It's only happening so you'll go to bed with me tonight.

That's why it's great to be a fiction writer, or a painter, huh Reo? Eliza says.

Reo puts the pen down and rests his hand after writing all those words. The finished story flashes before his eyes. He likes this version better. Not only doesn't Eliza leave him, she accepts his invitation to dinner. They fuck on the workbench near St. Mary's Park listening to golden oldies from the sixties on his grandfather's Philcos in a shop that closed almost half a century ago. And finally a scene he need not explain to me although if he had to, Reo would tell me the truth—she was goddamn pretty, a hell of a good lover, and a lot more colorful than he imagined.

Reo wonders if his story will stand the test of time. Fifty years later. The way my paintings have. He remembers I say *practice listening*. *That's how to view my painting*. That I sought respect. But for Reo, talking to me is like scraping the paint off an easel, trying to find his roots, trying to find a source of personal nourishment inside those clues layered over Grandfather's encrusted workbench. Clues to a deep-seated pain he is still learning to understand even as the drama plays over and over again before his eyes. *You find yourself and then it disappears*. It is the way of pentimento, the way paint dries into shapes and patterns that fade over time, so that even the barest outlines of a previous life, of emotionally charged moments, are too raw to forget. You see their power to affect.

Thud. Whoomph. Blackness. I am back in my painting.

Bad Man

Kenneth Halpern

- Father, I don't want to go to sleep.
- I don't blame you, son; who knows what happens when you are asleep?
- What do you mean?
- You are entirely helpless. If someone were to enter your room, they could do anything they wish. By the time you awakened, it would be too late.
- I hate scary stories.
- If your door isn't locked, a psychopath could make his way into your room and commit unspeakable atrocities.
- But I always lock my door like mother told me. Once, I forgot, and she locked me in the room for a whole day.
- Never cross your mother.
- I feel safe in my loftbed when the door is locked.
- What about the windows? Do you lock them as well? If not, someone could easily drop from the roof onto the sill. Then, they could pry the window open. Nobody would know they are in here with you.
- I would scream.
- If you are asleep, you cannot. What if they cover your mouth with duck-tape and tie your hands? Then they gently rouse you, that you may better see the horrors to be inflicted upon you.
- Why would someone want to hurt me?
- The only glimmer of hope remaining would be knowledge of the finite duration of the pain; though remote, this may save you from madness.

In fact, death must come with daylight or the intruder would likely be caught. On average, this would amount to six hours of suffering.

- What sort of suffering? Wouldn't they just take my things and leave?

- That would not be their purpose. Of course, if we are away then the time scale could significantly lengthen. It is likely that they would come when we are away- when you are alone with nobody to raise the alarm.

- Who would come?

- They. The ones who would enter through your door or window to do these terrible things. To make you wish for death.

- But I lock my door. If the door and windows are locked they cannot get in.

- Indeed. And that is why you should listen to your mother. Always lock the door and windows. We do. Even to one another. Who knows when an ordinary person could lose control. Do we ever really know someone?

- I know you. You're my daddy.

- But what else am I - or could I be? We do not know. It is best to be safe.

- Are you afraid, father?

- Of course. I am afraid of many things, though no man should admit to this. I fear failure and death, pain and grief, the contempt of others, the cold blade and the red flame, and water without end. Sometimes I fear your mother. Always I fear myself.

- You don't fear me, do you?

- Don't be silly. Why should I fear you, who are but a child?

- Then why does my weakest cry tear you from the chair with great haste?

- It is love, not fear. Fear is deep and pure. It is confined to one's own person. When all pretense of intellectual detachment is destroyed, it is what confronts us. In pain and cold, the elaborate constructs of our ego melt away and this physical reality alone remains to us.

- I don't understand.

- One day you will.
- If the door and windows are closed, what can harm us?
- There is one other from whom we cannot hide.
- Who is that?
- The bad man. No barrier obstructs him and he is always near.
- But if we cannot hide, why hasn't he killed us all?
- It is not his way. Like an animal, he senses fear. He only strikes those who think of him.
- Then I won't. That is easy.
- If one falls asleep thinking of him then he will come.
- Where does he come from?
- He slowly appears, as if rising from the ground. Once wholly present, he begins his work. You would first sense him, and then see his hand rising above the bed- groping toward your soft flesh.
- But you know of him. Why doesn't he come to you?
- I do not know what he looks like. He only appears if you have an image of him in your mind. You must know the details. A vague fear alone will not do.
- Do you know what he looks like?
- As I said, no. Obviously not, or he would have come.
- What does he do when he comes.
- Nobody knows for certain. The autopsies are usually sealed; for his existence is widely known, a dark secret that few openly speak of. It has been said that the victims were not recognizable and had taken a very long time to die.
- Who did he kill?
- Again, it is not clear. These details tend to be suppressed. Perhaps some of the unsolved cases or disappearances have been misrepresented by the press.

- Is he the devil?

- No. The devil does not exist. He is merely a fiction created as a necessary antagonist to God. Every religion has one. The bad man is simply mean. He enjoys watching others suffer. And he is real.

- But he can't harm us because you don't know what he looks like.

- Actually, I do. But I didn't want to tell you because you might not be ready to handle such a secret. You might accidentally think of him as you doze off. Only a grownup can handle such responsibility.

- You never forget?

- I never sleep.

- Yes you do. The other day, I saw you on the couch.

- Like Noah's son. Yes, I do indeed sleep. Yet I know what he looks like and have never been harmed.

- That must be hard. What if you forget? If you even worry about forgetting then you will have thought of him. Once the thought is embedded, you would be doomed. [seed is planted]

- This is true, except that most of us cannot summon him. Only very special people can do so.

- Am I special?

- To me you are. But probably not to him. Few are.

- I can handle the responsibility. Tell me what he looks like.

- I can't. What if you are one of the few?

- Is there a way to know?

- Not until it is too late.

- I promise not to think of him. Please tell me. I lock the door and I'm going to lock the windows. I'm a good boy. You can tell me.

- Very well. But don't say I didn't warn you. And don't tell anyone else.

- I promise not to tell. (Father whispers a description to the son).

- Can you envision him?
- A little.
- Think carefully. Close your eyes. Do you see him? What is he doing?
- Yes. Yes. I see him clearly. He has a carrot peeler in his hand.
- That sounds like the type of thing he would hold. Open your eyes. You don't want to see what he does with it.
- Why?
- You might dwell on him, and neglect to forget about him.
- He doesn't really exist. You told me about that bear who eats people, and that didn't exist either.
- True. But the bad man does exist. I have seen him.
- Then why didn't he hurt you.
- I wasn't one of the special children. And I only saw an image of him, drawn by one of the doomed.
- Why are they special?
- The bad man is part of us. When a typical child falls asleep, his thoughts flit between many subjects without alighting on any. Certain children are different, though. They focus on one object and let it grow in their minds. Their fear expands as fantasy generates every detail of this being and his actions. Through sheer force of will they create him. And through all the horrors and mutilations they endure, their consciousness is incapable of banishing him; for, once created, he is no longer bound. In sleep, the mind loses its mastery and fancy becomes reality. The bad man and his author share a similar fate, but he enjoys it.
- I don't understand.
- You are too young.
- Why did you tell me about him? Don't you love me.
- Yes. Very much. But each parent must test his child.
- Why?

- Those children are different in other ways too.
- Am I one of them?
- No. Now forget about all this nonsense and go to sleep.
- Daddy, I'm scared.
- There's no need to be. Your mother and I are nearby and your door is locked. If you need anything just shout.
- But he'll cover my mouth.
- Don't think about it. Promise me.
- I promise. Daddy, I love you.
- Me too. Goodnight, son.
- Goodbye, father.

About Involutions

Involutions is an online zine started as a collaboration among a number of local writers who know each other through various NY writing groups. It is an "online zine" as opposed to an "ezine" because the web is solely used as a distribution vehicle. The intent is that readers will download and properly print the zine. To this end, fully typeset PDFs for the interior and cover of each issue are provided. Involutions is free, but has been edited and proofread through an informal process of peer review. It originally was conceived as a collection of short stories but evolved to incorporate poems, graphic works, and pieces that defy classification. While much of the work has a surreal quality, there is no intentional emphasis on any one genre.

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