

## **A SUMMER LANDSCAPE**

I first met Ryan during the summer we graduated high school. His band played a house show down in Dearborn, one that was unusual because the basement was finished, meaning it had carpet. Everyone had to take their shoes off. It was a bunch of men standing around in their socks.

I didn't know Ryan and I were the same age at the time. I thought he was much older. He was balding, and to compensate for the loss, his body grew massive amounts of hair everywhere else. Arms like a gorilla's, chest like a bear's. He took his shirt off when he played, and what I assumed to be a beer gut hung over his khaki shorts (the culprit was, in fact, Mountain Dew). His voice, too, was extraordinarily deep. Gravely and propelled directly from his tummy. Because of all this, I was very timid when I introduced myself to him and told him I liked his set. Respectful, almost honorific, offering far more dignity than his crummy band deserved. But because I thought he was older, I was polite because I wanted to make friends and establish myself as a likeable person in the scene.

Such hopes were futile as my true disposition revealed itself: opinionated and strange, quiet and grim. I was only ever able to collect a small arrangement of friends, who, in truth, were closer to acquaintances. The most loyal of these was Ryan. It seems my compliments to him at the socked house show carried water in his mind. The next time he saw me, he asked if I wanted to grab a bite to eat a diner nearby. That's when I learned his real age.

I learned other things about him then, too. Then, at the diner, over puffed waffle fries (a specialty of the place, which has since closed) and terrible coffee, and later, at the beach and record shopping and bike rides and the bar, I learned Ryan's favorite books and bands, what his

parents were like, and what he wanted to do when he got older. Little things like that. More importantly, I learned what kind of person he was, or at least my approximation of him. My view was thus: there was something hapless about him, something clueless. An eternal optimism, an innocence that never eroded despite his penchant for drinking and lust for women. What's more, there was always something surprising about him. Though I knew he was funny, and I knew he was smart, I was still struck each time he made a joke or made a pointed comment, as if it was completely unexpected. The flip side of that, of course, was that he was just as irritating as he was charming. He was forever stuck up his own ass, forever failing to see the writing on the wall. But this, too, led into his innocence. Our friendship was pure, and I loved him.

But, like all friendships, we drifted apart, and while our bond stayed the same, it became only a sun-bleached version of what it was like ten years prior, and each time we saw each other, it became more and more difficult to withstand the other's company, if only for the unique, deep pain nostalgia bought. For better or worse, the next time I saw Ryan regularly, there was none of this melancholy feeling involved, for our primary reason for interacting was strictly business. It was summer again, though there were no symbolic markers to it like there had been the first time we met. Neither of us were graduating—Ryan had been out of college for some time, as had I, the difference being he had a degree while I didn't. Neither of us were getting married or divorced (both would come later). There were no births, no funerals. It was a summer like any other, which, in fact, turns out to be the rarest season of all. If you think of all the cyclical events of your life, like falls or winters or birthdays or holidays, I'm sure you'll find that almost everyone of them was an outlier in some respect—a nagging little pinprick or a massive aberration that prevented normality.

During that normal summer of 2013, Ryan decided he wanted to start a publishing house. He wanted to put out novels, poetry, art books. The whole nine yards. Problem being, he didn't have any money to do. So, he went to my employer for help. He procured a small loan, something close to thirteen grand, and offered to make paltry payments once a week before his profits started flowing in and he could start repaying the loan "for real." It goes without saying that this loan was unprofessional. There were no contracts, no receipts. My boss, Bruegel, was, among other things, a loan shark. As far as criminals go, he kept his hands pretty clean. Mostly gambling. Some fencing of stolen goods. Not much in the way of personal loans, which is one of the many reasons I was surprised to find him in business with Ryan.

Bruegel was a step ahead of me, however. He told me he didn't expect Ryan to repay the entire loan plus the interest, or vig, in his parlance. His words: "just make sure the little boy doesn't spend all of it before the summers over." So, once or twice a week, I'd meet Ryan, usually at his apartment, but sometimes at a bar, and collect his payment of about a hundred dollars or so. Then we'd catch up. I'd ask him how the publishing house was coming along, what books he had planned, the future, and report all this back to Bruegel, who would listen, nod his head, take some notes, then send me off, either back to my apartment, or to do some more collecting. I had no idea what his endgame was and asking him wasn't within the context of our relationship. If I had to guess, he was sussing out what the publishing industry held for him. It was one of the few pies he didn't have his finger in.

Were that the case, he couldn't have chosen a worse entry-level rube than Ryan. From our first meeting, it was clear that he would need to struggle to spend even half of what Bruegel gave

him. His operating costs were extraordinarily low. Not only was he the only employee, but he planned to be the first, inaugural author, too. He was starting a publishing house just to publish his own book, it seemed. On top of that, it was going to be a novel, so there were no budgetary concerns for research or assistants or licensing fees. Until that book was finished and until he received a quote from a printing press, he was just hanging out. He basically took out a thirteen thousand dollar loan to pay his rent.

As little sense as that made—getting in bed with a loan shark just to pay the bills—it took on some form of logic once I saw Ryan’s new apartment. He moved into The Jeffersonian, a rehabbed development that sat on the riverfront. The building was over fifty years old, and when they gutted it, they removed all the original mid-century fixtures and replaced them with more expensive replicas that somehow looked worse. But it was still a nice building, nicer than where I lived, at least. The developers wanted to install an air of luxury to the joint, so the lobby was fully staffed at all hours. Doorman. Front desk. Even a bathroom attendant. The apartments, too, were decked out. Japanese style toilet with a bidet. Slick cabinets and appliances. Choice views of the river. Even though he had only a studio, Ryan’s rent was easily four figures.

Once, I asked him why he didn’t use some of Bruegel’s money to furnish his apartment—instead of plopping his twin mattress on the ground, why didn’t he buy a Queen and appropriate frame? Instead of a bookshelf he found in a dumpster by the college dorms, why didn’t he get a nice one made from real wood, not particle board? I asked him these questions primarily out of obligation to Bruegel; I wanted to see how far Ryan would go with the money, how many

extravagances he would allow himself, but I was also genuinely concerned. He was living like a slob and overpaying for it.

“If I bought furniture,” he said, “that would be against everything I was trying to do. I want to live life as an ascetic and see where it takes me. I want to be pure.” He said this as we sat at his kitchen table on two mismatched chairs, splitting a case of High Life at two in the afternoon. I couldn’t tell if he was being serious or not, so I laughed. He laughed back, and I decided not to mention it to Bruegel.

That same day, toward the end of that case of beer, we went to Belle Isle. It was a short walk from his apartment, and it was the first time I’d ever crossed the bridge on foot. We took a short break midway through and looked out at the river, the bridge, and the handful of skyline Detroit provided. The beer had left me bloated and flushed, so I welcome the breeze coming off the water. We chatted for a bit, looking at our world. Not book stuff, thankfully, but normal things. Girls we wanted to fuck, places we wanted to go, various improvements we wanted to make to our diets. It felt good being with Ryan again, and I was thankful he didn’t ask me too much about my job, though even calling it a job felt strange. I preferred to think of it as something I did for money. If he pressed me too hard, if he asked a particularly pointed question, I would have had to give Ryan too many details about what I did, what I’ve seen, and the people I considered my colleagues, and I think this would have shocked him—it would have illustrated the gulf between us, the gap in time that separated our former selves and our present ones. I think he understood the danger of this realization, too, which is why he restrained himself.

Once we crossed the bridge and entered Belle Isle proper, we went straight to the beach. There were other places we could have went. Though it was getting late in the afternoon, perhaps even early evening, the greenhouse and aquarium were still open, but after being stuck together for a few hours, we were exhausted of each other's company. Having to relearn mannerisms and verbal tics was exhausting enough, but on top of that we needed to redraw lines in the sand. Where the jokes started and where they ended, what levels of irony we could get away with. Very draining stuff. At the beach, though, there were throngs of people. Many of whom we knew. Girls were there, too.

One group had big 40oz bottles of Old Milwaukee buried in the sand like totem poles. They had forgotten to grab a cooler on their beer run, they said, so they buried them to keep them cool. They offered one each to me and Ryan, and we sat down in the sand to drink them. There weren't enough beach towels. Immediately, I could feel the sand enter my ass crack.

One of the girls brought up the killings that had happened over the winter that carried into the spring. Five prostitutes had been murdered and dumped into abandoned houses on the near-east side. The police thought they were connected, thought it didn't take a genius to figure that one out. They also said each of the bodies had distinguishing characteristics that suggested a link, though they wouldn't say what these characteristics were, so of course our minds went wild with speculation. Mutilations? Occult rituals? Other perversions? It was a common form of introductory gossip that summer, something everyone had a theory on, a fine arena for morbid curiosity. Would the killings continue into the summer? Or was it only the work of a cold-weather sicko? The girl that brought them up this time, though, did so for a different reason. She

posited that because the victims were sex workers and women of color (her words), we didn't care as much as we would have had the victims been white boys or girls from the suburbs. To her, this was cause for moral outrage. She was certainly right about her first point—we would have cared more if we had reason to think we were at risk ourselves, but at the moment that was unlikely. As to her second point, she may have been right, but if one truly took the time to consider the murder, death, and despair that happened in the world every moment of every day, then moral outrage would be constant. It would fill you up to your gills. And that was no way to live. You had to pick your battles. For the time being, we were young. There was no reason to fight.

“Shut the fuck up, Justine,” one of the boys said. “In December, you said they were just ‘more dead whores.’ That’s a quote.”

“Sorry my thinking on the subject has evolved, Taylor. Would you like me to apologize for that? Or is there another way I should think?”

Taylor rolled up a joint, not even looking to see if police were around. There were some cops up in the parking lot, but it was unlikely they'd bother any of us. They were mostly there for fights. “Whatever dude, I don't care. Just shut up.”

I could see Justine was hurt. She cast her eyes down and squished her mouth into a squiggly line. I didn't like her much. I found her annoying for precisely the reasons Taylor outlined above—she was always grandstanding, hopping around from one topic to the next, and didn't seem like she had a true sense of self (not many of us did, but at least we didn't act otherwise). But her pain felt real. So, I abandoned Ryan and moved over to her.

“That was mean,” I said.

“Taylor’s a jerk. But it doesn’t matter. None of you fucking care.” I could see tears welling up in her eyes and collecting at the bottom of her lids. Her mascara was getting ready to set loose.

“I care. I care. It’s fucked up. I just...don’t know what we can do.”

“Well, if you people would listen to me for a minute,” said Justine, raising her voice, “you would know there are certain community organizations that are looking out for these women, and there are certain things we can do to help these women.”

Nobody looked over at her, and this only frustrated her all the more. They were too busy passing over Taylor’s joint. I made eye contact with Ryan, and he winked at me.

“What can we do, Justine? I’d like to help.”

“There’s money we can donate, or we can go canvassing together and put up flyers on light posts. Just get the word out so these women can protect themselves.”

“I’d do that with you. Do you wanna put flyers up this weekend?”

“Yeah, maybe. I’ll have to check. One of my friends is having an art opening, so I might be busy.” The joint got passed to us now. It was nearly a roach, and Justine took only a small hit. When it was my turn, I was faced with a precarious decision. If I took a modestly sized hit, there would hardly be enough to pass to the next person, and glancing around, I seemed to be last in line. If I passed it back to Taylor with only a measly bit of weed left, it’d almost be an insult. I made the call and took a huge puff. Way too much, it turns out. I nearly coughed up a lung.

“You like that shit,” Taylor called out to be. “That’s medicinal grade, man. The good stuff.”

He wasn’t lying, it really was the good stuff. A few minutes passed and I was overcome with the urge to lie down. I had given up on talking to Justine. She might have moved away, or she might have been right next to me still. If I moved my head, I would have thrown up. So, I stretched out on the sand and closed my eyes. The warm sand felt good on my back.

When I woke up, Ryan was the only one there with me. He had moved closer to me now, and there was only a faint afterburn of sun in the sky. Everything looked purple. Ryan smoked a cigarette and faced the water. The gentle waves from the river lapped up on the beach.

“Got too high,” Ryan said when he heard me stirring. He told me while I slept, I stuck my hand all the way into my pants to itch my crotch and snored like a pig. Everyone laughed, he said.

“Jesus,” I said. “What about Justine?”

“Oh, come on, man. Give that up. She’s not the one for you.”

“No, I know. But, I don’t know. You know.” I didn’t want to tell Ryan that I heard Justine was easy. I felt ashamed thinking about it myself, like I actually was a pig. Horniness knows no dignity.

It was hard walking back to the apartment, but that’s where my car was. I swerved on the sidewalk, and we took another break on the bridge, though for more practical reasons than we

had the first time. The city looked nice at night, the LED lights were colorful and bright. They made the city seem alive, and it was comfortable to zone out to them for a minute or two.

“Let me ask you something,” Ryan said. “Why does Bruegel send you out here? Why doesn’t he just have me drop off the money?”

“I don’t want to get into that, man. Come on. We got a good thing going. Let’s just go home. We can talk about it later.” I pushed off from the concrete handrail and started walking away, but I didn’t make it far before I felt woozy again.

“No, I want to know. Tell me or I won’t let you back into my apartment. Your keys are on my table.”

I checked my back pocket. He was right! “Ah, fuck. What do you want to know man? Why he sends me over to you? I make sure you’re staying out of trouble. Make sure you’re not using his money stupidly. Placing bets with it, paying off other loans. That kind of shit.”

“And what if I was? Or am?”

“Then I would have to tell him.”

“Would you?”

“I would have to. He’s my boss. And if I didn’t and he found out otherwise, it’d spell bigger trouble for both of us.”

“How would he find out though?” We started our slow walk back. Cars drove too fast down Jefferson, so we instinctively kept close to the side. Lots of trash on the sidewalk. Cheeto bags. Empty cans of Arizona. Cigarette packs, condoms, and needles.

“He sends people to check on me, man. He doesn’t trust me. I’m just a little lackey.”

“I see.” Ryan lit another cigarette and offered me one.

“American Spirits. Nice.”

“Thank your boss. They aren’t cheap. So, what would come next, then? After you told him I was misbehaving with the money, which, by the way, I don’t recall any stipulations being handed to me when I took the loan, it’s not like he told me I couldn’t do X with it, only Y.”

“Well, sure, man, but that’s how it works. You should know that. But if I found out, hypothetically, that you were using the money that wasn’t in the best interest of both of you, I’d have to gently tell you to stop. And if you didn’t listen to me, he’d send someone else. Someone with a bit more muscle.”

“He’d kill me?”

“Are you retarded? Who kills anyone for thirteen grand? A tough guy would just ask you again, and you’d likely be more inclined to listen. But if you still kept acting like an asshole, then they might break some stuff in your apartment. Maybe punch you. They’d find other ways to ruin your life, but they wouldn’t end it.”

Ryan got very quiet. I was afraid I’d said too much. He didn’t speak again until we were in the elevator: “I know you’re not in charge, but who gets the right to say what’s in my best interest or not? Doesn’t Bruegel assume the risk when he loans me the money?”

I took a deep breath. “Can we save this? For next week? Or even tomorrow if you’re so damn interested? I’m not in the proper mood, friend.”

“Answer me, please.” He unlocked his apartment door. All the lights were off, though the moon outside caught the reflection of my keys sitting on his table. There they were, waiting for me.

I pulled up a seat. There was one beer left, it turned out, rolling around at the bottom of the High Life box. It was warm and skunky, but I took it out and cracked it open anyway. Before replying, I stared at the can in the dark. Ryan didn't turn the lights on. The colors of the High Life can, a musty gold and patriotic red, always reminded me of the Civil War for some reason. In the dark, these colors were muted, and for a moment I thought back to my childhood, when my Dad took me to Tigers games and we'd park the car on someone's front lawn who lived a few blocks away from the stadium for five bucks; they always kept their garage door open, where they'd sit with a few of their friends and watch the game on an old TV; they drank High Life, too, and the can design hadn't changed since then. “I think once you enter a deal with someone like Bruegel, Ryan, your interest is no longer your own. Even if you went a more legit route, like a bank, or even if you're looking outside cash and money, once you enter a relationship with somebody, you stop living for yourself. Sometimes, this is mutually beneficial. Like, if we're lucky enough to get married someday, we'll want to have responsibilities, right? Responsibilities that feel good? We won't want to spend all day drinking beer and dicking around and playing in shitty bands and chasing pussy. But when you take money from someone, you enter a similar relationship. Hell, even if you never agree to take money from people, *if you simply enter someone's realm*, your interests are no longer your own. People have invested in you. Or they are wary of you. So, they watch you. They make sure you don't fly too far outside the boundaries. This is life, my friend. All you have to do is figure out how to navigate it.”

Ryan opened the fridge and took out a pack of Bell's Two Hearted, a delicious beer with a high alcohol content. He was hiding the good stuff from me. The fridge light lit the entire room up and cast our long shadows back against his bare walls, against his lonely twin mattress on the floor. "You don't make any sense. But I understand. It's my mess I'm in. Made the bed, etcetera. If you're okay to drive, I think you should go. I wanted to do some work before bed."

As I left, I asked Ryan if he'd like me to flip the light switch by the door, but he said no.

Outside of collecting payments, Bruegel had me do drop-offs, too. Drop-offs were less frequent than pick-ups, but when they happened, the sums of money tended to be much larger, and, strangely, much less surreptitious. I'd carry big fat envelopes into the city buildings, the office buildings, the warehouses. People in suits would take them from me, usually give me a curt nod, sometimes a handshake, then I'd be on my way. It was surprisingly simple. In fact, that was one of the things that shocked me most when I started working for Bruegel. I thought all crime would take place behind the veil through backdoor deals and complex chains of command. While this was still true in some respects, much of it was blunt forced and out in the open, the drop-offs being a prime example. It helped that there was the pretense of charity foundation shells that Bruegel had set up to ease transactions, but anyone with a brain could see the money for what it was: a bribe, a payoff, a bit of grease to the wheels.

One of the more interesting people I interacted with was Nat Hardon, a clerk for the city treasurer. He was the only person I ever interacted with at the city building outside of the security guards at the front and the coffee guy on the ground floor who sold sandwiches. The sandwiches were good, too. I think he might have made them himself, for they were wrapped in loose cellophane and the bread was straight out of a bag. Nat was a real tough motherfucker. A hard nut to crack. He was tall, well over six foot five, wiry, and so black that his skin looked purple. It was clear he hated me from the jump. All attempts at casual conversation were stonewalled. He'd pull out his phone whenever I tried talking to him. At first, I thought it might have been because I was white, which, truth told, didn't bother me that much. I didn't take it personally. But then I saw him treat other staffers the same way, and even the food delivery guys that would pop in sometimes. He didn't have time for any of them. It turned out Nat Hardon was just a dick.

Once I realized this, it was a lot easier to get along with him in our own way. I complimented him on his suits, which were always different color combinations of the classic Burberry pattern, I told him about my day, what kind of sandwiches the coffee guy was selling, I speculated about the weather and national political issues. His responses to me never changed, though sometimes I could bait him into giving a response if my questions was provocative enough (the most emotional I'd ever seen him is when I asked if he thought all abortion doctors should be shot on sight—I had no opinion on the matter myself, outside of knowing my question was particularly obnoxious, but he had done such a good job of ignoring me that day that I resorted to desperate measures; in return, he launched a string of insults of me that left my face so red, I must have looked a shade of purple similar to his own), but I was able to look at our relationship as a game of sorts. Our interactions weren't real in that nothing I did or said would change the course of things—I would still drop off the money, he would still accept it—much like my interactions with the coffee guy downstairs, or other cashiers, or my landlord, or the bartender, or even my friends and family; sometimes there is an overwhelming sense that you are powerless against not only the tides of fate, but against the motives and agendas of the heart; in other words, there is little you can do to change the course of history, just as there is little you can do to change how someone feels, to change how they think; anything you do is incremental at best, any words or actions are as real as a snowflake is heavy; there are times when the exact opposite is the case, of course—when it's painfully clear and hyperreal that we hold destiny between our fingers, even if only for a moment, but these times are so few and far between (if they come at all, which for most of us is doubtful), that when they do happen, when our breath does quicken and our brains switch to a gear seldom used, they feel even *less real* than normality,

they are doubly gamified. For example, if a man with a briefcase approached you right now, right this moment as you sat lounging on a park bench, pigeons fluttering away as he stepped toward you with his porkpie hat pulled low over his eyes, and he took an electronic device out of the briefcase, one with two buttons, and he said ‘excuse me, but we need you to make a crucial decision. If you push button A, we will destroy this country. Button B is another. But you need to press one,’ would that decision feel real to you, all questions of normality aside? No, it would not. And if you changed the stakes, say, lower it from the destruction of a country to that of a state, city, family, then individual, it still wouldn’t feel real. In fact, even if lives weren’t on the line, but livelihoods (‘Button A means X will lose their job, B means Y’), you would still feel radically disconnected from the situation. And if you think buttons were taken out of the equation and replaced with face to face interaction would do anything to increase the verisimilitude, you’d be dead wrong—you’d need to abstract the concept in your mind even more-so to deal with the fraught morality of the situation. The only way you’d be to face the situation head-on and look at it for what it really is (a choice, a decision where one road is forever untraveled) is if the stakes were lowered sufficiently enough that Button A was hotdog and Button B was hamburger. But even then, the choice would feel so inconsequential that it might as well be unreal. So where does that leave us? In a simulation of our own making? I don’t know. What I do know, is I think Nat Hardon might have felt the same way I did about our interactions, for while he didn’t play along, he never explicitly asked me to leave, either.

When I came to see him once with an especially fat stack of cash one day, he let me in his office, but left me to return to a phone call. I couldn’t hear what was said, Hardon spoke in hushed tones and used his freehand to cover his mouth as if I was lipreader, but the call went on

for an extraordinary long time. He didn't offer me a seat, either, and the longer the call went on, the more sure I was it would soon end, so I kept standing. This turned out to be a minor mistake, as my legs grew tired and my feet ached, all I could do was shift my weight from side to side. I was too polite to lean on anything. To pass the time, I looked at all the little knickknacks he had on his shelves, the diplomas on his wall. For the first time, it struck me that his office was unusually large for an assistant to the treasurer. Big windows that overlooked Woodward, high, vaulted ceilings, teak wood fixtures and fine, leather furniture with soft, accentual lighting. High class stuff.

The photos on his shelves were tastefully spaced apart. He was in all of them, but never alone. Some of them were dated (one even black and white), while others were brand new with the clarity only digital could achieve. Hardon looked the same in all of them. He had the same stern expression, the same Burberry type suits, the same dark skin. Age wasn't a factor for him, it seemed. For the other people, the years took their toll. Some of them made repeat appearances, looking either radically older or younger than they did in the last photo, depending on how they were scattered amongst the shelf. I didn't know who they were, but it wasn't hard to guess—other city officials and low-level political types, community organizers, poets and musicians. People that were supposedly a big deal but were only known by those who hoped to one day replace them. Aside from that, he had some track trophies which unfortunately weren't dated, at least not where I could see them. A football that was signed by somebody. And some books, too. The titles were extra dry. Economics, urban planning, one or two on Pan-Africanism. Nothing that caught my interest.

Hardon had his back turned to me on the phone. His chair was swiveled around, and he looked out the window. I would have liked to join him. Watching people on the street was far better than poking around some company man's office, especially at this time of day, in the hours between lunch and dinner, when most people were finishing up their work before heading home. Who would be out right now? What kind of sickos and perverts would be out prowling the sidewalks? What kind of honorable, blue collar men would be keeping the streets clean and the pipes flowing? I would never know, at least not that day. Hardon was hogging the window.

"Sorry, sir," he said after hanging up the phone. That he called me sir disturbed me. It signaled a tectonic shift. But perhaps he just didn't know my name. "Do you have the envelope?"

"Maybe," I said. "What's it to you?"

"I apologize for making you wait. Do you have the envelope? Or is there something else I can help you with on behalf of the treasurer?"

I picked up the envelope from the side table I had laid it on. I fumbled it, though, and knocked over a heavy crystal glass that did a short roll before falling onto the floor. Were it not carpeted, it would have shattered.

"You can leave the glass," Hardon said. "I'll get it later."

"No, I insist," I said. I bent over to pick the glass up and immediately felt a swath of cold air on my backside. Instantly, I knew my ass crack was showing. I heard Hardon laugh behind me. I straightened up before my hand even got to the glass and turned around to face him. He was trying to suppress a giggle but having a hard time at it.

“Sorry,” Hardon said. “Something in my throat.”

The game between us wasn't funny anymore. He'd seen me exposed, and we were no longer equals. He now had more dignity than I did, even if that was only temporary. “Sure. Here's the money. Bruegel sends his regards.”

“And please, my regards to Bruegel!” This was the most he'd even given me voluntarily, and the most cheerful he'd even sounded, too. My ass must have done something to him. Maybe I was just a clown, now. “Do you happen to know when the next payment will be coming?”

I picked up the glass, this time bending at the knees, and placed it back on the side table. I ran my finger along the edge and looked elsewhere when answering: “No. That's not up to me.” This was a day of novelty. He'd never asked before, though now that I thought about it, I never considered it. I supposed it was about once a month.

“Well, when you see Bruegel, can you ask him? Or, better yet, could you request an advancement? Sometime next week would be fine.” He stood up and walked over to me. Chest to chest, we'd never been as close before, and he towered over me, his chin tucked all the way in just to meet eye contact. His cologne was strong. Placing his hand on my shoulder, he said “could you do that for me, lad? It'd be a great help. I'd call him myself, but it's been ages since I've had the old boys number.” He smiled and looked over the tips of his glasses. The ends of his mustache were wet. Was it normal for mustache tips to dampen when drinking coffee? I didn't know. I couldn't grow one to save my life.

“I can give it to you, if you want,” I said, taking out my phone. “I have it right here.”

“No, I don’t want to be a bother. Just mention it next time you see him, if you could. You can say Natty is asking a favor, but don’t press too heavy, understand? Use a light touch. If you do this for me, I’ll remember. Are you aware the treasury department is in charge of unclaimed land and property?”

“Are you saying you’d give me land if I asked Bruegel to do you a favor?”

His smile fell. “Of course not. But I might be inclined to find a better deal, maybe save you a grand or two on back taxes.”

“Right. Very generous. I’ll mention it to him.” I eyed the envelope he left on his desk. There was close to double what Bruegel had lent Ryan in there. I’m sure an extra hundred or two wouldn’t be considered missing. “For a price.”

Hardon turned his back to me. “Forget it, then. Goodbye.”

“Joke, Nat. Just a joke. I’ll mention it.” *what do they want from each other*

“Please see that you do. Is there anything else I can help you with?” He opened a ledger on his desk, licked the tip of a fountain pen, and started writing. Obviously, he couldn’t have been actually working, and was merely mimicking an action he’d seen in the movies, trying to signal his time was more than mine. But what could he have been writing? The same word over and over? A stream of conscious? Was he doodling? When stopped and considered, these actions we do, actions to signal meaning, are quite embarrassing and debasing. They’re passive masked as active. Still, I wasn’t going to pretend I didn’t know what he meant and bowed out quietly.

His secretary made eye contact with me and returned to her work. She never smiled at me, never greeted me, never did much. She either thought I was scum of the earth for working in the business I did, or she thought I was bad news and not to be tussled with. Perhaps a mixture of both. And who knows, she might have been right. She was older than me, perhaps my a good ten years, and she was very attractive. She might have been Japanese. After what had happened with Hardon—my dignity lost when he saw my ass then regained when he asked me to do something for him—I was feeling a bit reckless and invincible. I asked her how she was. Fine, she said.

“Hey, do you ever go to the coffee guy downstairs? He has some pretty damn good sandwiches.”

“You mean Leo? He makes those in his car between rushes. Gets the ingredients at the liquor store over on Griswold. Oscar Meyer stuff.”

“No, he doesn’t. That ham sandwich is ambrosia. Even on the days I don’t have to come here, I’ll stop in just to pick one up.”

She raised her eyebrow at me. “Yes, he does. I’ve seen it myself.”

I shook my head. “I don’t believe you. They’re way too good.”

“Okay. Don’t believe me.”

“Maybe you can take me out for a real sandwich sometime, if you know the real deal.”

“You’re not serious.”

“And if I was?”

Believe it or not, that ended up doing the trick. She introduced herself as Midori, and I waited outside for a few hours before she was done for the day, chain-smoking cigarettes in the little shit area they'd set up for the smokers with the other schlubs. I must have smelt like a tobacco farm by the time she was done, but I had little other choice. My nerves were on ten. I couldn't believe she agreed to get a sandwich with me.

Her eatery of choice was a little podunk bar down by Joe Louis called Tommy's. She offered to drive me there, and when we passed my car parked at the meter, I saw a ticket on the windshield.

The sandwiches at Tommy's were good, but not spectacular. I told Midori I saw little difference between these, and the ones Leo made in his car. There was a kitchen, she said, but I said a kitchen shouldn't matter when sandwiches are involved. So, she tried attacking the ingredients. The difference there was also negligible in my mind. Both used meat that came off a truck. Where the meat was before that, who knows. It could have come from Nebraska, it could have come from China. She disagreed. When I said at least the coffee shops had some heart, she didn't laugh. This stung extra hard because even I knew it wasn't funny.

She didn't like riffing about sandwiches, for which I couldn't blame her, honestly. Riffing about anything was kind of a ruse. It was only an exchange of lukewarm jokes and ideas that masked the difficulty of true communication. Riffing was like morphine for conversation. Yet you couldn't necessarily jump feet first into the deep stuff, either. People would think you're a psycho if you asked them about God or time or philosophy. That was one thing I hated about certain people, typically humanities majors who had trouble getting laid—they thought small talk

was a disease of the small minded. When they'd try to crack open the world and ask people about their deepest childhood traumas or the meaning of existence, they'd act offended that their olive branches weren't properly received, then go back to thinking of themselves as true wanderers above the sea fog. This was a ridiculous notion. Small talk was a much better method of getting to know someone. Asking them about the foods and drinks they liked, their morning routines. That was where the true self lied. Of course, you needed to put in some extra work to decode it, hence the difficulty of true communication, but that was still the way to go. People can stumble and misspeak when asked about eternity. Not so much about toothpaste. That said, Midori and I had reached an impasse, and I wasn't in the mood for small talk. I was too horny and excited. So I reached for the closest object that I recognized, which unfortunately turned out to be her boss, Nat Hardon.

They'd known each other for a while, it turns out. Midori had been working there a long time, fifteen years at least, but she'd known Hardon longer than that, since she was a kid. He used to come around to work with Midori's father, who was an early pioneer of civil rights, or perhaps educational rights. Rights of some kind. He started a school that had a revolutionary curriculum, led more than a few protests, and was arrested more times than anyone could count—Midori's father, that is; not Hardon. He was a local legend of sorts, though I had never heard of him. But then again I ran in different types of circles. I asked Midori when his heyday was and did some quick napkin math. It put her at forty and Hardon in his sixties. Late sixties. This was surprising, and so was the fact that I was on a date with a forty year old woman.

“It's not a date,” Midori said. “We're just getting sandwiches.”

“Who gets sandwiches with a stranger?”

“I don’t know. Lonely women, I guess.” I inched closer to her and placed my hand on the bar, barely a millimeter between our pinkies. I could feel the heat from her body, and I’m sure she could feel the same off of mine. She didn’t move a muscle though, which I took as a good sign.

Hardon wanted to become the next Midori’s father (I forgot his name, unfortunately. I could take a guess at it, but the only things that come to mind are stockpile Japanese names like Toru or Akira. It might have been one of these generic names, for all I know, but it feels racist and lazy to guess, so he shall remain nameless for the rest of my life, or until I gather the effort to do the minimum amount of research), so he asked to be taken on as a mentor of sorts. He did some community organizing, whatever that meant. Raised funds, maybe. Met with leaders. Pushed for change. Incremental actions like that. Before long, however, this wasn’t enough for Hardon. In his mind, radical change was necessary. Midori’s father disagreed. He’d been around long enough to know only gradual progress had the glacial weight necessary to carve deep enough lines for lasting change; everything else was only burning tinder. Hardon said No, I don’t think so, old man. The glaciers are melting, and we can’t wait. So, he broke away. The breakup was surely uglier than that, Midori assured me, but it had happened so long ago that the only real effects she remembered were a dearth of gifts and visits from Hardon. Her mom, she said, took it particularly hard, as if it was romantic in nature. But the real costs were to her father’s organization. Hardon had amassed a following of sorts, and when he left, they came with him.

The next turn in his life was a decidedly active one. He became a black revolutionary. This was after the big counterculture movements of the sixties and seventies, of course, so the Black Panthers and associated groups were all but decimated, their leaders either assassinated by the CIA or actively courted by them. All that was left were atomized causes with increasingly niche goals that kept them separated from one another.

“Whether this was a result of direct intelligence intervention or simply human nature, I’ll leave it to you to decide,” Midori said, referring to the stratified causes amongst the various left wing groups, a subject I had no opinion on, and in fact hadn’t even thought about until she mentioned it. But Hardon identified the problem, too, and sought to change it.

“You’re too young to remember, but Jesse Jackson had the idea of a Rainbow Coalition,” Midori said. “Working people of all colors and sizes and all that coming together to form a mass movement. Feel-good type stuff. That’s what Nat wanted to do, except outside the realm of politics.”

His first MO was to gather people, more than the sizable amount he already had. He went to bars, barbershops, pool halls, the docks, sanitation departments, the auto lines. Come join me, he said. Together, we will win. And this worked, at first. Went Hardon wanted to organize outside of city hall, or outside the offices of automotive bigwigs, or even up at the state capitol, people followed him. They shouted along with him, they let him take the pulpit or the soapbox. When he directed his attention toward something, necks turned with him He had a fiery passion, the kind that makes you think you’re watching an old newsreel. His body was lean and athletic. His dark skin intimidated the right kinds of people and inspired others. And he was charismatic. Men

wanted to be him, women wanted to be with him. Yet, as far as Midori could recall, he never gave in to the primal urges—of course, all her knowledge was only secondary, but he didn't have a reputation as a louse. His heart was pure, as was his hatred.

But the base he had built only lasted through a summer. As the weather turned, as the kids started going back to school, his followers started dropping like flies. The caravans were holding half capacity. Moths flew from his coffers. When he demanded meetings with officials, he had to wait. His acolytes no longer lingered in the lobbies.

“The problem was people didn't know what they were fighting for. When Nat said ‘together, we will win,’ what was at stake? Food? Money? Housing? His scope was too broad, so the normal folks dropped off. He wasn't giving out paychecks, after all. Then, the only people who remained were the diehards. They wanted to know, what are you doing for women? What about immigrants? Or the disabled? For them, his focus wasn't narrow enough. So infighting broke out, the same as it had with my Dad, and they left, too.”

By the time the next summer came around, Hardon had soured. A long winter was spent in isolation, reading the political masters like Lenin and Gramsci and Fanon and Sankara, but also more esoteric writings, like Nietzsche and Deleuze and Evola. Now, the problem was things weren't bad enough for people. They had too many comforts, too many concessions. It was impossible for them to know how bad things truly were when they were too distracted with alcohol, music, food, and central air.

So far, Midori had just been telling me a saga of people identifying different types of problems. There was always something bigger ahead of them, it seemed. Something deeper. A

perpetual scratching of the surface. What I wanted to know, but didn't ask, is what any of this changed. Not in a political sense, I wasn't that ignorant (I knew protesting or community organizing or whatever you called it was important, even if only in some vague ontological sense), but on a personal level. In other words, it seemed to be that no matter what thought passed through my head, the reality of the world remained intact. For instance, if I thought that the problem belonged to the ruling class, they still ruled all the same. Likewise, if I thought it was the bottom rung who was leaching off the taxpayer, well, they still got their pittance. Of course, you'd have to be a fool to think you could change anything on your own, so what did it matter? Perhaps it had something to do with living with dignity and being able to look yourself in the mirror every morning. But that, too, was only an illusion to me. There were always deeper sources of shame to excavate. My phone rang and I had to excuse myself. When I left the stool, I momentarily used Midori's shoulder to balance my body. She didn't flinch. Another good sign.

It was Bruegel. He wanted to know why I hadn't relayed what Hardon asked me to pass on. I was just grabbing a bite to eat, I said, and I didn't think it was top priority.

"You bet your cocksucking ass it's a top priority, shithead," he screamed over the phone. I held it away from my ear. "I've got some fucking mooley over here right now looking for a handout. It would have been nice to get a heads up. Jesus fucking Christ. Am I not paying you enough? Do you want me to tickle your balls, too?" He hung up. By the next time I saw him, I knew he'd be cool. He was bipolar, self-diagnosed. His distrust of doctors ran high, so he self-medicated using a cocktail of pills from the Chinese black markets, along with herbal and homeopathic remedies from the Chinese wet markets, like lynx paw and rhino horn. The dosages

of his medicine were always in flux. The back channels are always reliable, but only in their own way.

When I got back, Midori had ordered two drinks. I assumed it was for both of us, but when I sat down, she pulled the second glass over to her. Bruegel had yelled at me before, so while I wasn't shaken, I was disturbed somewhat, if only because I thought I'd made a mistake. Midori leaned forward and put her hand on my knee. "Hey, you okay?" I smelt alcohol on her breath. There was an empty shot glass beside the two drinks she already had. Her voice was deeper than I remember. Motherly, too. I felt myself get hard, my dick pushing against the inside of my trousers. It was still light outside, and the bar was empty. Not even the jukebox played. The situation felt doubly subversive.

Yes, I said, everything was okay. If there was any window to make my move, now was the time, but I couldn't help myself. I needed to ask. How did Hardon know Bruegel?

Midori straightened up and moved away from me. That story picked up right where she had left off, it turned out. The summer after his big push came the acceptance of his ineffectiveness and defeat. Nat Hardon needed a new strategy.

"I think he was drinking a lot over the winter, along with his reading. He must have gone to some dark places. Basically, he wanted to kill people. Bomb something. Shoot someone. Terrorism, essentially. A shock to the system."

Back in the nineties, I know Bruegel was involved with some decidedly worse shit than he was now. More drugs, but some gun running, too. He hung out with a lot of Mexicans and Colombians, he said. He had the Spanish to prove it, too. Compared to the shit he did back then,

he told me once, what he did now was basically retirement. If you wanted to get your hands on explosives and guns, not to mention the people who knew how to operate them, Bruegel was your man. Or, if not your man, one of the men you passed on your journey to the endpoint. He was going to supply Hardon with the necessary materials. Midori didn't know the details, understandably, but if I knew Bruegel, I'd assume his only presale condition was safety— "Don't let me be a victim of your little race war," I could imagine him saying.

Midori never knew what his target was supposed to be. A convention, maybe. The state senate. A concert. Perhaps even her own father's funeral. "He died around the same time, and I knew Hardon carried some grudges with him, still. He thought my father peeled off some of his early supporters. When he came around, he'd let some nasty comments slip out. Calling my father, a coon, an inside job. Bitterness, really. But he might have had a point, even if it was a small one. Dad kept a lot of company, especially as he aged, and his organization took on the bounds and structures of something more official. He'd meet with business leaders, even members of the opposition, if you could call them that. Justice has strange bedfellows, he'd always say. My mom disapproved, but she didn't disapprove of the money."

Before anything could happen, though, Timothy McVeigh bombed the Oklahoma Building. "That was a strange day," Midori said. "I was living down in the Cass Corridor at the time, going to school. I was 20, maybe 21. Nat knocked on my door very early in the morning, or at least early for me. I threw on a big Vipers T-shirt before answering. That was the only thing I had on. I slept naked then, and still do. It's a hard habit to break, once you get used to it. I remember because when I opened the door, Nat was there, wild eyed and sweaty, wearing dress

shoes, slacks, but no shirt. His torso was bare. It looked like he'd been crying. Immediately, I took off my shirt and gave it to him. Maybe I was still drunk, I don't know. Or maybe that was just one of the dramatic things you do when you're young, when you think your life still might become a movie if you play your cards right. I expected him to put the shirt on and for us to embrace, but instead he just took the shirt and stared at me, confused. I was naked, and it took more courage than I'd ever need to not cover myself with my arms. I wanted him to see me like that. But he didn't make a move. He just came inside, sat down on my couch, and turned on my TV, which is when I saw the news. I don't know how much you know about that bombing, but McVeigh had spent a lot of time in Michigan, up north in the woods."

That was true, he had. And this coincidence really bothered Hardon. He was certain the Feds were watching him and sunk into a deep paranoia. What made matters worse was he no longer had the thought of The Plan to sustain him. After Oklahoma, it's like his eyes were opened, and he couldn't believe he spent the last few weeks of his life planning to kill innocents. Or, even if they weren't innocent, planning to kill at all. He felt ashamed and spent a lot of his time at Midori's that morning crying. Yet his feelings must have been more complex than that, Midori hypothesized, because there was some anger in him, too, especially when he found out that McVeigh had been a libertarian white supremacist, essentially the opposite of who Hardon considered himself to be, something of a communist black supremacist. "He got jealous, I think. Even if he didn't want to admit it. He thought McVeigh had stolen the opportunity for change from him, despite the fact that he was more than grateful that he hadn't gone through with this plan. So, he was disappointed and envious over something he never wanted to happen. A strange mixture of emotions, I think. It was hard for him to deal with and sort out."

What made matters worse, is Bruegel started coming knocking around. That was the first time Midori met him, actually, is when he came looking for Hardon at her place. “Bruegel thought he was skipping town, so he was checking on all known associates. Looking back on it now, it’s strange that Bruegel came himself and didn’t send one of his lackies to do it.” (This hurt me). “But I think I know why he did. That pervert couldn’t keep his eyes off me.” Even though Hardon hadn’t gone through with anything, hadn’t picked up any bulk orders of C4 or fertilizer or whatever it was people used when they wanted to partake in mass destruction, Bruegel was still going to charge him for it. He’d done the work in procuring the load, even if no one had laid eyes on it. And the bill was massive. Thousands upon thousands. Hardon hadn’t considered the cost before, since he figured he’d just kill himself once everything was done with, but now he had no way of paying it. If Bruegel found him, it was possible he’d have a head-on encounter with a fate worse than death, a phrase most of us have heard so often it rolls off the tongue, but, when stopped and considered, is truly a frightening thing.

So, he ran away for a while. Left town. Went up-north, actually, all the way to the Upper Peninsula, to be amongst the trees and bears and rocks and the mighty Lake Superior. Ironically, or perhaps intentionally, this is where McVeigh had laid camp in Michigan. The little terrorist was hanging out with militia groups and separatists and integralists and other men with strange political ideas up in the empty country, some of whom were certainly intelligence, government connected, feds, psy ops, and agents. While Hardon went up there to escape the heat from Bruegel in the city, he found himself confronted by a new sort of heat. The afterburn from the McVeigh bombings in all forms. Locals suspicious of outsiders, especially tall black dudes from the city, and, in Hardon’s mind, more federals looking for the next McVeigh. But he had nowhere

else to go. He didn't want to cross any state lines, for some reason. He thought that would put him on more radars than necessary. And if worse came to worst, he could charter a boat and get a coyote (or perhaps they called border couriers something else up there, like moose) to get him to Canada. So, despite the suspicion and paranoia, he stayed in the Upper Peninsula, holed up like an animal. Took to drinking again. Moved from hotel to boarding house to cabins. Ideally, he would have taken the time to sort through everything in his mind, figure out what led him to the path he now found himself, but he was too busy being worried to think about anything else. Whenever he could, he went on long walks to look at birds. He still had money, but it drained quickly.

In the winter, the snow falls heavy up there. Multiple feet. People are indoors for weeks on end. The best method of travel is snowmobile, and tracks cut deep through the woods. You can rent them for fairly cheap if you're stupid enough not to own one, which is the category Hardon found himself in. One night, leaving one bar and on his way to another, he wrapped the snowmobile around a tree. He was flung from the handles, and landed a few feet away with two broken angles, a fractured hip, and a sprained wrist. The snowmobile caught on fire, and he lay there as it burned, his face lit up from the glow of the flames, thinking he felt the heat as he flopped around under the cold stars, trying to stand up but failing, the snow getting into his suit. Soon, a group of deer came up to eat the winter berries from the trees. They must have thought he was dead, otherwise they would have stayed away. He woke up in the hospital a few days later. There were some flowers on the table and a get well card from Bruegel. The man was connected everywhere. He must have heard it through the wire. Hardon wised up and went back to Detroit as soon as he could. Midori thought the hospital bill was still unpaid.

We left Tommy's. Midori had finished her two drinks and polished off another, while I had a double vodka. She didn't slur, didn't wobble when she walked, and when she got behind the wheel, she had neither the confidence nor timidity alcohol gives you. She brought us back to her house, a little bungalow in the northwest. Quiet neighborhood, mostly for families and old-timers. I kept waiting for her to give me a qualifier, like this isn't something she normally does, or it's something she always does, but that never came. Once inside, we continued our conversation at her kitchen table over some coffee. The house was furnished like a model home. Barely lived in, and few markers of taste.

Bruegel gave Hardon an option in Detroit. He could work for him to repay what he owed, or he could find another method. The other method best suited to Hardon was to get a job with the city. Easy enough for him. Plenty of connections, plenty of experience. He asked around and found an opening in the treasury department. Installed there, he became Bruegel's point man. The person on the inside. Another step in his expanding criminal empire, which I knew was not as contracted these days as he led on, this suspicion especially confirmed by the way Midori talked about—as someone with power. From what she understood, Hardon's involvement with Bruegel was something of an open secret, something winked at as often as much as his past with radical politics. But it was also accepted, even courted. There was mutual backscratching happening. As far as Hardon's position with the department was concerned, he was never allowed a promotion on paper, as that would open him up to more scrutiny, more FOIAs, more risk, but he was given lavish benefits, such as his office and own personal secretary. He hired Midori as soon as he could, and she'd been installed ever since. That was as much as she could

say definitively. Everything else was conjecture, especially in regard to Hardon's feelings about the matter, and the legality of the situation.

"I mean," she said, leading me into her bedroom, "that's not unheard of. A government employee that's there for the dirty work. Every department has one. State, federal, you name it. Things always need to be done outside the legal bounds, and not always bad things, either, but there needs to be a fall man, right? In case shit hits the fan? Someone that can do a perp walk. I guess Hardon is that guy, which is why he gets paid the way he does. Still, the brazenness of it all surprises even me, sometimes. I have no idea why it hasn't been investigated, or why some upstart doesn't come in with an agenda to clean out the place. I suppose since it's only money changing hands and some figures moving around on a paper, it's not that interesting." She took turned the lights off and started getting unchanged. I sat down on the bed and started doing the same. My heart raced, breathing quickened, and I started shaking. I'd never been with an older woman before, and this was happening at a clip I hadn't anticipated.

"He's dead inside, though, I can tell you that. The idealism of his youth left behind. I think when he first started working for the city, working for Bruegel, he thought he could change things from the inside, the lie that everyone tells themselves. Or maybe he thought he could still get out of it one day, that he could really pay Bruegel back. He didn't understand that once you're in the claws of someone like Bruegel, there's no getting out. Even if Bruegel died, there'd be someone to replace him. Or even if there was no one to replace him, how do you go back to a normal life after what Nat did? Planning to kill, getting involved with a criminal, aiding and abetting Lord knows what. It's akin to soldiers coming back from war, I think. You need to do

herculean mental jumps to separate the person who fired a gun versus the person that raises a daughter, but even if you're successful, that distinction is never erased. And the problem with doing what Nat did, working with Bruegel, I mean, is there wasn't a war to separate it. There was no other country, there was no rules of engagement. He participated in something that's still happening. For him, and for the rest of us, the war is never over. We'll never know the types of people we are outside the combat zone."

She handed me a condom. When we fucked, she was silent. At first, I tried to make some noises to inspire her, but it was just be grunting in the dark. I threw some groans in there, which I think are unnatural for a man to make (perhaps unnatural for a woman to make, too, and they only do so out of respect for the rules of engagement), but that didn't feel right. The only position we did was doggy-style. If there's a classier name for that one, I hadn't heard it. There was no foreplay, no kissing, no oral. When I said I was going to cum, I only registered the slightest nod of her head. I busted inside of her and felt my calf cramp up. She got up from the bed quickly and walked to the bathroom. I realized we hadn't even gotten under the covers. The bed was still made. While I waited for her, I considered my options. I could get dressed, but she might think that rude. I could crawl into bed, but she might think I was inviting myself to stay the night. I could sit there, ass naked, my penis leaking residual, but the image of that made me laugh. What would she think? So, I stayed in the same position I had when we were fucking. On my knees, facing the headboard. My cramp went away, my dick softened again, but Midori hadn't come back. The light in the bathroom was on. I walked over and knocked, but she didn't reply. I listened. She wasn't crying or talking on the phone. No water was running. I waited a few more moments and knocked again. Still nothing.

“I think I’m going to head out, if that’s okay,” I said. Nothing. “I saw you had a memo book out, so I wrote my number in it. I hope you don’t mind. And I can catch an Uber. No worries there.” Silence.

I waited until I was outside to call the Uber, which was a mistake. 40 minute wait time. I stood around and smoked cigarettes. Not a single light in Midori’s house came on, nor was there a brief flash of the bathroom light that would come from her opening the door. There were no long shadows cast, no faded colors of the High Life we’d drunk at her kitchen table after the coffee.

It was spooky standing outside at night, especially in the state I was in. Still half drunk, sleepy, and post-orgasm. I was a sitting duck, and I had no protection. No knife. No nothing. The neighborhood was likely safe, that was true, but in the middle of the night, anything was a threat. If I saw someone outside walking, they could have been up to anything. Looking for break-ins, looking for victims. The only thing that brought me comfort was the thought that *I* might be that person. Someone else might see me and think ‘well, I have perfectly fine reasons for being outside at this hour, but what about *him*? What’s *he* up to?’ I was the dangerous one. What a funny thing to consider: you might be a threat, and not even plan to be one.

Usually, my work with Bruegel didn't end as sordid as it had with Midori. Most of the time I got lucky (and that really is the best euphuism for fucking there is, 'getting lucky,' when you think about how many prospects end in failure, how many times you have to debase yourself just to get a chance at some pussy, to feel a breast, to slide your tongue between lips; what's more, if you wanted to take a less vulgar approach to it, you could consider the great lengths we must go to sustain a connection, how many ropes and lifesavers we throw over the bridge and how many of them are wasted, how much of our effort ends in naught—taking this further, you could even consider this metaphor a different way: when we try to form a relationship with someone, are we the ones throwing a line, or are we the ones drowning? Or, perhaps, we're all drowning, and any attempt to help another is two flailing swimmers dragging each other down. Of course, this is all high metaphor, if it's correct at all, and you'd need to be a psychopath to think this way in the heat of the moment, when all you want to do is bone or have a laugh and a chat), it was on my own, and a decidedly normal affair with none of the noir element that had accompanied my tryst with Midori—I would text girls and wait for their reply, pining and falling into states of despair when they took too long.

Instead, my work typically involved men. Underworld types, though not necessarily in the criminal sense. Think more low class, sometimes scummy, sometimes stand-up. Some genuinely nice, some assholes by victim of circumstance, some just true assholes. I got along with nearly all of them, which I would like to think is a result of be easy-going nature and my ability to withhold judgement (at least externally), but in reality, it was likely due to the fact that they owed me money by proxy. If they didn't pay me, Bruegel would hear about it, and the friendlier they were with me, the more lenient I was with them. It wasn't unheard of for me to let

late payments slide, or even light envelopes. I was able to do this because Bruegel granted me some degree of autonomy. He knew that the key to a successful enterprise was flexibility, the degree to which one can change with the times. “Think of the maple tree,” he told me once, “or the mighty oak. Years to grow, decades even. Roots deep and twisted. But all it takes is once storm to bring it down. A lifetime of progress lost. Now, compare that to the perennials. They come and go with the season. There’re feast times and there’re lean times. Most importantly, though, they bend with the wind, see? A storm might take more than a few flowers off, it might do some major damage, but because the plant bends, it will never be ripped from its roots. It will live to blossom another day. Unless there’s a hurricane or something, but then we’re all fucked, aren’t we?” This was during the time he was reading copious amounts of botany books, so most of his analogies had a similar theme. As his interests changed, so did the analogies, but the end message was always the same: be flexible.

On the topic of interests, it always amazed me how much knowledge he had. He was a voracious reader, with enough specialized books to fill multiple libraries. Anyone could read, of course, but what was most impressive about Bruegel was how he found the time in between everything else he did, the moderate empire he ran, the parties and meetings and everything else. Sometimes, I doubted he slept. Whenever I came to see him, there was a book on his hand or between his hands. One week botany, the next Japanese medieval history, then locomotion, mineral rights in sub-Saharan Africa, the Dulles brothers, Operation Gladio, DARPA, the Mongols. He tried to talk to me about these topics, but since I knew nothing, at least not on the level to converse with him, I’d just reply with flippant, churlish things that annoyed him. Once I was with other people, however, like my friends, I’d repeat everything Bruegel said, or at least a

very watered down version of it, and thus required the reputation of a know-it-all. I suppose all knowledge filtered through the ages this way. Perhaps this was another reason Bruegel agreed to loan Ryan some money for a publishing press. Maybe it was a passion project, though if that were the case, I don't know why Bruegel wouldn't want to take the reins himself. The world was full of dull mysteries.

Generally speaking, though, I didn't like to talk books and history like that. It was all minutia to me. Minutia that made me feel stupid. Sure, I considered borrowing books from Bruegel every now and then, or even getting some of my own, but I failed to see the point. I didn't think they would improve my life. They'd only detract from it and make all that I didn't know more apparent. It was much better to find your system of living through actual experience, I thought. For these reasons, I felt more comfortable amongst the low-lives.

One of my favorite places to go was the warehouse district. Property was still cheap there, meaning it was still an appropriate amount to pay in a city like Detroit. It was primarily scrap metal and junker shops that broke every OSHA code packed into old buildings with broken windows, which also happened to be the businesses I was sent to collect from. Places like that need metal anyway they can get it, and copper wire and catalytic converters came at a premium. It took a special type of handyman to get those sorts of goods in the quantities needed, and that's where Bruegel came in. On hot days, they opened the bay doors, and sparks from the saws and welders flew out into the street like fireworks. On cold days, the doors stayed closed, and you would think the buildings were abandoned if you were walking by, but it'd be odd to take a stroll through that area anyway, unless you were there for business, be it legal or illicit. The other

shops there were by appointment only—there was a cobbler that I knew of, along with a mechanic that was cash-only—or not open to the public, like the screenprinter and the distillery, which were the only shops operated by white people. They were my age, too. But outside of the nod and wave, we didn't talk much. For food, there was one old guy who served up fish and chicken in one of the cleaner warehouses—he only took a small corner of it for himself and cleaned it up so it almost looked like a real restaurant. More accurately, it looked like the stockroom of a real restaurant. The food wasn't half-bad, I had it once or twice, but it was nothing worth going out of our way for. Thom McAdams, the owner, used to be a junkie, and he liked to talk about how things used to be back in the day. He was nice enough, though I could only handle as much conversation as the meal lasted.

Unfortunately, Thom didn't have much sense for social cues. He'd keep me there, talking about his past, long after I'd polished off my greasy whitefish and drumsticks, my red beans and rice and French fries, talking to me with his dirty dishrag thrown over his shoulder and wiping his hands on his half-cut apron, like he was out of a fucking movie or something. As much as he annoyed me, I couldn't stop his story dead in the tracks like I could with other pests, like the creeps at the strip clubs or the bars, or the half homeless that'd approach you in the park or outside the bar. I couldn't walk away from Thom, who asked that everyone call him Mr. Mack, because I sympathized with him on a molecular level. He was incredibly open with the mistakes he's made in the past—the jobs he's lost because of his addictions, the families he's torn apart, the shelter he's stayed in, the horrible things he'd done just to feed it—he called his addiction 'the monster,' which wasn't the most original term I'd ever heard, I had to admit. It wasn't very literary. But I think that's a bit of a fallacy some people have, the expectation that you come

through heart wrenching situations with a well-earned perspective. Most of the time, you're lucky enough to make it out alive, and all you can carry with you is the visceral feeling of what it felt like to live through it, and those visceral feelings don't often lend themselves to high language—they rely on base words, like 'fucked, pain, hurt, insane, crazy,' and other terms that only signal to the real emotion, never fully describing it. As Bruegel once said, "poetry is for geniuses and faggots. How many geniuses do you think there truly are?"

To illustrate this further, it was clear that when Mr. Mack called his addiction the monster, he took a bit of pride in it, like he had come up with the term all by himself. For all I knew, he very well may have. And that on its own is impressive. For example, it's common knowledge that two plus two equals four. But if I locked you in a room since birth and you developed that notion on our lonesome, well, that deserves a pat on the back. But, despite the ingenuity, there was something grotesque about his pride. It was pitiful, even though it was hard earned. Momentarily, it put me above him, as dumb as I was and as little as I'd been through; I knew that his coinage was nothing to be proud of, yet at the same time, it was. And this dissonance felt uncomfortable, it's what made the situation grotesque, and it provided me with the guilt needed to listen to his endless stories, nearly all of which were repeated.

The ones he was most fond of telling are as follows: his time in the army, which was between wars and mostly stationed in Germany. There, he met and fell in love with the supposed heir to the Mercedes Fortune, but in the end he had to do right by the girl he left back at home in the states; supposedly, the heiress took a private helicopter to the airfield as he was taking off at the end of his deployment, but even the Mercedes Benz company bird wasn't fast enough to stop

the commercial jet on route from Berlin to Detroit. That story always got him thinking about another—his mom, who was white, met his father, who was black, in Germany, but back in the post WWII days, when America was busy divvying up what was left of Europe with the Marshall plan. His mom, Mr. Mack used to say, would see Hitler parade the streets as a little girl and refuse to heil, a tale that was undoubtedly false, but, like his nickname for his addiction, gave him pride all the same, and who wouldn't like an excuse to be proud of German blood? He had kids of his own, too, though the use of 'had' there is questionable. They were both from the same women, and both stillbirths. They were never named, though he referred to them as his son and his daughter, respectfully. Allegedly, he had managed to get them buried in Arlington, even if it was unclear that he'd end up there when his time came. When the children came out of the womb already dead, he told me his cries of anguish could be heard all the way down the hall in the hospital. What made this story different from his others was it actually made me feel something. Even if there was hyperbole in there, no man would lie about something like that. What's more, each time he repeated the story to me like it was the first time he'd ever told it, it didn't lose any of the emotion it had the first time he told me, even if he hit all the same beats. In fact, it gained some weight each time I was forced to replay the story in my head, to imagine what his now frail body looked like, wailing in a hospital, to imagine how his wife felt, the nurses, what was in the hospital room when the children came out, and, eventually, when I was forced to envision what the stillborn bodies of the children looked like—one, he said, had never even fully formed in the womb. Then, there were his more pedestrian tales of addiction and shelters. These, I quickly grew tired of. Not because they weren't equally horrifying (though the use of 'equally' there is questionable), but, because like all addict tales, they were half remembered. Finally, there were

his dogshit stories of funny things that happened in his youth, none of which were funny. All told, Mr. Mack's stories gave me a rather complete picture of his life and his person. I took him as a man who didn't make excuses for himself, which I respected, since I couldn't say the same when it came to my regrets.

Another, more banal side effect of Mr. Mack's past was his deep appreciation for the little things in life. Like his term for his addiction, the monster, this appreciation was also easily relegated to the gutter of cliché until you were witness to the truest expression of it. His business made little money, so he couldn't buy wholesale, instead taking the bus to different grocery stores to find the best prices on boneless chicken and white fish, sometimes using his food stamps, but afraid to do so too often in case of fraud charges. He also bought pop this way, selling them out a cheap minifridge for the ridiculous price of thirty cents a can, potentially losing money on the drinks. Whenever I came in, he'd grab a Coke for himself and crack the tab behind the counter. Without fail, each time the syrupy carbonated water hit his lips, the dude practically came.

"Goddamn, Kyle," he'd say, "that is one tasty fucking drink!" Then he'd opine about how good the beverage was. This, too, was grotesque and pathetic. It was a lukewarm Coca-Cola. Far from the best humanity had to offer. Far from the best of what industrial production had to offer, even. It was a mark of poor taste. Yet, who wouldn't want to live like that? Who wouldn't want to think a Coke was the sweetest ambrosia? I sure would. Whenever I left Mr. Mack's restaurant without a name, I always made a solemn vow to myself that I, too, would take a closer look at the small stuff, a vow that typically lasted until my walk over to the next scrap shop, where the

men usually talked about pussy in the worst possible way or were busy taming the same monster Mr. Mack had fought so hard to escape, to use a turn of phrase I'm sure he would appreciate.

When my conscious faltered, I'd be tempted to ask Mr. Mack if he didn't want a loan, maybe move into a proper place with actual foot traffic, open up some wholesale accounts, get himself a car. But this wouldn't be the right thing to do, not at all. The money would help him out for a bit, sure, but once he found himself entangled with Bruegel, it'd be impossible to extract. That's how it worked. Then, I'd be forced to come around and take payments, sometimes offering extensions, which, despite their friendly appearance, were just other ways of keeping people inside the claw. I didn't want that. Plus, I don't think Bruegel would have found much use in Mr. Mack's fish and chicken, and it was hard to say what was worse for the soul, being under the thumb of a lowlife, or getting rejected by one.

The worst places to go were the strip clubs. I wasn't one of Bruegel's top guys, not yet, at least, so I didn't go to the fancy ones. My beat was more places like Chix on Dix, and a joint up on Woodward that was always changing names, and was a Déjà Vu at one point, Déjà Vu, a strip club known for their trashy billboards that, when I was younger, I thought were a unique product of the city (100 Beautiful Girls and 2 Ugly Ones) but soon found out were actually part of a chain of Déjà Vu's across the country, and as soon as I realized this this, I began noticing Déjà Vu billboards on the highway all across the country, all with the same joke, and each time I saw the same joke, it got a little less clever and tongue-in-cheek and more bland, bleak, and sterile in an ad-exec sort of way, and it depressed me. What the former Detroit Déjà Vu did hold over the others across the country, however, was a reputation—it was eventually raided for being an

afterhours, as well as a prostitution and drug den before shutting down and reopening a week later under a different name. By the time I started working for Bruegel, I think it changed names and owners five more times, but I assume the girls stayed the same.

The activity at the strip club spilt out onto the streets, as well—the stretch of Woodward surrounding the club was one of the few places you confidentially identify as a prostitute or sex worker or, as most people called them, hookers, the confidence coming from the fact that they wore hardly any clothing, even when the night called for at least a thin jacket, and, as my own father once advised me, they didn't carry purses (if they carried purses, he said, they were likely undercover cops). Palmer Park nearby was also known as a cruising spot, a rumor I never confirmed. Drugs, too, ran rampant. It goes without saying that the area was dangerous, too; there was a donut store nearby that was legendary (open all night, shitty donuts made right, shitty meaning there was nothing fancy about them—chocolate glaze was as radical as it got, and dirt cheap), everyone went to it, despite the area's dangers.

With the dangers came a certain clientele, and with the clientele came very dirty money. Literally. Wet dollar bills. Coins with strange color gunk embedded in the ridged edges. The owners knew it was nasty, and since they resented Bruegel and me by extension, they'd never put it in a nice envelope for me to go away with. If I had the stones, I'd have worn latex gloves when I picked up the dough, but I couldn't. I was representing Bruegel whenever I was in there, and he'd never do such a thing. Besides, if wearing latex gloves was my idea of attitude, I had other problems I needed to work on. It was verboten to carry a gun when I was working for Bruegel, however. He was sensible when it came to that sort of stuff—he knew that a gun, once

introduced, only served to escalate matters. It wasn't a good tool for making money, at least not long-term gains. "Chekov would have been a good businessman," he said once. "You can learn a thing or two from him." I never did learn anything from Chekov, but I did take Bruegel's advice to heart. The only gun I had was a little pea shooter that I kept locked up in my nightstand. I'd only used it twice, both times deep out on the westside, where fields were more common than houses; I'd taken some girls out there and tried to impress them by setting up cans and bottles on concrete walls and plinking them with my 9mm. For one of the girls, this didn't work at all—she was bored and spent most of the time smoking and looking toward the sky, which made me feel like a fool, for I wasn't even naturally a machismo sort of dude, it had all been a put-on, so, in the end, I was only performing for myself. For the other, it worked too well. I'd brought her to the same field, I remember. It was late fall, and grey clouds covered the sky. All the grass and wildflowers had already died, so the field was yellow and withered. The few houses that remained were empty, and unless someone called the cops, which was unlikely, we wouldn't see one for hours, so I felt free while I set up the empty pop bottles I'd saved. The girl, Kiersten (an ugly name that was a lesser form of Joleen or Bobbi), was excited from the jump. She'd never fired a gun before and couldn't wait to take it out of my hands. When I said I wanted to pop a few off first, mostly to establish power in the situation, but also because I wanted to make sure it was firing correctly and wasn't jammed up—despite the affect I put on, I knew next to nothing about guns, and there was a part of me worried that a misfire would end in tragedy, even if that tragedy was only minor, such as my gun breaking. Kiersten wouldn't take no for an answer, though. As I loaded up the bullet and did my half-assed safety checks, she said watching me hold a gun made her wet, and she spread her legs in the backseat of my car, rubbed the outside of her

crotch, and made soft moans. I should have taken this as the first bad sign (there were worse signs before that, however, like the outfit she wore that day: thin leggings, flip flops, and an oversized t-shirt, none of which was appropriate for the cold weather we were having, nor was it appropriate to wear outside the house on any occasion, and it stood in stark contrast to the clothes I'd picked out for myself: crisp chinos, duck boots from L.L. Bean, a mustard flannel, and a brown Carhart work jacket—all of which were brand new, and made me look like I was plucked from a college orientation packet in the mid-aughts; though no one else was around, I would have been embarrassed to have been seen with her, for what our outfits taken together clearly signaled what our relationship was about: pure sex; it would have been the same were the situations were reversed, if I had dressed like a scum bag while she was dolled up to the nines; sex was one of the few things that allowed people to freely traverse demarcation lines like class and caste and race and so on. This was an accepted fact, but when it was too obvious, it was vulgar and desperate), but I was too horny and excited to do otherwise. My hands shook when I loaded the gun and wrapped my finger around the trigger, and I couldn't hit the targets. My bullets left small dents in the cinder block they sat on. Kiersten called me a pussy, and took the gun from my hands, which I let go gently, like it was water slipping through my fingers. Though she'd never fired a gun before, at least according to her, she hit every single target with incredible accuracy. I had to reload, which took longer than it ever had for me, and while I was doing it, she engaged in some more heavy petting, this time on me. In some regard, it was fantasy—here I was, shooting guns with a violent nymphomaniac, but it had almost come to easy for me, and it felt like it was on the wrong side of transgressive, a type of hedonism that delivered its regrets in real time. I had to pretend I liked it. A long silence descended while I

fumbled around with bullets and dug through my trunk to find more targets. The wind whipped through the field and through the windows of the empty houses. Winter would be here soon. A guest arrived. A pheasant, one with a bright green head and a red ringed neck. This was always a rare sight in Detroit, but a welcome one. “Hurry,” Kiersten said. “Hurry up.” I loaded the clip and handed it back to her. With one shot, she had the pheasant dead to rights. It didn’t explode in a ball of feathers, nor did its body ricochet against the wall behind it. It merely sputtered, then died. “Wow,” she said. “Good for me.” I was taken aback. For the first time, I noticed an old lady staring at us from her front porch. We left and went back to my place. We did end up having sex, of course. At one point, she stuck her finger inside my butt without asking, and it made me uncomfortable, still makes me uncomfortable, to think about. We saw each other again after that, but only once.

I’d heard through the grapevine that Kiersten got a job at the Woodward strip club for a short while, during the period it was called Daddio’s. She didn’t last long, though. I could imagine why. Heinous things happened there. The floor was more of a showroom, and the real business happened in the private rooms. I’d never partaken myself, but sometimes the music wasn’t even loud enough to drown out the carnal noises. Someone once told me it was the place to go in Detroit if you wanted to fuck a hooker without a condom, or if you had any nasty fetishes you wanted to explore without overpaying for it. For these reasons, I tried to get out of there as quickly as I could, but sometimes they’d make me wait while they gathered their disgusting money from the safe and money bags. I avoided looking at the strippers and the men, but it couldn’t always be helped. What I saw then was expected. Women with track marks, bad teeth, and chronic coughs. Men with jaundiced skin, jackets that smelt like piss, and chronic

coughs. People from the bottom rung congregating in the same space due to forces outside their control. Primal urges in some, economic models for others. Every now and then, you'd see a man from the suburbs, clearly out of his element, but too animalistic to care. Did they disgust me more than the others? No, I don't think so. They just disgusted me in a different way.

I dreaded the possibility of speaking to any of the strippers. I didn't want to hear their stories, I didn't want to hear the long descent into where they were, I didn't want to hear their plans of getting out, the vast majority of which would never come to fruition. It was too much of a bummer, to put it simply. I understood everyone had their vices, of course. They were my bread and butter, after all, but sex was a mark apart from gambling, drinking, drugs, and theft, in my mind. There was something sinister to it that I couldn't resolve. It could go too dark too quickly. Easily my least favorite part of the job, which is why I never ended my day with a pickup at the strip club whenever I could.

Typically, my route would be a semi-legitimate place with nominal daytime hours, like the body shops down by the docks, but some restaurants too, along with bars and other manufacturers, then I'd do the dirty work, like the strip clubs and whorehouses and massage parlors, before ending with something lighthearted, like some good old fashioned gambling.

Detroit was flushed with casinos—we had three of them in a relatively small area—but people still loved to gamble outside the legal bounds. Lord knows why. Perhaps for the social bonding of ritual. When men did things together without a corporate mediator, they became closer. They liked Bruegel, too. His style and panache. If you were involved in a Bruegel organized game, that said something about you. It meant you had connections.

These games were organized into different tiers. All of them were what you would consider high-rollers, but there were varying degrees even within that category. For instance, there were the games that were more of a novelty for some people—perhaps they were regular gamblers, and on a lark, they'd gotten an invite, so they took the small nut they had stashed aside and splurged on a private game. These people weren't who you'd consider rich. Maybe they had some money, but never any influence. Little Caesar's franchisees, young tech types who worked at Quicken Loans, insurance salesmen, semi-pro poker players. Then, you had your regular games. The real gamblers, people who'd known Bruegel for ages. For these types, their work and their lifestyle was inextricably bound. However, when you got down to it, all they really did was manage the types who came before them. They were the heads of departments, not the cogs. The difference between dollar amounts was vast between the two types of games, but everything else was negligible. The real lucrative stuff was the ultra-exclusive games. These weren't so much about playing poker as they were about socializing. Scions of industry, foreign dignitaries, former chiefs of police, government men. The machinations of the world. But when they got together, they pretty much just talked about pussy. At least from what I heard.

They happened nearly every night, if you can believe that. One night it'd be poker, the next blackjack. Roulette. Baccarat. Even mahjong during the auto show, when Chinese whales would be in town. Each man had their favorite game. The best ones happened in hotel suites that Bruegel had booked for blocks on end. The others took place in apartments. Luxury apartments, but still apartments. In fact, Bruegel was eyeing a top floor spot in The Jeffersonian, the same place Ryan decided to shack up while he got his press off the ground.

For staff, there was always a dealer, usually a veteran on the off-night from his casino job. A bartender, some muscle, and a point man. There was no need to worry about cheating, because anyone who dared was sure to suffer a fate worse than death (there's that phrase again; it strikes me now that it almost certainly takes on a different gravity to different people—for one, it might mean torture, for another, excommunication, yet despite these differences, it was something feared equally). Even if they weren't shot or killed, Bruegel had dirt on everyone there. In some respects, it was the price of admission. For as the night drug on, as the booze flowed and the cocaine passed around, if the mood was right, the point man would call in women. Not the types at the strip clubs I was describing earlier, but real times. Perfect tens. The assumption was that pictures and videos were taken once the party started rolling, and no one had ever called Bruegel's bluff to prove otherwise. So, there was the safeguard against cheating. Luckily, my work was always done before this happened (I only had to make a quick pick up), so I could easily disconnect from this part. In my mind, it was only gambling.

During that particular summer, the one where Ryan tried his hardest to get his publishing press off the ground, the games were on fire. Bruegel was making gangbusters. One his other guys called in sick one night, so I had the privilege to go to the upper crust games to collect, an opportunity that came to me only rarely. It was at the top floor of a hotel on Michigan, just adjacent to downtown proper. Like the strip clubs, the hotel changed names and ownership every year or so, but more so do to moving capital than crimes and deals gone wrong (asking if there's a difference between the two is a bad joke at this point—of course there is, but if you can't see the similarities, then I have a bridge to sell you). Sometimes, larger chains with brand establishment (disgusting term) would move in. For a short period, it was a Ritz Carlton, even.

But before long, the young executives at these companies would realize the money pumping in and out of Detroit in the early years of our 21<sup>st</sup> century was nothing more than gilded shit. The most they could get out of it was a slight edge to their portfolio—if they had a hotel in Detroit, they could appeal to the investors who claimed to be interested in things beyond profit. But this never turned out to be the case, either. All things beside profit were a secondary factor, and the pie in Detroit was never sweet enough. So, the hotel would be dropped and passed along to another more gullible company. I didn't give a shit about the hotel in and of itself, but you could see this exact pattern play out across any industry in Detroit. There simply wasn't enough money here to make any more. The money that already existed simply changed hands between the people who already had it, like Bruegel and his friends.

Anyway, that particular night, the hotel was called The Winston. I'd just come from the massage parlor off one of the side streets downtown, so I could walk to hotel. I'd hoped the night air would clear my head, but it was hot and muggy. When I smoked a cigarette, it felt like the smoke clung to my face.

The muscle man at the door must have felt this way, too. We knew each other through work, but he couldn't let me in.

“Sorry, man. You smell like shit. Can't have that. Go wash up.”

I was pissed, but I knew the rules. I ran down to the lobby to give myself a Mexican shower in the sink, so to speak. But the hotel didn't have public restrooms. I asked the front desk guy for a key, but he just reiterated the policy.

“Look, man, I’m just trying to do my job,” I told him. “All I need to do is wash my hands. Can’t I pay you or something?”

“I’m sorry, sir. It’s company policy. I could lose my job.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you fucking could.” I sighed and looked around. The lobby was deserted. It was 1am on a Tuesday. “Is there somewhere I could go?”

“There’s the coney across the street. They may let you use the bathroom.”

I didn’t thank him and left. The two coney’s across the street were open all night and slung shitty chili dogs with undercooked fries. They were Detroit institutions, and, like all institutions, were shadows of what made them so in the first place and were propped up only by people interested in the idea of the place, not the place itself. I chose the larger of the two. It was dead inside. There was one dude eating alone in a window seat, but he ordered enough to pay a college tuition. The whole table was covered with coney dogs and cheese fries, mozzarella sticks, loose burgers, empty cups of Pepsi. He shoveled it in and wore headphones. Perhaps he was an aspiring competitive eater. Not the loftiest goal in life, but, then again, not the worst, either.

The workers were all old Greek dudes with mustaches and hairy arms. They all wore little white caps and uniforms. It was quaint, but not organically so. They smoked over the fryer and flat iron.

“Bathroom?” I asked.

One of them shook his head. Customers only. Jesus Christ. This wasn’t an emergency, there was no rush, but it was a pain in the ass. I slapped a few dollars on the table for a cup of

coffee, but I realized too late that I had accidentally grabbed one of the hundreds I'd picked up from the massage parlor. The poor guy's eyes almost popped out of his head. He must have thought Christmas came twice. Before I could correct the mistake, he grabbed it and tucked it into the cash register. Whatever, I thought. I'd pick up the change later.

The bathroom was a single, only a small toilet and even smaller sink. It smelt horrible in there, like someone had just took a violent shit that ruined their asshole. The toilet seat was closed, and I was too afraid to lift it to see if the bowl was full. The lighting was poor in there, just a dim incandescent, and the water pressure on the sink was dreadful. All that came out of the soap dispenser, which was sticky with things other than soap, was a spurt. I washed my neck and face the best I could. On top of the toilet was one of those Glade scented things made of some gelatinous substance. It looked brand new. If I smeared my fingers on it and put some over my coat, it could work as a makeshift cologne. Problem was, the longer I stayed in that cramped little bathroom, the worse the smell inside the toilet became. I began to doubt it was shit at all. It could have been vomit or worse. Blood and innards, perhaps. Or a rotted corpse. The logic jump was a large one, but I'd heard of stranger things happening, as I'm sure you have, too. Unwanted children left behind in suitcases, dumpster, or even desk drawers. Amputated body parts left in a place just conspicuous enough so the right people would find them. I gagged thinking about it. I was afraid of brushing my pants up against the toilet bowl, afraid of the residue.

I left the bathroom with my skin and hair wet. There were no paper towels in there, and I'd have to have been a madman to use the hand dryer. I planned on asking one of the Greeks for

a squirt of cologne. They were sure to have had some. To my surprise, the motherfucker set out fifty cups of coffee on the counter instead of giving me change for a hundred.

“Are you fucking crazy, Stromboli,” I asked him. When angry, all Mediterraneans fell under the same blanket.

“You ask for coffee, I give you coffee.”

“Who wants fifty cups of coffee?”

“Crazy things happen. You look rushed.”

“You goat fucking asshole,” I said, laughing. “Jesus. I don’t even have change left over to tip you.”

“No tip, thank you sir. Coffee good enough.”

I couldn’t drink all of it, of course. I didn’t even know why they had fifty empty mugs on hand back there. I asked if I could take one of the mugs to go.

“Sorry,” said the Greek. “Mug must stay.”

“You don’t quit. Do you have a to-go cup?”

He ran to the other side of the counter and whispered something to the other Greek manning the cash register. All the servers were men. That was unusual. He came back with a big smile on his face and placed a Styrofoam cup down, picked up one of the filled mugs, and tried to pour it in, but the lip on the mug made it awkward, so hot coffee got all over his hand and the counter. Only half made it into the Styrofoam.

“That’s okay,” I said. “That’s enough.”

“Thank you, sir. Fifty cents.”

“Fuck you.”

They yelled something at me in Greek as I walked out, but it was only empty posturing. That’s the way the game was played. I’d already lost, so they couldn’t let it look like I had won. In the end, I supposed I had, but I was clearly the real loser here. Since it was so humid outside, I didn’t dry off much on my way back up to the top floor, and I was still a little wet when I got the suite. The muscle man, Henry, wasn’t outside the door any longer. I wondered what had happened. I didn’t want to knock, so I waited.

I didn’t have to wait long before the door flew open, smacking me in the face and making my eyes water.

“Kyle, holy shit,” said the muscle man. “You smell worse than before.”

“Everything okay in there? I was just coming to collect.”

“No, it’s not. Can you tell the front desk it’s a code black up here? They’ll understand what it means.”

“Yeah, sure.” I rode the elevator down. Ironically, now, after the coffee, I had to piss. Standing still made it worse, so I paced back and forth in the elevator while it glided to the bottom floor. Mid-way down, it stopped. Some young girls got in. College freshman by the looks of it, maybe younger. They were wearing big, ostentatious gowns and their hair was done up, though it was clearly falling apart at the end of a long night. One was crying.

“Don’t let him do that to you, girl,” said the stoic one. “It ain’t right.”

“Fuck him. Fuck him and his tiny little dick. I’m going to tell the police on him.”

They didn’t notice I was there, or at least regarded me as a non-entity.

“You should. Take him down and his whole stupid little fucking crew.”

“Ladies,” I interjected, wobbling my knees together to stave off the urine. “Can I ask what this is about?”

“Were we talking to you,” asked the crying one.

“Yeah, white boy, who asked you?” came the other.

The elevator hit the lobby and the doors opened. “I was just asking,” I said, hurrying out. “I could have helped!”

They ignored me and went out the front doors. Whoever it was they were talking about, he was in for a world of trouble if they went through with talking to the police. It was unlikely to happen, I guessed, but when two friends got to scheming together, they could come up with enough plans to burn the earth. I hope the pussy was worth it for the young boy. It hardly ever is.

“Excuse me,” I said to the man at the front desk. He smiled at me, as if he didn’t remember me from before. “There’s a code black at the top floor. The suite.”

He gave me a curt nod and dashed off behind the counter, to some secret room. I looked around the lobby to find a door that could possibly be a bathroom, but it was all marble save for one door without a handle. I didn’t know if he needed me for anything else, so I hung around. I

needed to pee so bad, I was sweating. After an eternity, I rang the little bell they had set out on the desk. No answer. I didn't even know if I could make it back up to the room before I wet myself. I walked over to the front doors. If it was still dead outside, I could piss on the street. All I needed to worry about were the two girls. I didn't see them outside, not in front of the big glass doors, anyway, but I did see the night auditor running past. He went down the street and around the corner.

Well, fuck it, I thought. The night was going straight to hell. I didn't even know what a code black was supposed to be, but I would bet that my services would be needed much longer. I unzipped my fly and took a piss in a potted plant. A very realistic looking fake plant, it turns out. There was no soil for my pee to sink into, so it just sat on the plastic surface, collected. Maybe it'd be blamed on one of the girls.

Back at the suite, Harvey was outside the door again. "Did you tell them?"

"Yeah, code black like you said. What's going on?"

"Here, I got your money. It's light, but Bruegel will understand. Had to do some refunds."

He handed me an envelope, one of thinnest I'd ever seen from one of these games.

"What happened, Harvey? Is there something I can do?"

"Nah, kid. You'd be better off not knowing."

The elevator doors at the end of the hall opened, and out came a pair of paramilitary paramedics. They were dressed in all black tactical gear and walked lock-step with a stretcher at

their sides. Harvey opened the door just enough to let them in and closed it as soon as the last foot crossed the threshold.

“Did somebody die?”

Harvey sighed, realizing he wasn't going to get rid of me as easily as he would have liked. When it came to certain things, I had a curious mind. “No, not yet. One of the guys had a heart attack, or maybe a stroke. I can't tell you who, though. You get it.”

“Sure, yeah. Damn, man. That's crazy.”

Harvey's lips twisted up. Once the floodgate was open, it was hard to stop gossip from pouring out. People liked to tell stories, they liked to pass secret information from their mouth to your ear, even when they knew it was wrong. Secrets weren't secrets until someone else knew about them. “It sounds crazy, but there was a reason. I guess there's some music festival thing going on in Hamtramck tonight.”

“Yeah, the Blowout. It sucks.” Every year, the worst local bands came together to play every single bar in Hammtrammck. Lots of people went just to get drunk. Now that I thought about it, that's one reason downtown might have been so empty tonight, but at the same time, the Blowout crowd wasn't the same types who would be downtown. Another dull mystery. Maybe after I dropped off the cash at Bruegel's, I'd head to the Blowout myself, I thought. I'd be sure to run into some people I knew, and it'd be good to shoot the shit and blow off some steam.

“Well, guess what happened tonight. One of the guy's daughters went with some friends. They left one bar, Tight Fitting Gene's, I think, and were heading to another, one of those house

bars.” These were common in Hamtramck, an old immigrant city (that happened to be entirely inside the bounds of Detroit, so a city within another one), where old Polish dudes set up bars in the ground floors of their homes and lived above them. There were no storefronts, and they were entirely confined to residential streets. You had to know to look for them. It was a bit of charm of the city that quickly wore off. These days, most of the immigrants were Arabic or Indian, so it was the place to go for cheap and good food. “On their way there, a van stopped in the road, a couple guys got out, drug them inside, then they were raped by a few men as the van circled the block. Once it was over, they threw them out, almost at the same place they picked em up.”

“Holy fucking shit.”

“Yeah, no kidding. The cops are involved already. Girls are safe, they got them protected. The media doesn’t know about it yet, and with any luck it’ll stay that way. Same thing with the poor boy in there.”

There was a knock from inside the door.

“Oh. Hey, Kyle. Turn around. Close your eyes.”

I did as I was told and waited an appropriate length. When I returned from the dark to talk to Henry, the elevator was already closed.

“That was him. Doesn’t look too good. Eyes were bloody. But, like I was saying, everything’s okay now, relatively speaking. No deaths, at least not yet. Keep your mouth shut and your ear to the ground, okay?”

“Yeah, Harvey. For sure. Look, is there anything I could maybe do? You need help cleaning up in there or something?”

“Nah, we got it. You’re good. Just gotta press the flesh in there, make sure they’re return customers despite the night’s unfortunate circumstances. You just be careful out there, okay? Make sure you don’t get butt-fucked.”

“Not cool, Harvey.”

“Hey, I’m just looking out for you and your small feminine features. Go on, kid, get out of here. Be safe.”

I left and drove over to Lafayette Park to drop off the cash for Bruegel, a mid-century enclave that was very cool, very exclusive, and very expensive—buildings designed by the director of Bauhaus, private security, lush trees and grass that sheltered the neighborhood from the rest of the world; instead of walls, all the condos had big, plate glass windows facing inward, so as you walked the sidewalks that crisscrossed public green areas, you had no choice but to look inside people’s houses and see what their lives were like, and, of course, this was part of the appeal of Lafayette Park, part of its exclusivity—only the best and most tasteful furniture was arranged in these condos, only the most interesting and tasteful people. They loved to show off. Bruegel had a place there, and in recent years, it was the one he stayed at most.

When I got there, however, all his lights were off, so I just dropped the envelopes through his mail slot. I was sick of smoking in the car, so I hung out by his front door and lit one up. He might actually be home, and if he smelt my cigarette smoke, he might want to talk to me. There was a little coffee can of ashes on the ground, used almost exclusively by me. Bruegel smoked

inside, but only the finest cigars. He made me go outside. He'd gotten complaints from the neighbors about my secondhand smoke in the past, but he waved them off. What the fuck were they gonna do, arrest him?

It was very late, so most of the other houses were dark, too, but I could see the glow of TVs inside a few. I would have liked to live in Lafayette Park one day. It was a dream of mine, in fact. It signaled a balanced, wholesome life. Not too rich to be obnoxious, but not a stranger to the finer things, either. It was pretty hip to live there, too. It meant you were in the know, that you wouldn't settle. A fine place to raise a child. Inexpensive, too, comparatively. The same condos would be millions in a real city, but in Detroit, you could scoot by in the low hundreds, though that number was looking more like the mid-threes as the city had its false rebound. By the time I got around to buying them, if I ever did, it might be up to millions. Or it might only be fifty g's. In either case, it was nice to be here for the time being. There wasn't a better spot to smoke a cigarette. It was so quiet and calm.

I thought about the girls while I smoked. I had no other choice. What had happened to them was so horrible, I didn't know if I could believe it. It sounded like something out of a movie. Unable to accept it as is, I started questioning the story. Was the crime really as random as Harvey made it out to seem? Wasn't it possible they had connections to the men who raped her? Were they even raped? Could it be an elaborate scheme for inheritance money? Or was Harvey bullshitting me the entire time? Who knew. I tossed my cigarette in the coffee can. A thin little trail of smoke spun up. It was times like this I was glad I wasn't a detective. It had to take a special sort of guts to focus all your energy on solving one tiny part of the world when so much

of it remained unsolvable. Or maybe hubris is the better word, not guts. Or maybe they always went hand in hand. Besides, I'm not sure you could ever be certain you knew the facts of a case. There was always context missing, no matter how many interviews you did. I mean, sure, you could find irrefutable physical evidence. A bullet is always left behind. But that was child's play, I think. The average joe could sus most cases out if he had the time. What was more interesting, and infinitely harder to solve, was the meaning behind crimes and actions. These were usually unknown to the people who themselves committed said crimes (even if someone says they certainly know why they acted a certain way, there's surely some delusion involved in such a proclamation), so how could an outside observer know any better? Again, who knew.

When I talked to Bruegel the next day, I was on my way to Ryan's for our weekly meeting. He called me on the phone, just to confirm he got what I dropped off. When I asked him what happened, his voice dropped a level. He became quite serious:

“Yeah, I heard. Bad news. I think they might be our guys. I don't know yet. I'm trying to figure it out. You heard anything? Amongst the street walkers and pill poppers? Anyone mentioning it?”

“No, but it's pretty early in the morning, boss. Haven't heard much of anything. Just you today, actually.”

“Useless. You're on your phone all the fucking time. You telling me you haven't seen anyone talk about while you were surfing the web?” It was hard to tell if he used this language ironically or not. I was just glad he didn't say social media, or use sarcastic names like Twatter or Fuckbook. The former was too professional and pathetic, if Bruegel had used it, it would have signaled his submission to the new guard. The latter were too obvious. Had Bruegel used those, I would have worried about mental decline, or him finally conforming to the mold of old people humor.

“I try to stay away from it, to tell you the truth. Not good for the mind or soul.”

“Oh, suck my fucking dick, homo. I'm not paying for your mind or soul. Find some shit out for me. Don't ask around, but just listen. Let me know if your little bald friend says anything.”

“Will do.” We hung up. Ryan and I agreed to meet for breakfast instead of his apartment. I welcomed the disruption to our routine. I was hungry, for one, and some hash browns would do me good, but, for another, I wanted to tell Ryan about what happened last night, though I was sworn to full secrecy by Harvey and half-secrecy by Bruegel. I didn’t give a fuck. It was too much to carry around on my own, and I needed someone to carry the pain with me or help me develop my harebrained conspiracy. Telling Ryan inside his apartment would lead to too many hushed voices and somber tones. If I told him in a diner, I could keep it casual and light. It would be gossip and rumors, not inuendo and accusation.

I idled in the circle drive while he came downstairs, which took longer than usual. He looked and smelled like shit.

“What the fuck, man?” I said. “Late night?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I guess. I don’t know. I stayed in, but I’ve had a rough one the past few days. You could say I tied one on.” He looked at his shirt and pants, both of which were wrinkled. He smelled his pits, but instead of pulling his nose away disgusted, he looked satisfied, like a theory confirmed.

“Where’d that phrase come from, anyway? ‘Tie one on.’”

“I think it was from horses. Like, you’d go to a bar for a night, get skunk drunk, and leave your horse tied up.”

“You’re fucking crazy. You think we still use cowboy language?”

“Well, what do you think it came from?”

“I think it came from the olden days, when men would wear ascots as a sign of class. They’d go to a bar, order a bottle of the finest whiskey, and tie their ascot around it, as if to say ‘this one’s mine.’”

“Get the fuck outta here.”

“My theories as good as yours.”

We went to a diner in Eastern Market, but one on the outskirts, not one of the popular one that suburban tourists went to on the weekend after the farmer’s market. Johnny’s Hambone. It was just as expensive as the touristy diners, and the food was demonstrably worse, but we had perverse senses of pride. We both got corn beef hash. I told Ryan what had happened the night before, leaving out a few choice details, like the women in the elevator, and playing up a few others, like the fifty cups of coffee (which didn’t need much hyperbole) and the piss in the potted plant (which I told him had ran over the side and spilt onto the floor).

“Fucking hell,” he said. “No, I hadn’t heard about that, but I believe it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, man. Dark shit’s been happening lately. I’m sure you know about it. Hell, I’m sure you’re part of it.”

“Hey now.”

“Just saying. You know what I mean.”

“What have you heard?” Our breakfasts came. Lukewarm and over seasoned.

“About you?”

“No, the dark shit.”

“One in the same as far as I’m concerned. But, just shit with girls. Like everything else in the world. That’s what it all ties back to. Girls and sex. There was this one chick, Zoe, who got involved with some bad people around here. She was partying and whatever, then did some amateur modeling, then, next thing you know, people haven’t seen her in weeks. Months went by. No one knew how to contact her family, because you know how it is down here, you meet people at clubs or parties or whatever and everyone’s trying to hide their past. No one wants to admit they grew up in the suburbs, that their parents have more money than they might let on, that their fathers say the n-word in private conversation, so we all just let it remain a mystery, we all pretend we found ourselves shored up in Detroit the second we turned 18. It’s a joke, man.”

“What’s your point?”

“The point is this chick was missing for months, and no one knew what was going on. When they searched her name on Google, nothing came up. Then, eventually, a rumor started that some guy found her on a cam site, one of those Russian ones with dirty bedrooms and poor internet connections. Legally adjacent type shit. She was on there, looked all coked up and strung out, just lazily shoving a dildo in her ass. But the resolution was too poor to tell if it was her for sure. When the guy was pressed later, he fizzled out about it. Pretended not to know the name of the site, claimed he found it on a blog that was since deleted. Maybe he was telling the truth, who knows.”

“No shit.”

“Yeah. That’s not all. I’ve heard other shit, too. Less substantiated, if you can even call that substantiated, but more harrowing. Stuff about parties. Cults. Rituals.”

I took a sip of the coffee. “I’ll stop you there, man. I’ve been to those parties. There’s pussy, yeah, but nothing spooky like that. No cults or rituals. They’re rich and powerful enough already. They don’t need magic.”

“Maybe. But have you considered that you’ve only been to the parties you’ve been allowed to?”

“Okay. So, how’s the press coming? You got some good novels on the docket? Some mysteries or thrillers? Money makers?”

“Well, that’s the thing. That’s what I’ve been thinking about the last couple of nights. I don’t think I want the first book to be a novel. I want it to be nonfiction, but investigative. Reporting, like.”

“What you wanna do? Something on the potholes? The People Mover? White flight? Racism? There’s money in racism, you know.”

“No, that’s not where my mind is at. I’m thinking larger. The grand theory of it all, you could say.”

“Stephen Hawking over here. What led you to that?”

“I got some documents back at my place I can show you. But I’ve just been thinking. It’s funny that this shit happens in Detroit, of all places.”

“What shit?”

“Oh, you know. Backdoor deals. Blackmail. Intelligence. Power and manipulation.”

“Silly of me to ask, of course.”

“You’re being facetious, but I think you know what I’m talking about, even if you don’t want to admit it. Because you’re implicated.”

“Fuck off.”

“Relax, I’m implicated, too. We all are. Being alive is being implicated. I’m not blaming you. But you should try to look at it. Anyway, what I was saying is that Detroit is a dead city, wouldn’t you agree? Nothing happens here anymore. It’s all echoes of the past. Anything new is just influx of empty capital. Hand to mouth type shit. Restaurants, entertainment, casinos. Nothing real, nothing solid. No industry. All of the money here, all of the power, it would disappear in the blink of the eye if something happened. A bomb, a tornado, a pandemic. It’s just empty cicada shells, man. But, of course, everyone’s pretending that it’s not. The corpse of money is still being passed around from one fuck to another. Necrophilia, that’s all it is. But they still go through all the pomp and circumstance. They still meet behind backdoors. They, the officials and the elites, they still do crimes. They still have their codes, their meanings. They still do everything they can to keep the power concentrated. But you know what it’s like to me? It’s like one of those houses you see in Louisiana, down by the bayou. It’s a house built on stilts. It won’t last. It’d be funny if it wasn’t so horrifying.”

“God, I wish they still let you smoke in here,” I said. “Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“Sure would, buddy. Sure would.” We took our packs out of our pocket and tapped them against the table. “Why, you wanna head outside?”

“If you don’t mind, yeah. Feels like more a cigarette conversation than a breakfast one, you know what I mean?”

“Absolutely. You think they’ll be okay with us stepping out?”

“Yeah, I don’t see why not. Here, I’ll leave my keys on the table.”

Outside, I told Ryan what I thought when I heard about the rape van. That maybe it wasn’t true after all, that even a generous view could sense something was left out. Then, for the first time, I told him what else had happened in the hotel. The code black, the stretcher, when Harvey made me turn my back. This was unusual, I told him. Never had it been so apparent that I was adjacent to something I wasn’t meant to see.

“Makes sense to me.”

“What does?”

“All of it, all at once. It could be taken at face value, maybe there was a band of rapists riding around Hamtramck looking for women, and they just happened to have the worst luck in the world picking the daughter of someone who would raise hell to bring justice. Or maybe it was a set up from a rival business leader or criminal, looking to get him where it hurts. Or maybe it was all fake, and it’s just a means to some other end, maybe new security policies or insurance fraud. Or consider that it’s a combination of all of the above, a confluence of mistakes and plans.”

I took a deep drag. “Yeah, I don’t know about that, man. It could be. These are just thoughts I’ve been having, you know. I haven’t been in the industry that long compared to some of the other guys, but usually when someone wants to prove a point, they make it known. Evidence is left behind, the connections are well drawn. No use in leaving your mark anonymously.”

“That’s not what I’m saying, though. I’m saying the connections aren’t ours to see. It’s cryptology, a language without a public referent.”

“You sound fucking crazy, dude. We don’t even know if this happened.”

“Does it really matter if everyone thinks otherwise?”

“Okay, Kemosabe. Come on. Let’s pay the bill.”

The waitress had taken away our half-eaten plates of food on the table but left my keys and bill. I was still hungry, so this left me annoyed. You had to pay at the cash register, so Ryan and I waited up there while we waited for the cashier to come. It was slow in there, and it looked like it was going to rain soon. Everywhere seemed to be slow, these days. There was a dish of peppermint Lifesavers out, each wrapped individually in crinkled plastic. I took one for myself and another for Ryan. He stuck his hand out and I placed it in there.

“I can get this one,” I said. I hope you’re not still hungry.”

“Nah, I’m fine. I got tons of food back at the apartment, actually, if you want some.”

“I was thinking we could stay outside, if you don’t mind. Catch some fresh air before the rain comes.”

“Yeah, sure. I got no plans.”

The cashier came up to the register, hocking up a storm with a tissue covering her mouth. Her eyes were watery. “Sorry,” she said. “Allergies.”

“Hey, no worries. We all get em.” I handed her the money and told her to keep the change.

We got back in my car and I took the backroads over to the east side. The sky was getting quite dark now, and there was a rumble of thunder in the distance. Luckily, we were able to talk about normal things as we drove. I didn’t pressure Ryan about what he was talking about earlier, though I could tell it wasn’t far under the surface. We debated the merits of corn beef hash, whether it was better or worse than just having a side of corned beef with hash browns. I argued it was better to just have corn beef and hash browns separate, as the two textures complimented each other, but they didn’t mesh. Well-cooked corn beef was smooth and buttery, hash browns were more chunky and solid. Ryan disagreed. The blend of the two was what made for a filling breakfast, though he did concede that the saltiness could be overpowering. It was a classic riff, one I had sought with Midori, and, like all riffs were, it was only half-interesting. I could only imagine how obnoxious it would be to anyone who was listening in on the conversation. They would have thought we were auditioning for a two-bit Seinfeld. There was no real heart of the matter.

Instinctively, I took Van Dyke up, a road that went all the way into the suburbs. Down here in Detroit, it was one of the worst roads you could find. Nothing existed on the street except churches and liquor stores, a combination so philosophically tiring that it hurt to even think about

what someone might say about it. Everything else was either bombed out or cinder blocked up. Supposedly, there was a lot of history on that street, but it looked the same as any other. Any monuments to the past that remained only existed in books or the minds of people with a nostalgia hard on. For everyone else, the place just reeked of misery and desperation.

I pointed out a street corner to Ryan: “I saw on the news some guy got killed there the other day for wearing Cartier sunglasses. Can you believe that?”

“It’ll happen.”

“Yeah, but that’s so sad, man. Getting shot just for wanting to turn your swag on.”

“Come on, man, you can’t believe that. People don’t kill each other over Cartier sunglasses. They probably knew each other before hand. There was probably bad blood. The news story just wants to portray it as random. They want all of this,” he said, twirling his hand around, separating the smoke that had appeared above his head, “to appear random. Senseless acts of violence and economic squander.”

“Oh, shit, I didn’t realize you’d talked to the CEO of the News. I can’t believe that memo got leaked where he told every reporter to make crime seem random.”

“Don’t be stupid, that’s not what I’m saying. These narratives already exist in the air. The people who can reach out and adapt to them are the successful ones. Everyone else is ignored.”

“Someone sounds a little bitter. Just wait until you get that book out, man. Then we’ll see who’s ignored. You know, I’ve been talking to Bruegel, he’s got a good promotional plan for

you. We can get cheap ads in newspapers, get you lined up with a few interviews. It'll sell, even if we have to force it."

"Bruegel. Don't get me started. That bald headed fuck, I can't believe I took fucking money from him. I wasn't thinking."

"Look who's talking, cueball. Love him or hate him, he butters the bread."

"He's implicated in all of this, you know. We all are."

"The Cartier sunglasses murder?"

"In a way."

"Now who's stupid. Be for real, player. Crime exists, but it exists on multiple levels. There's organized crime and there's random crime. They're separate but connected to the same base. It's human nature to be bad. We'll always kill each other. Organization, ideally, helps mitigate that. It controls who gets killed."

"Is that what you tell yourself?"

"Sometimes, when I want to sleep."

I turned down a side street, one covered with trees. The first raindrops hit my windshield, but it wasn't enough yet to turn the wipers on. Down some ways was a tow lot. I had to swerve to avoid the potholes. Big, massive ones that would not only destroy your tire, but stood a chance at breaking an axle, too. I asked Ryan if he remembered that time back in college when my girlfriend got her car towed and we had to pick it up at this lot.

“Haha, yeah. She called everyone the n-word.”

“I know! And they weren’t even black. They were Italian.”

“She was pissed, man. How much did she have to pay? Like, three hundred dollars?”

“That was a lot of money to us at the time.”

“It’s a lot now.”

“Right. Well, it’s all relative.”

We idled outside for a moment. I don’t know what Ryan was thinking about, but I know what I was. What it felt like to be younger, before aches and pains became a part of my daily life. (I mean, Christ, I wasn’t even old.) Before I had to stop applying morality to things, because if I did, that meant I had to apply it to myself, too. Random, passing thoughts. I’m not sure I could get along with anyone who could look toward their youth and think that same self would be satisfied with the person they became. People needed a certain regret to them, I think. It was an essential character trait. Just like not getting along with your family.

There was a junkyard dog in the lot, just hanging out by the fence and watching us. He was a pit, all white with a grey spot over one of his eyes. Pure pits could look disgusting sometimes, like their skin was stretched all the way back over their skull, like their skeleton was ready to hop out of their body. He stood there shaking with anticipation. He probably wanted to attack us. The door to the trailer that served as the office swung open and someone whistled the dog inside. When he turned around, he had two big flopping nuts that bounced between his legs.

One of the strangest things about Detroit, something that I don't think most people could really grasp until they saw it for themselves, were the roving packs of stray dogs in some parts of the city. I've only been lucky enough to see them a few times, always in the evening or the dead of night, passing beneath a single streetlight on an otherwise dark street. They traveled in packs of four or more, with presumably an alpha at the helm. They were never the same breed, always a mix. Big dogs, small dogs, but all dangerous. I liked seeing them because they were pure and feral. They played by no one's rules. I also liked them because they spoke to how far the city had fallen. Bankrupt pensions, apocalyptic poverty and unemployment, a tax base so small you could shove it up the mayor's ass, all these were abstractions at a certain level. But packs of wild dogs? That was beyond control. They'd been known to be deadly. Usually to unattended toddlers, but once to an old man taking his trash out. This was the exception, rather than the rule, however. Most of the time they found enough food in the dumpsters to keep themselves full. One time I happened to see them on the way back from a pizza run, so I set the whole pizza, box and all, out on the street, and stood a few yards away while they gingerly approached it and tore it piece to piece. They were like minor gods, and I respected them. The real danger when it came to dogs were those trained for fighting. Those were the horror stories you heard. They escaped basement lairs and crawled underneath backyard fences and chewed faces off. These attacks happened almost like clockwork, and whenever they did, there was always a small murmur to place a citywide ban on pits, but that would never happen. They were too widespread. And so many of them were cute and harmless. Dog people always say it's not the dog, it's the owner. They're trained to fight. Trained to kill. It's a horrible business, really. Seeing the churches and liquor stores earlier got my mind on other obvious connections, so it wasn't hard for me to draw the

line between dogs and owners to people and their handlers. We're all trained to do what we do. There's no control group to say otherwise. This lets us off the hook, a little, does it not? It allows us to have a necessary distance from our actions. We may privately disapprove, but we still go through with them because it's part of our job and, hey, everyone needs to eat, right? I did it all the time. Coincidentally, I met Bruegel through dog fighting (though how much of that line of thought was coincidental was up for debate—I constructed it after all, I must have known on some level where my musings about the junkyard dog would take me). Not that I was ever involved, but I lived near a guy who was. It was back when I lived in some no-man's land between Woodward and Hamtramck. The only noise came from the freeway down below. Otherwise it was dead quiet. I lived with a few other guys in a house that used to be owned by some Buddhist, so all the walls were painted with a pleasing yellow pallet, the stairs were mosaiced with pottery pieces, and there was a garden out back that we didn't take care of. There were only two houses on the street that were occupied, and they happened to be directly across the street from each other. We never talked or introduced ourselves. When our group sat on the porch during hot summer days to drink beer and hang out, we'd wave at them, but they'd never return the favor. They just looked at us like we were cops. Outside of the freeway noises each night, you heard dog yelps from their house. I assumed they came from the basement. I don't know what they did to train the dogs for fighting, but they must have been beating them. It was pretty disturbing, so to drown it out we'd turn our stereo up way loud while we played video games and smoked weed. Sometimes, we had band practice at night, and even had a few shows there. But even when our solitary street was filled with cars, the dog yelps didn't stop. They had a regimen, it seemed, and it had to be followed no matter what. There must be a lot of money

involved in dog fighting, I thought at the time. One afternoon, while the rest of my roommates were at work and I sat at home gainfully unemployed, I stepped outside to smoke and get some fresh air for the first time that day. It wasn't long before a Cadillac I could only describe as blood cherry red pulled down the street. Out the passenger door stepped a massive man whose bald head reflected the sun. His suit was checkered blue and white. He waltzed inside the house and a few moments later, I heard yelps, but of the human kind. Soon after that, the bald man stepped out again, smiling and rubbing his knuckles. He told me to put that nasty ass cigarette out and I told him to fuck off. That got us to talking, and a few days later I was moving out of that house and into my own. When I talked to my roommates again, they told me it'd been broken into and all their stuff had been stolen, though they had nothing of real value anyway. Memories.

“Hey,” Ryan said, interrupting my reverie. “I hate to keep bringing this up, but is Bruegel involved in the towing industry at all? I've heard some things.”

“Christ, man, you don't quit.” I shifted the car back into drive and rolled out, trying to decide if I kept wanting to drive through the outskirts of the city or back into the heart of it, though for Detroit the two worlds were one in the same. “What have you heard?”

“Oh, just backdoor stuff. Like the tow companies have contracts with certain businesses and some cars get illegally towed for kickbacks and that.”

“I mean, I can't really say, obviously, but I can tell you that Bruegel's involvement in that sort of stuff is fairly minimal. Maybe back when he was younger, he got more into it, but really that's small potatoes. He'd only been taking a kickback off a kickback, and the numbers simply aren't big enough. Not enough drivers in Detroit. When the suburbs people come down, they

park at the pay lots that charge forty or fifty bucks or whatever. Now that, Bruegel is involved in. But that's all legal."

"What about the land deals to get the lots in the first place?"

"Land deals? I don't fucking know, man. Do I look like a speculator?" I gave Ryan the finger, but in my head, I was thinking of Nat Hardon. He offered me a deal on land.

"What about the sports stadiums? Is he involved in that? I heard there was some shady shit going on with the new hockey arena. Tax breaks, contracts that went through. Dark money moving about."

"I don't fucking know, man, do you want to interview him? You're starting to piss me off. You do realize what I do for the guy, right? I make collections. I'm not his little minion, I'm not shaking people down. I'm the friendly neighborhood face."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to. I've just been cooped up with these questions, you know. I haven't talked to anyone in what feels like months."

"How long has it been actually?"

"Oh, not that long. I've been texting people. Girls, mostly."

"Yeah? You getting any?"

"Sadly, no. Some pictures, but nothing real."

"I hear you, man. I've had a dry spell, too. Actually, no, that's not true. I got laid a few weeks ago."

“I know her?”

“No. I hardly know her. It was weird.” I told Ryan about Midori, including the weird affair that had happened afterward, and how I hadn’t seen or heard from her since.

“Damn, man. That’s strange. How do you feel about it?”

“Equally strange. I don’t know.”

“Do you think her boss told her to fuck you?”

“What?”

“Just asking questions.”

“Get outta here. Maybe you should try sticking your dick somewhere, see how you like it.”

“Maybe one day.”

I had decided on further outskirts. I took Van Dyke over to Mt Eliot, then I’d take that over to Gratiot. The rain was really starting to pour now. Wipers were on full blast. The trouble with driving in the rain was that you could never tell if a puddle was just a puddle or obscuring a car swallowing pothole. So, though the roads were all but empty, I drove extra slowly. We passed the Heidelberg Project, an art installation where some dude decorated each abandoned house to a different theme. There was the Motown house, covered in records, the dot house, covered in dots, and the disturbing stuffed animal house, which had stapled teddy bears and rabbits all over it that bore the worst brunt of weather and looked haunted. It was a tourist trap, mostly. In the recent year, some houses had burned down, leading to accusations of arson.

“You got something to ask me about that?” I asked Ryan.

“Nah. Simple insurance fraud, as I see it. I heard the dude that did the whole thing is a scumbag. As most artists are.”

“Yeah, no kidding. It’s not really my side of the business, but Bruegel is involved in some of that shit.” I took a turn and led us back out to the main drag of Gratiot, back into Eastern Market. The sky was getting quite dark now, as if a real storm was coming in. “It’s ingenious what he does, really. He’ll find an artist that’s selling low, just starting off, you know, then he’ll buy up all their shit. Then, he uses his connections to get em in a few prestige galleries, pull his strings in New York and LA and get em placed in art mags, find someone to do a write-up about em. Price is inflated, then. Maybe artificially, maybe not, it depends how you look at it, it meaning the art world in general. But once the stock is right, he’ll sell his early pieces and make a tidy sum. Wash, rinse, and repeat. As for what happens to the artists afterward, well, the machine is already in motion. They end up doing fine. Or crashing and burning.”

“Yeah, it’s all bullshit, man.”

“Oh, it certainly is. But it’s not criminal. I mean, Bruegel happens to be a criminal, but wall street guys do it all the time. Art’s a great place to store money.”

“Why don’t you have any?”

“Can’t afford the buy-in. Plus, I think it’s gay.”

We laughed. For a period, it was the ultimate taboo to say ‘gay’ in the pejorative. People wouldn’t even say it in the privacy of friends. Everyone, no matter what stripe, wanted to be seen

as the ultimate progressive. Then, after a few years had passed, it was safe again to say in close quarters, even if it was only ironically, and people said it precisely because they knew it was the wrong thing to say. Eventually, it was common coinage once again, along with the word ‘retarded.’ Most things in the world, it seemed, could only be summed up with two words: gay and retarded.

I drove down to the oldest cemetery in Detroit. It was where the old money was buried. Big plots, mausoleums, landscaped hills and rivers, old oak trees. It was a nice place to be at any time, but in the rain, it was quite idyllic.

“Bruegel’s got a plot set out here, you know. For when he dies. Had to jump through quite a few hoops to get one, too.”

“Money and influence don’t always equal power.”

“No, I suppose not. But never underestimate the work of good old fashioned American elbow grease.”

I drove even slower through the cemetery than I did the streets surrounding. Thunder rattled the sky, as did lightning. The trees whipped in the wind.

“You ever take girls here?”

“Yeah, have you?”

“Of course. Morbid. Quiet. Beautiful. It’s the perfect place to make them believe you’re the brooding, thinking type.”

“Now that I actually am that guy,” Ryan said, “I’ve found the pussy doesn’t flow as freely as when you’re actually living that life instead of pantomiming it.”

“No kidding. Maybe you should lay off the reading, man.”

“I can’t. Once you’re in it, you can’t stop. I’m sure you know that.”

“Don’t I ever.” I parked the car. “If I had umbrellas, we could stand outside and smoke another. Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay. Is there a reason you took me here?”

“No,” I said, pausing afterward. “No, I don’t think so.”

Across the street, and across another, less prestigious cemetery, was a church. Monastery, actually. Our Lady of Ransom. One of the oldest in Detroit, if not the oldest, and the home to the tomb of a soon-to-be saint. I kept up on it whenever I remembered to read the Catholic news and had gone there to confession a few times.

“You know,” I said to Ryan, pointing to the spire of the monastery, “there’s a guy there that Bruegel sells reproductions to. Originals, sometimes. It’s pretty amazing at how far his range his when it comes to making money.”

“Reproductions of what?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Old bible shit. Woodcuts. Theological texts. I drop em off sometimes. He’s quite a talker. Old guy.”

“He cool?”

“Yeah, he’s interesting. He told me this weird story once that I actually recorded. I could probably give it to you, if you wanted it.”

“Why’d you record it?”

“Ha. Well, believe it or not, I used to see my job as a means to an end. I thought maybe I’d write a book one day. About all the crazy shit I got up to, here. I think that’s everyone’s dream, at a certain point, isn’t it? Write a book? Anyone can do it.”

Ryan didn’t say anything. He seemed offended.

“Of course, there’s a difference between doing something and doing it well,” I said. “I gave it up in the end.”

“I have the same thoughts myself, sometimes.”

“Nah, man. You got it in you. Sounds like you have a good thing going. Keep at it.”

“Thank you.” Pause. “Hey. Do you think Bruegel would want to check out what I wrote? If I went through with what I’m thinking? This conspiracy stuff? Would he want his name taken out or anything like that?”

“Of course. What are you, nuts? He’s bankrolling your entire project, dude. Yeah, he’ll want to look at it.”

Ryan thumped my window with his fist. “Fucking bullshit. Why wouldn’t it be.”

“Don’t be so sure, hombre. He might want to leave his name in there. Hell, he might tell you some stuff that’s not in there. There’s strategic element to that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I mean, sometimes it’s good to have your name out there a little bit. Let people know what you’re capable of. I don’t think Bruegel would be diametrically opposed. Most of those rumors are already out there, anyway. The only thing you would need to watch out for is, in the even you actually wrote a book, how Bruegel would try to market it. That’s one thing he might be in complete control of. If he wants to sell it as some sleazy, underground expose, then the only people who would buy into it are the people who are predisposed to do so anyway, do you see what I’m saying? You wouldn’t turn any heads. But, that said, the information would still be out there in some form. So, the question you have to ask yourself is if that’s a bargain worth haggling over. How much integrity do you want to sacrifice in service of the truth? And, just for the record, that’s your truth we’re talking about here. Not the undisputed sort.”

Ryan blew air out through his lips. “God, man. I don’t fucking know. I haven’t even written a word down yet. Fuck.” He lit a cigarette. I was out, so I bummed one of him. We sat there in silence for a while, just listening to the rain hit my car. The storm showed no signs of letting up. “You know,” he continued, “this is so overwhelming sometimes, I think about just giving up. Take the money Bruegel gave me and just give it all back. Say it’s over. Work out a deal on the interest. I still have most of the principal, you know. Practically all of it.”

This was good to know, and I made a mental note of it for later. Bruegel would be pleased to know his money was in safe keeping. “Don’t say that, man. Come on. Bruegel gave you a fucking sweetheart deal with the payments. You’d be stupid to give it up before the summer was over. You’re not losing money.”

“Money’s besides the point now, man. I feel like I’m at the edge of something, you know? Like, I can either dive all the way in or back out now. But I can’t keep hanging out on the edge for much longer.”

“You thinking maybe six feet isn’t so far down?”

“What?”

“Nothing. Old Creed song. Stupid joke.”

“Oh, shit, yeah, I remember that.”

“Yeah. Used to listen to it in 6<sup>th</sup> grade on the bus. Thinking about killing myself because the hot lunch didn’t have pizza that day.”

“Stupid.”

“I know. Anyway, just dive the fuck in, man. Fuck it. That’s what I did.”

“How’d that work out for you?”

“Remains to be seen.” I pulled out of the cemetery and drove around to the monastery.

“You ever been in this place?”

“Hell no.”

“That’s a shame. It’s pretty nice. Good place to pray.”

“Pray?”

“You heard me, motherfucker.”

“You believe in God now?”

“Sure do, friend. Sure do.”

“Fucking wild. You’ve changed a lot.”

“Have I, though?”

“How’s that jive with the shit you’re doing? Crimes and God and all that?”

“I’m not sure it does jive, to be honest with you. But it’s not so much a choice for me as it is an acknowledgement of facts.”

“Whatever.”

“Yeah, that’s how I feel sometimes about it, too.”

We drove back to his apartment. It was getting late and dark. The clouds were so heavy and black that I wanted to be inside and watch TV, just to forget about things for a while. When I was almost there, though, Ryan asked if we could go to my place, instead.

“I can pick us up a pack of High Lifes. A pizza, too, if you’re hungry.” He said he’d been so lonely cooped up in his place that he could use a night out, even if it was just replacing one apartment with another.

“Sure,” I said. “But I haven’t cleaned up in a while. So, don’t expect much.”

While I wasn’t lying, there wasn’t much to clean up. My apartment was a slightly upgraded version of Ryan’s. I had a bed frame, though the bed wasn’t made. Kitchen table with matching chairs. New bookcase. Leather couch and TV. It was spartan, but not in a put-upon

way, like I'd seen how hitman lived in movies, but just in a way that fit my natural lifestyle. I didn't buy much. I didn't collect art, I had no hobbies or interests outside of the norm. I was a normal guy with a vacuous exterior life, which I suppose was rarer these days than the antipodal.

Ryan made good on his promise of beer and pizza. There was a liquor store across the street from my place, and we could run there with our jackets pulled over our head in place of umbrellas. I was on good terms with the dude who usually worked the night shift, a Russian kid named Ivan who was saving up some cash to bring his mother back to America one day, so we chatted for a while as we waited for the pizza order we called in to finish rolling through the convection oven. He and Ryan had never met before, so I introduced them. Ivan was a talkative guy with a strong passion for film which Ryan nominally shared, so the conversation got on well. We mainly talked about the movie *Stalker*, which had developed a niche reputation as an essential art film in certain circles in America, including the ones Ryan and I travelled it. It was a perfectly good and common choice to state as your favorite movie if you wanted to project a mysterious, brooding image, which is typically what one wanted to project to strangers, man and woman alike. To Ivan, however, it was simply a film that was always on the television growing up, much in the same way *Gone with the Wind* was always on the TV for us. We talked about how weird this was for a while, how the perception of something will, in effect, change the content of it (without using those words, of course), then went to pick up the pizza. The rain still came, and by now the streets were flooding. We had to stand to the side, backs pressed up against building, when the busses rolled by, as they washed up massive tsunami waves when they passed. We were so wet that we didn't bother lifting our jacket collars over our heads anymore, though the water damaged the cardboard case that carried the High Lifes, so Ryan had to hold it

like a baby. The pizza place forgot our ranch, so we needed to ask for an extra cup or two. The ranch at this pizza place, Jet's, was really world class, so it was worth it. We had ordered a cheese pizza with jalapenos. Canned jalapenos were truly the best pizza topping to have. Much better than the fresh variety. They were so salty and vinegary with just the right amount of heat. I didn't get pizza much anymore, especially from Jet's, because the way they cooked it with the crust packed to the edge of a greased pan, Detroit style, was a nightmare for my colon. That plus the beer meant tomorrow morning would be a nightmare. But sometimes the risk (not risk, there was no doubt I'd spend the better part of the next morning on the toilet) was worth it. We ran home so the pizza didn't get wet through the cardboard box. By the time we got to the apartment, we were soaking wet, so we took off all our clothes save the underwear, then sat on my couch and drank the beer and ate pizza, periodically removing our backs to unstick them from the leather.

“Didn't you want to show me some documents back at your place? Some conspiracy shit with my boss?”

“Oh, yeah,” Ryan said, grabbing the last piece of pizza and wiping it around the plastic cup of ranch, trying to savor any last drop. “They're not going anywhere. Unless they kill me. Didn't you have something to show me? Some old guy?”

“Yeah, man, check this shit out,” I got up from the couch and started digging through a drawer in my desk. “I recorded it. This guy is nuts. So, I asked him one day, maybe the third drop-off I did, why he got these things from Bruegel, and I asked him if I could record him, too, so I'm pretty sure it's legal if you wanted to use it. You should have seen this guy, man. He was

like straight out of a movie. Big, bushy mustache. Hair that was balding at just the right line.

Here.”

I played the recording for Ryan.

“These are for my research”, the man, whose name was Gregor Abdleman began, referring to the woodcuts I had just dropped off. “I used to buy them online, but I received too many fakes to maintain trust in the process—people can age paper, you see, they can even burn it to mimic fire damage, and when you realize that, you can’t trust the content of the page, even if the information is true, there is always the seed of doubt that it’s not, and once that seed exists, no research can take place, no true, research, at least. You see, I’ve been looking into French witchcraft. More specifically, the punishment of French witchcraft. There are intersections between who was punished and with race and gender and class and the sort, as I’m sure you can imagine, but that isn’t what I’m interested in, at least not nominally. For one, those of a different race or gender or class or any other marker of identity have been punished and killed since the beginning of time, as they will until the end of the time—the middle ages were no different, and to pretend as such, to pretend that the witch purges were an anomaly, a marker of things to come, would be disingenuous, it would be akin to blaming a single soldier in a war; this is to say that the purges were horrific, undoubtedly, but they must be contextualized in a monolithic, unending horror. For another, and this is really just an extension on the first point, I have nothing new to say on the matter, matters of race or gender or class. If you can’t see the way the wheel has been turning, the shadow of the blade, then who am I to convince you? No, instead, I’m interested in the minutia of witch torture, the devices used, how they were developed, the torture methods that didn’t quite make the cut. This is interesting to me for primarily one reason: the distribution of knowledge. That’s the direction my research has taken in recent years—and when I say research, I should qualify, I purely mean leisurely research. I have no position anymore, I have no plans to publish, this is simply how I spend my time between other, equally ephemeral hours, reading

about the church schisms, the city salt mines, the breviary, the riots. I ask: how many people could read back then? How many could write? How many knew the laws of physics, the mathematics, the limits of the body? Not many. Very few, in fact, especially when compared to today, when much of that knowledge is taken for granted—by the time you're an adult, you're a comparative expert when stood next to a serf or peasant or even a lower scribe. So, then, with this in mind, think of how much of that knowledge was distributed to torture. How many man hours, how much creative power, how much human genius was spent on torturing another? Is it the same case today? With our guns and our bombs and our gasses and our austerity and our chemicals in our food? Or are we doing enough which can be considered objectively good to balance the scales, so to speak? That's what I'm pursuing. That question. Why France, you might ask. Well, my father was German, as am I, as I'm sure you've guessed by now. I would call myself Bavarian, for that's where I grew up, a small village on the border of Austria, but for an American, I am German. We were lucky to escape the material horrors of the war, but not the ideological ones. My parents were committed to the cause, even my mother, who had family in France, celebrated in the streets of Munich when Hitler stormed Paris—I was there, too, too young to know much of anything, simply waving a flag that had been placed in my hand, a torture device all on its own, but especially so with the vibrant red white and black of the party. It was my mother's family, in fact, that got me interested in the country to begin with. When the Nazis bombed the Parisian suburbs, just short of 300 people died. As it happens, in one of the morbid jokes of history, which has a sense of gallows humor that matches none other, my mother's entire family was swallowed by that small number—all of them died that night. Were they clumped together because they were celebrating? Or because they were mourning? Or

because they merely lived together? I'll never know. And neither will my mother, who had become estranged from her family years before, when she traveled to Germany on account of a flimsy marriage proposal from my father, who had wooed her during the previous war years before, and who had also been celebrating in the streets of Munich unaware her entire family, at that moment, was dead and buried in rubble, their corpses waiting for rescue and proper burial. It wasn't until after the war that we found out what had happened to them, just as it wasn't until after the war my father and mother, waking up from the cold shower of defeat, eyes widened at their fever and hysteria, decided to move to America, perhaps as a way of cleansing their sins, so to speak, the ultimate act of capitulation to the former enemy, an act of repentance if there ever was one, and we ended up here, in Detroit, perhaps an unconscious or even unconscious apology on my mother's behalf to her family in France—the names of the French are everywhere in this city, and my mother couldn't go a day without being reminded, even in a small way, of her family whose deaths she had inadvertently cheered. So, my father took up work at a furniture factory, my mother stayed at home. Things continued in this way for the rest of my life, even as I went off to university and even as my father lost his job and even as my mother died—life continued, in other words. I own their house now, you see. It went into foreclosure after my father's pension ran dry and I was able to buy it for pennies on the dollar. With not much else to do, I moved in, and my father, in turn, became by guest. I was now the one who paid the bills and stocked the fridge. He died in his sleep one night, and just like that, I was alone. Before he died, however, when his illness was still in the state of decline and had not arrived at its terminus, I started coming here, to Our Lady of Ransom. At first, I went under intellectual pretenses, I wanted to study the architecture of the monastery and to see for myself how the

spiritual health fared under our current cultural climate. However, I soon realized that I was actually there for an ulterior motive that I had not wanted to admit: I wanted to pray to Brother Chateaubriand, I wanted to ask his help in healing my father. I don't normally put stock in miracles and the like, but I was at my wit's end, and I kneeled down on my younger knees and asked Brother Chateaubriand to help my father, and, if not that, help him find peace. Whether this helped my father or not is another gap in my own personal knowledge (how is that we can have such large gaps in what we know about those we love, yet we have the ability to pool our resources and create torture devices, or to hold the shared belief that together, as humans, we will figure all of this out?), for by that time he had lost the ability to speak and essentially was unable to communicate; however, it did make me feel better, which is why I continued to come, and I eventually developed a relationship among the Brothers—many of them attended my father's funeral, despite the fact they never met the man, and couldn't speak to his virtues or his vices or even his sins, if holding a belief without acting on it is a sin at all, which I believe it is, for the record, but one I have abided in my father nonetheless. One day, one of them asked if I ever considered joining the monastery and becoming a priest. I had to decline. They pressed me further, so I was forced to explain: when I was younger and still in university, I considered dropping out and enrolling in the seminary. After much thought I decided against it for one reason only—I wanted to love. Or, to be frank, I wanted to have sex. So I did. With a few women. None of whom I loved, none of whom I married. When the Brother asked me, I was well past my prime, so to speak, and my love making days were behind me. Still, I declined, because the desire was still there, and in that desire I held a perhaps delusional belief that one day it still might happen to me, and, even if it didn't (which it hasn't), having that avenue closed to me

forever would be a torture I couldn't bear. This, too, is of interest to me and my research: the sacrifices we make for the littlest things, even the things that don't exist, and how desires which leave not even the slightest stain on the tapestry of history have enough power to cleave our individual lives in two, to keep us on the rack for as long as we live."

The next day, Bruegel arranged a meeting for the two of us at his place in Lafayette Park. It'd been set-up more than a week in advance, but in the days preceding, he texted me incessantly, asking if I'd come, almost as if he were my Dad. It was getting annoying, to tell the truth. First, it was set for 3pm, then 2, until, in the end, it was moved forward to noon.

It was hot when I arrived, and the air conditioning in my car had stopped working, so I drove the entire way there with the windows rolled down. The wind whipped my clothes. I'd been trying out a new style that summer—wife beaters underneath unbuttoned short-sleeved shirts. It looked pretty good, I had to admit, though if I'd kept eating and drinking the way I had, I'd develop a pouch that would render it ineffective.

Bruegel's anxiety must have rubbed off on me, so before I walked in, I smoked a cigarette outside his condo in the same spot I had a few nights prior. The sun beat down on me and I soon started sweating. The hair cream I'd put on that morning melted, and my hair fell flat. Little translucent spots appeared on my wife beater. My pants felt wet and uncomfortable. The smoke was making me upset to my stomach. The beer and pizza were finally coming back to haunt me, and my gut rumbled. As opposed to the other night, Lafayette Park was crowded in the afternoon. Families played on the green spaces between the condos. There were old jungle gyms the kids climbed on, though they seemed built more for design than function, in that they looked nice but didn't seem too fun. Others were inside their condos, eating lunch at their tables or reading, sprawled out on fancy armchairs that cost thousands of dollars. It must have been a weekend. I hadn't checked the calendar in quite some time, I was just going by what I remembered in my head. I hoped I didn't forget any major dates.

I tossed the cigarette into the can, where it joined its lonely brother. No one else had been there so smoke except me. One of the parents watching his kid play at the playground made a big show of coughing and waving his hand in front of his face, though he was a good fifty yards away from me. I wasn't bothered by the action as much as I was annoyed that people like him existed, though he was undoubtedly in the right. I shouldn't have been smoking in public places.

I noticed his son was black. The father was white, both in appearance and attitude, meaning he dressed like a catalog model. He wore clear framed glasses. It wasn't possible the child was his, the skin tones were too different. The child must have either been adopted, or his wife's (who remained to be seen) through a previous relationship, but I would place my bets on adoption. I assumed the child came from Africa, maybe some place like Kenya or Ethiopia. This made me feel for the guy, despite my initial annoyance. Both him and his son would have a tough go at it in life. For a time, adopting a child from another country was seen as the right thing to do. You were lifting them out of poverty, introducing them to the splendors of America. Then, somewhere along the line, things changed. It became suspicious, and for different reasons, too. There was the crowd that raised eyebrows at the racial mixing—how could a white man teach a child to be black in America? And then there was the crowd that drew question to the whole aspect of international adoption altogether: where were the children coming from? Where was the money going? Was there trafficking involved? All valid questions, as far as I was concerned, but questions that likely had no bearing to the man's decision to adopt the child. Yet, he would have to live his entire life underneath them, when all he wanted to do (hopefully all he

wanted to do), was love his adopted black son as if he were his own. The situation was grotesque, and I pitied him.

Bruegel's door was unlocked, so I let myself in. All his shades on the inside were drawn all the way down, as he was wont to do. His condo here wasn't befitting of him, to tell the truth, so I understood why. Whereas his other houses reflected a man of certain taste—his home in Grosse Pointe had oak paneled walls and professionally upholstered furniture with liquor kept in fine-cut crystal glasses, his penthouse in Ferndale was sleek and minimal with leather and chrome, his lake house up north appropriately rustic and outfitted—his condo in Lafayette Park was like a movie set bachelor pad and criminal hideaway. The ground floor was made up to be a sleazy lounge—the nicest thing there was the stereo, but even that was a pastiche of the swinging sixties with dark brown wood and canvas covered speakers. The light fixtures were bulbar and out of fashion in the worst way. In the kitchen, most of the space was taken up by a large muscle car hood that hung on the wall, outfitted with a portrait of Bettie Page. The liquor here was kept in the standard bottle, and instead of being secured inside a bar cabinet, it was left out on the counter.

The basement was done up like a bootleg strip club. Purple neon lighting everywhere, a full bar, booths with boudoir fixings, a few lonely poles. It was where he held his private get togethers, with other horny old men like himself. The girls were imported from the high-class strip clubs, the ones I didn't collect from, and were essentially escorts. Well-paid, but escorts, nonetheless. I'm fairly certain Bruegel had cameras down here, though I'd never seen them. I

knew there were rooms in his condo I had never stepped foot in, and I knew he had an IT guy come over once a week to check things out. It was easy to put two and two together.

Far more interesting was the top floor of his house (the one, as he called it, ‘for the gangstas.’ The basement, on the other hand, was ‘for the playas.’ He always said this with a smirk, as if half-ironic and half-not). Up there, wall to wall was covered with guns. Machine guns high-tech and from the Russo wars. Rifles, pistols, shotguns, ARs, revolvers. You name it. They were set up on display wall mounts with backlighting and little name placards, a veritable museum. All of them were replicas. Bruegel refused to keep real guns on him. Outside of the obvious legal issues involved (none of which he would ever have a problem with, assuredly; the police were greased to their gills by him, which, as he told me once, was one of the primary reasons he stayed in Detroit; it was big enough to make some money, but not big enough that anyone bothers you doing it), he’s said, rightfully, that a gun is only used to escalate a situation beyond the point you wish it to reach. In other words, the threat of a gun should be enough. If you need to prove it beyond that, it’s not worth it. It’s better to walk away. And in the event, you needed a gun to save your own life, well, those were the breaks. He’d been preparing for that moment since the day he was born, Bruegel told me. If you were smart enough, you would never encounter it. So, this is why he kept replica guns only. To scare people off. A bark, not a bite. It’s worked in his favor so far. As for myself, I haven’t contemplated the threat of death to the extent Bruegel had. I figured one day I would. Until then, I’d try to stay alive like everyone else.

The gun room was where I found him. Not the gun room exactly, but in a small office behind a hidden wall he used as a smoking room. It was open when I came up the stairs, and the

smoke drifted out and floated around the floor, contaminating the replicas. He must have been in a sour mood to not take the care he normally did.

“You wanted to see me, Bruegel?”

“Yeah,” he said, looking up from a stack of files. “Yeah. Come on. Sit down. You want a drink?”

It wasn't like him to offer me anything, so I accepted only gingerly. Before I had any second thoughts about his generosity, however, he motioned to me that I should make it myself, so I made myself a whiskey soda, being careful not to pour myself too much. “A cigar would be good with this,” I said.

“Yeah, I bet it would, fucker.” He took a big puff of his, sucking his cheeks in, and blowing it out too quickly. He coughed. He was getting old, I could see, and was losing weight at a rapid clip. When we first met, he looked like one of those Russian peasants you'd see online. Big and bulky, all the stronger for his age. Now he was frail. The suits he wore (always seersucker, always pastel), hung off his body, as did his skin. His bald head, which was normally polished and bright, had a liver spot. His attitude, however, remained as sharp as ever, as if his brain siphoned off energy from his body.

“Right,” I said. “Of course. So, what's up?”

“It's about that fucking rape thing the other night. Fucking animals. You hear anything from your little friend when you were hanging out with him? Any juicy tidbits?”

“I'm afraid not.”

“Too busy sucking cock, I’m sure. Well, it’s not good news. The long and short of it is it ties back to Hardon, that lanky glass of water from the city building, you know him, right?”

“Yeah, he’s been on my collects list for a few months, now.”

“Oh? I thought he was one of Greyer’s,” he said, referring to a fellow goon.

“No, he’s mine. We talked about him on the phone a few days ago.”

“You bet your fucking ass we did. I was testing you. Faggot.”

“Of course.”

“Anyway, when he asked you for an advance, it turns out he owed money to the wrong people. Some side deal or some shit, I don’t know. It was the Mexicans. When he didn’t pay up, they decided to send a message, so they set out to rape his daughter, that’s what the case in Hamtramck was all about. Problem is, they got the wrong girl. Group of girls, actually. How, I have no idea. The girls were white, and that Hardon is blacker than panther’s asshole. The only thing they were right on were the connections. One of them was the daughter of Gilbert,” said Bruegel, now referring to the Detroit land baron, the man who owned not only the biggest employer of the city, a mortgage company, but also the real estate company that was buying land for pennies; he was viewed as either the savior of the city, or the one who would financialize it to death. In my view, if it weren’t him, it’d be someone else. He was simply fulfilling a function.

“However,” Bruegel continued, “I’ve heard through the backchannel that Hardon is dead fucking set on keeping the case clamped down, in that he doesn’t want the guys to be caught. Doesn’t want them to squeal and get turned into little chorizo links. Meanwhile, he’s been riding

my fucking ass. Saying ‘you white motherfucker, you didn’t give me the money I asked for, all I done for you,’ blah blah. Same thing they all say. So, this fuckhead is trying to place the blame on me. And, what’s more, he’s trying to do it before the other guys get caught. Gilbert is trying to his hardest to make sure it happens expediently, too. Wants to be the good avenging father for his daughter who was whoring around in the first place.”

“Wow,” I said.

“No kidding. It’s got all the right moving parts. You might want to sell it your friend. Has the good trappings of a mystery.”

“Where do I come in?”

“Shut the fuck up and I’ll tell you. There’s another problem. In a perfect world, I’d give up the Mexicans to Gilbert, sell both them and Hardon out, and get a monkey off my back immediately. In more ways than one, if you catch my drift.”

“Yeah, sure. So?”

“This is above your paygrade, so plug your ears while I tell you. For one, Hardon thinks he’s got a big dick all of the sudden. He’s so in deep with the city, he thinks he’s got immunity, like if he disappears people will notice. Sorry, it’s a joke so funny I forgot to fucking laugh. Like the limp little secretary to the treasury will cause the next march on Selma. Give me a fucking break. The blacks are too doped up to give a shit, and the whites couldn’t tell him apart from Tiger Woods. But. But! I am not one to act irrationally, so I’m trying to sus that out first. I might need you help in that. On the other hand, I have a little something going on with the Mexicans.

Territorial disputes. I'm stepping in with a helping hand, the great benefactor." His lips spread to a wide, wet smile. Teeth white as ever. He did care about hygiene. "So, I can't take care of that, either. You may also need to help. I'm caught between a rock and a hard place, you see. I wouldn't normally mind, but for once the hard place isn't my dick. My hands are tied. And not in the sexy way."

This is typically how he communicated, so I wasn't taken aback. It was merely a matter of waiting out his flights of fancy and sifting through until you found the real information. Sometimes, however, he needed a little pushing: "What can I do? I'm here."

"And if you weren't, you'd be dead. Remember that. What I'm about to say to you might sound crazy. And it probably should. Maybe I'm losing my fucking marbles. Maybe I'm going crazy from the pussy. You should have seen these girls we had over here the other night, man. It'd put those dumpy ones you've been talking to at the beach to shame."

"Girls at the beach?"

"Yeah, you think I don't know about that? You're on my dime, motherfucker. You bet your ass I'm making sure I'm getting value."

"We never agreed to that."

"I've been doing it since you started. On and off. It's typically stuff. You want to revise your contract? Get the fuck out. Standard business. Suck my cock."

"It wasn't the relationship I thought we had, that's all I'm saying."

“Well, you thought wrong. It’s the relationship we’ve had all along. If you don’t like it, you can find another job. Kroger is always hiring. But that’s not even my point. What I was saying is that you take your little friend, and you put information in his ear. You say, ‘Hey, lover, why don’t you sniff around city hall, I heard there’s some dirt on this Nat Hardon guy.’ Now, it’s just a wild guess, but I’d wager this friend of yours isn’t the most seasoned reporter. He’d be sloppy. Nat would get word, panic, then get distracted. When people get distracted is where they fuck up. It creates an opening, either for us or for the more proper authorities. That’s not all, though. I’m taking a two pronged approach. While the little boy is poking around the hallowed halls, I want you to go over to the Mexicans. I can give you a front, have you start running collections there. Now, you may be a little thin-prick pillow biter, but you’re a people pleaser, too. I can see that. I want you to start asking questions, get in good with the spics. Find out who did the rapes. Right now, they’re being protective of their own, which they have every right to do. But if we come at them with names, real, actual names, be they Jesus Hernandez or Carlos Lopez or any of their other mariachi cousins, then they’d be forced to show their hand. We could get them to give them up as patsies. Sweep the whole ordeal under the rug. Ideally, both you and little George Plimpton would coalesce, which would give us some real firing power. But I’ll take what I can get at this point.”

“What about my regular collections?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize that was your money. Shut the fuck up. I’ll have someone else take care of it. Who’s that new kid. Snyerscki. We’ll see how he works out. You can parlay and give him what he needs to know.”

“Alright,” I said. I stood up to pour myself another. My legs were shaking. A new responsibility was placed on me. “I can handle it.”

“Are you sure, baby? Because if you’re not, I can see if someone else can. Maybe you can even split their pay.”

“Yeah, I got it. I can do it.”

“Get me another one of those while you’re at it, will you?”

I poured Bruegel another, a double shot. “So, should I start today?”

“Yeah, that’s why I called you over here early. There’s a restaurant I put a stake in recently. They’re supposed to give me something in good faith. Here.” He wrote the address down on a slip of paper. His stationary was grade-A, his pencil sharpened to the finest point. “It’s down in Mexicantown. They told me to send you in through the back.”

I took the slip of paper, folded it, and slipped it into my pocket. “Alright, that’s doable. And Ryan?”

“Well, here’s what I’m thinking there. Call him up and meet him off the clock. Make it look like a chat between fellows. Shouldn’t be hard for you. Tell him you heard something from me, maybe even play it up a little bit. Say I pissed you off, or you’ve been having second thoughts about the industry. Be vulnerable. I know half of that is probably true, anyway. I piss everyone off and everyone has second thoughts about the business. You’ll win an Oscar, easy. Then follow up as per usual.”

“Yeah, okay.” The drink was starting to get to me now. “Hey, is that why you loaned the cash out to Ryan in the first place? To use him as a source like this?”

“Source? What, am I in the fucking CIA? No, it was a happy accident. I was looking to expand my portfolio for a while, try to get into something the young kids are doing. Publishing was a natural choice for me. Turns out I have quite the nose, too. There’re a few kids trying to get into it. I gave out loans to all of them. I spread my chips. When one of the them succeeds, I’ll go all in. You like my gambling metaphors? One fucker looks like he stands a shot, too. Some rich little prick. Wants to do art books. I’ll see how he does. I’m trying not to get too involved, which is why I’m relying on natural talent. But when it happens, you couldn’t ask for a better tax write-off. Grants. Foundations. Oh, it’s a money pot. Publishers are expected to lose money, so no one will bat an eye. If it works out, I could clean cash through it, too.”

“I’m assuming the others don’t know you’re playing the field.”

“Hell no. I know they’re the sensitive types. I’ll let em fight it out on the marsh. It’ll work out. I’m not worried. What’s got you so fucking curious all the sudden?”

“Just listening to Ryan talk, I guess. He’s my friend, you know. He seems to care about this quite a bit.”

“I know, homo. I know. Don’t worry. Your little friend will be okay. Just talk to him when you can. Go to the Mexicans first, though. You hungry?”

I felt my stomach rumble. There was no chance Bruegel would let me use his bathroom.

“No, not yet. I’m not much a breakfast person.”

“Since when? Anyway, that’s too bad. You’ll need to order something there.”

“I thought you said go through the back?”

“I did. Order something anyway. It’s part of how they do business.”

“Alright.” I downed the last of the drink. I needed to get to a bathroom fast. “Anything else?”

“No. Well, maybe. Just personal. You like fucking that chick from the office?”

“Midori?”

“Yeah, the oriental. Don’t worry, wasn’t spying on you,” Bruegel said, waving his hands above his head like a monster. “Just something I heard. I hit that once or twice you know, back when my dick was something you could set you watch to.”

“Uh, yeah. It was nice.”

“Faggot. People like you don’t deserve pussy. That’s all. Get out of here. Close the door, too. Can’t believe you left it open.”

My next stop was Mexicantown, some shanty taco joint I never heard of with a name I’d never remember.

The address Bruegel gave me didn't match the building I arrived at. He had written at the top of the slip 'El Cabron,' but the sign on the building said 'El Toro,' with a tiny, neon bull in the window that was likely a piece of Chicago Bulls merchandise. They shared their parking lot with a hardware store, so it was filled with pickups and utility vans, most of them dirty and splattered with rust and paint, their beds full of supplies, but there were a few brand-new Ford F-150's, too, their owners dressed in cowboy hats, bespangled jeans, and clean pressed flannels with cowboy boots.

As I walked around to the back of the restaurant, near the dumpsters, I looked in through the tinted windows of the lobby. It was very empty inside, not even stranglers for take out waited around. I still hadn't shit, though the feeling had been coming off and on. The worst part about it was when the feeling came, it was more like a pressure that wrapped itself around my gut than it was a solid log that deposited itself in my colon. When it was time to use the bathroom, I knew, it would be long and painful. Intermittent and harsh. Whenever times like this came, as they did for all of us, we were more slaves to the body than the mind, as had happened with me earlier in the week, at the hotel. In this case, my body had called me to order twice in a short period of time. One could make the argument this was true all the time, of course, but it was typically left out of our stories and collective memories, like tales of war and corruption; there were typically thought to have been higher orders of humanity at play, such as bravery, honor, and greed. Not so, Bruegel once told me. In letters from battle, generals and filed soldiers most often complained about the banalities of fighting, such as the tiredness, fatigue, poor sleep, common colds, and bad food—these letters made up the bulk of the correspondence, though it was only the outliers that made it to the history books—tragic recollections of hometown friends splitting

into two from artillery shells, pining for sweethearts back state side. “Even in war,” Bruegel said, “highlights are the exception.” Likewise, when you hear of criminal organizations rising and falling, it’s often guttural instincts that drive the specifics of these movements, not calculation. “You’d be shocked at how many deals I’ve arranged because I had the foresight to order the good wine,” Bruegel has also said. This is why he was always replete with the finer things. He knew the power of an appetite. It was only the frequency of my bodily functions that made them stand out in my mind.

The smell of the grease dumpsters set my organs off again. I doubled up and stood my ground for a moment, waiting for the feeling to pass. I took a deep breath, then knocked on the dented steel door that led to the kitchen.

A dishwasher opened it for me, his apron wet. He had headphones on, so all we did was exchange a curt nod before he went back to the sink. There was a large stack of dishes beside him, though I couldn’t imagine where they had come from. No one else was there to meet me, so I stood around and waited some more, looking for a bathroom in case I absolutely needed it. The kitchen was small, however, and the only other door was for a walk-in cooler, outside of the flapping, saloon style doors that led to the dining room. There was a big box of poblano peppers on a stainless steel prep table. They looked to be ripe with no deformities, a deep dark green, like they were hiding secrets. Before I worked for Bruegel, I did some time in restaurants. Once, I had cut up a big batch of peppers just like those on the table, then went to the bathroom to take a piss. It didn’t hit me at first, but when I clocked out later, my penis burned like it was stung by a thousand ants. The rest of that night, I alternated between covering my dick in olive oil and milk,

trying to take the pain away. It was hard to remember this story whenever I saw poblano peppers, but they were still delicious, and I always craved their taste.

The cook came out of the cooler, almost smacking me with the door. He jumped back for a moment, and, instinctively, so did I. But the gears turned in his head, and he soon realized who he was, and why I had come. His arms were full of cheese and meat. On the shelf behind him were stacks of tortillas. He offered to take me to the dining room, saying next time I come, please use the front door.

I sat down in the empty restaurant, and a waitress dropped of a menu with a plastic red cup of lukewarm tap water, no ice and no straw. She looked young, probably in the early stages of high school, if not late junior high. This was common in family-run places, and even more so when they were immigrants. Most people were familiar with the Thai restaurants with back booths taken up by piles of homework. One of the strangest things was if you visited a place long enough, you'd inevitably see them grow up and into themselves. The girls would wear lipstick, the boys would spend their money on outrageous tennis shoes. Before long, they were adults, at least legally. I knew having their children work at the restaurant was a marriage of convenience, and even had whiffs of apprenticeship, but I always suspected there was shrewder business aspect to it, as well—what kind of psychopath would send food back if their waitress was a teenager? Though, now that I thought about it, food being sent back wasn't likely to leave a dent in the bottom line.

The menu she had handed me was filthy with salsa drippings and crumbs. I handled it by pinching between my thumb and forefinger. The menu was in Spanish, so I could only half-

decipher it. In the end, I decided on chile rellenos, a choice inspired by the poblanos I'd seen earlier. When the waitress came back to take my order, she didn't ask if I wanted meat or cheese or rice or beans or anything like that. I wasn't going to press her, as I wasn't that hungry in the first place, but I did wonder what I would get. Because of my stomach, both the meat and cheese options were dangerous for different reasons. It was only because of what Bruegel told me that I ordered anything at all, but after the mix-up of both the name and rear-entrance, I wondered if he had even gotten those facts correct.

Across the restaurant, in a separate dining area as empty as mine, I saw my waitress sit down with a pencil and notebook. Perhaps she was in summer school. Then, as if suddenly remembering, she stood up and fiddled with the screen on the electronic jukebox. Soon, Mexican music blasted through the restaurant. I liked the music, preferring it to the Cantonese pop you'd hear at Asian restaurants and the anonymous electronic music at the newer, hipper joints. With Mexican music, the production was modern and bombastic with horns and percussion, yet the vocals were always passionate and mournful. I could never understand what they were saying, but in my mind, they were always lamenting lost loves and decisions they had been forced to make, like killing a man. I tapped my toe to it as I waited for my food, trying to keep my mind occupied and off my stomach.

It wasn't the waitress who brought my food out, however, but the dishwasher. He set it down, left, and came back with an unwrapped fork and knife. I dug in. They'd given me both meat and cheese. Perhaps in another life, this would be a boon, but I dreaded each bite I took. Still, it was delicious. It came with rice and beans, too. A full meal. I ate it quickly.

When I was almost done, the other man I'd seen earlier joined me at the table. Under his arm, he carried an envelope, which he set on the tabletop only after careening his neck in a wide circle, despite the fact that we were the only ones there. I quickly took it and set it next to me.

"Thank you," I said. "Good food, too."

"You like that? We made it special for you. Normally the kitchen doesn't open for another hour or so."

"Oh. You didn't have to do that for me."

"Please, it's no problem. You're with Bruegel. We're friends, now."

"It was great, really. I'll have to come here again, maybe bring some friends."

"That would be wonderful, my friend. Truly wonderful." He smiled and leaned forward, a gesture that took me by surprise for how pathetic it was. "So, what can I do for you?"

"Well, I think that's it," I said, a bit confused. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"No, I don't think so. Bruegel said you wanted to talk?"

Of course, he did. "Oh, right." I took a sip of the water, which until then I'd left untouched, to buy time. "It's nothing, really. I was just curious about this place. How it came about. Did it change names?"

"No, it did not." He looked confused.

"Bruegel wrote down a different name on the slip he gave me, I was just wondering."

"What name was that?"

I searched my pockets, but I seemed to have misplaced the slip. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember.”

“I see.”

We came to an impasse. So far, I was failing. “When did you open?”

“Seven years ago, this month. No, eight.”

“It hasn’t always been easy, I’m sure.”

“No. Sometimes, it’s been hard.”

“That’s how life can be, right? Always a struggle.”

“Maybe sometimes, this is true.”

I took another sip of water. This was tough going. “What’s your name?”

“Javier Reyes.”

“Nice to meet you, Javier.”

“Same. I’m very grateful.” He didn’t ask me for my name. I noted that the most he’s said since we talked was mentioned the kitchen hours, likely a passive aggressive dig.

I told him that was all I wanted to know, and he looked relieved to leave. He took my empty cup of water with him along with the silverware but left the plate. I wasn’t sure if I were expected to pay or not, so I lingered to see if the waitress would come over. The next song that came out was a ballad. The dishwasher came out again and grabbed my plate. I motioned to him to remove his earphones, which he did only reluctantly. I asked him, in more or less words, if he

knew a place to buy weed. This was my standard technique when I wanted to get straight to the source. It wasn't illicit enough to rouse suspicion, as if I asked for coke or something, but it opened a bridge.

"No. Sorry." He left with my plate.

I went to flag down the waitress, but she was gone, her homework left on the table. None of this was working out the way I had hoped, and, as I suspected, my stomach flared up again. I needed use a bathroom soon but wanted to do so in the comfort of my own home. I was probably a twenty minute drive away. I tried to use the front door, but it was locked, and I wasn't sure how to unlock it, so I'd need to go out through the back.

When I went through the floppy, saloon style doors, I interrupted a conversation between Javier and the dishwasher. They both stopped what they were saying and looked at me. I said the front door was locked.

"That's no problem, friend," said Javier. "But I was talking things over with my associate, and I think there's been a mistake. Can I see the envelope you took from me earlier, please?"

Normally, I would say no, but there was nothing about the afternoon that had fit protocol, so I handed it over. He opened it and took out a folded stack of papers, which he then gave to the dishwasher before passing the envelope back to me.

"These weren't meant for Bruegel, my apologies. It's just been so hectic and busy around here lately. The money is still the same. And I won't charge you for the meal in exchange for the trouble."

“Yeah, I appreciate it.” A sharp jab in my stomach. “Do you have a bathroom here? That I can use?”

“I’m sorry friend, we don’t.”

“Fuck. Where do you guys go?”

“I’m sorry, sir, our bathroom is broken.”

“Horseshit, man. Come on. This is an emergency.” I had to tuck my butt forward.

“You can ask the hardware store, they might let you use the bathroom.”

“Holy shit.” My stomach made bubbling noises. “I’m going to take a shit on your floor if you don’t let me use the bathroom. Come on. Now. Fuck.”

The dishwasher led gave me a dirty look and led me back into the dining area. Behind the cash register was a small door he unlocked with a key attached to his belt, behind which was the bathroom.

I ran in and closed my eyes. My shit was more liquid than solid, and it exerted a pressure on my inside that made me pound the side of the wall. Relief came and went in waves. It was five minutes before I thought it was finally over and I could finally wipe my ass for damage control. The toilet paper was thick, double-ply. This must have been for members only. I used most of the roll.

That should have been enough to last me another hour. I could go home and finish there. I washed my hands at the sink and noticed the large utility cabinet behind me. Naturally, I was curious after Javier had been so secretive about the bathroom, so I opened it and soon saw why.

It was filled with condoms, needles, ammunition, plastic baggies of cocaine. Not large amounts of any, but enough for a party, that's for sure. Nothing surprising in and of itself, but it did make me question who exactly they thought I was, and how dirty Bruegel's operation could be. I laughed a little and closed the cabinet.

When I came out, the dishwasher was leaning against the wall. Had he been there the whole time? Listening to me shitting and moaning?

"You like what you see in there, you piece of shit," he said, before docking me in the stomach.

It was a swift punch, and I think it knocked a pocket of gas loose, for I ripped a huge fart as I staggered back.

Javier stepped up from around some corner. "We told you there was no bathroom, sir. You shouldn't have gone in there."

The dishwasher kned me in the crotch, then used both his fists to pound me on the back.

"What the fuck," I said, more surprised than hurt.

"We warned you, sir, now you must pay," said Javier. Then he spoke Spanish to the dishwasher.

He gave me a couple quick jabs to the torso, then threw a hook at my face. Of all his punches, that one hurt the most. It was the one that convinced me to put my arms up as he landed a few more on me. He was small guy, but wiry, his punches like rubber bullets. Behind Javier, I saw the teenage waitress run to the back.

I boxed the dishwasher's ears, nice and firm. He staggered, then hunched over. I readied myself and got ready to continue, though I had no desire to. I just wanted to leave.

Javier came around behind the counter, but before he got too far, I socked him in the gut. He doubled over, so I grabbed his head and kneed him between the eyes. It started bleeding and I tossed him to the side. The dishwasher came up and put his arms around my neck.

I wasn't a big guy, but I was still twice the size of the dishwasher, so I threw my weight backwards and tried smashing him against the counter. The harder I tried, the tighter he rung his forearms around my neck. In the meantime, Javier regained control and ran out of sight.

Eventually, the dishwasher loosened his arms. I broke away from him and stood there, facing him, both of us breathing heavy. Javier came out of the kitchen with a large knife. The waitress, who at this point I assumed was his daughter, followed him with a large cast iron frying pan, as if she had seen it in Andy Capp comics.

"You need to go," Javier said. "This ends right now."

I put my hands up and backed away. "Okay," I said. "I just can't leave through the front. It's locked."

Javier nodded to his presumed daughter, she went beyond the counter slowly, obviously afraid of me, and perhaps the dishwasher, too. She reached in a drawer, nervously, and took out a thin metal rod. She pushed that rod through a hole on the bottom of one of the door handles, unlocking it. I walked away facing Javier and everyone else, but when I got outside, I realized

I'd forgotten the money he was meant to give me inside. I left it in the bathroom, on a small side table with scented Lysol.

I decided to leave the money for now and went back to my car. Once I sat down, I felt my body ache. I lifted my shirt and saw bruises already forming on my skin. I called Bruegel but got no answer. I texted him our code for emergencies. I was hardly out of the parking lot when his response came:

“O.K. Busy call soon.”

So, that was that for now. I took the long way home and smoked half a pack, trying to relax. I hardly ever got into brawls like that. The few I had were of a lesser magnitude, more like glorified shoving matches. Part of working for Bruegel required basic self defense lessons, which he called his version of health insurance. I took only a few classes and years ago at that. All the skills I had learned I had just exhausted inside the Mexican restaurant.

It's hard, if not impossible, to know what to do with yourself after a fight, much like it is after a car accident, or death, or any piece of bad news, ranging from the mildly devastating to the catastrophic. All plans are off. The world needs to be reconfigured. The adrenaline I had clenched my anus tight like a clamp, so my immediate concerns were taken care of. I couldn't very well go grab a cup of coffee or go home and read a book. Driving around made me feel like a caged animal. The only thing to do was get drunk.

Going to any bar I normally went to didn't feel right. I wouldn't be able to hide the fact that I hadn't had what you would call a normal day so far, and I didn't feel like answering questions. Plus, I felt vulnerable. Despite what some might think, there are very few people on

earth who want to cause harm to others, at least directly with their bare hands. It tapped into a power you had that was best left untouched. Furthermore, no one liked to be hurt, unless you were a real pervert. It was hard not to think of my mom and dad. If, for example, you went back a quarter century or so and told them that their little boy who liked to run around the front lawn with the sprinkler on would one day piss off two Mexicans so badly that they would try to kill him, they would have been heartbroken. Of course, I also had conflicting emotions over the waitress, she had seen me give her a father a good one, after all, but these emotions were prosaic. Everyone agreed that children should be spared pain and suffering. With all this in mind, I wanted to go somewhere anonymous. My best bet was a casino bar.

It didn't take long for me to get properly drunk. I slammed back shots and washed them down with beer. As depressing as they were, casino bars had a certain charm to them. There were no pretenses. Everyone was there to get drunk, lose money, and be horny. The bars themselves didn't even try to be cool, instead schlocking it up to the fullest extent. Motor City Casino, the one I went to, really laid into the Detroit theme. Muscle cars, Motown records, guitars, factory parts. All reproductions lit in neon. The names of the cocktails were just as corny. It was so brazenly inauthentic, you had no choice but to find it honest. The lack of windows and clocks helped, too. Time dripped away.

My dad swore that the deli inside Motor City Casino had the best corned beef out of any in the city, even better than the Jewish delis up near Oak Park and Bloomfield. We went there together once, on one of our rare outings together. You ordered the sandwich from a digital kiosk, and you could use your casino card to pay. My dad treated me, and we sat in the food court area

that held the other casino restaurants, like the Chinese place, the Caribbean place, the Italian place, and the French patisserie, all of which shared the same kitchen and employees; I don't remember the names to any of the restaurants, but they were assuredly more uninspired than anything I could make up on the spot. The casino food court in the afternoon is a lonely place, and there's where my Dad and I sat as we ate our corned beef that came off a SISCO truck, salty and fluorescent red. Afterward, he asked me for my verdict. It wasn't bad, I told him, but it wasn't as good as other places, like Johnny's Hambone over in Eastern Market. Okay, he said, before saying I was full of shit. This brief interaction must have cut him deep to his core, for each time we saw each other afterward, even years later, he never failed to mention it, such as at family dinner, where he would say to my mom, 'Kyle knows a lot of places in Detroit. If you want to know the best place to get corned beef, ask him, because the places I know and love are chump change, apparently,' then he'd wink at me, but the whole interaction was draped in discomfort. After a few drinks at the bar, I wandered down to the food court to try the corned beef for a second time. I was feeling guilty and nostalgic. The deli, however, was closed. Replaced with a kebab place. The Chinese food was replaced with a Little Caesars. I ordered a slice for the outrageous price of five dollars and took an entire table to myself. My head ached, both from the fight and the alcohol, and my indigestion migrated north to my stomach. I felt like throwing up.

I got a text. I thought it would have been Bruegel, who still hasn't called me back, or perhaps Ryan, following up on our conversation from yesterday, but no. It was Justine. From the beach.

“Heyyy. Are we still going to hang out today?”

I hadn't realized she took me seriously when I said we should get together a week ago, which felt like an eternity. I could have easily ignored her. I had no skin in the game and would lose nothing if she felt burned by me, if ill-well developed between us. However, this was the single instance where I wouldn't mind answering questions. I could give her vague details about the sort of day I had, maybe play up some of my bruises. It would earn me sympathy and mystery, and there wasn't a better combination when you were feeling lonely and horny and ready to lose money, like I had in the casino. So, I replied yes, we are, and asked where we should meet.

We drove separate to the neighborhood she asked to meet. I must have drunk too much, for I was swerving more than I was comfortable with, but I wasn't worried about the police. Drunk driving was common in Detroit, especially so with my friends. Point of fact was you needed to drive everywhere. Few things were in walking distance. On top of that, there were little cops and the ones on patrol were hardly ever doing traffic. There was little risk of getting caught, and it felt pleasantly anarchic. The only thing you needed to watch out for, really, were the people who walked in the middle of the street instead of the sidewalk, which, in Detroit, were many. I drove with the windows down and the A/C turned all the way up to sober myself before arriving. I also stopped at a gas station to buy a cold bottle of water and a hot coffee. The coffee tasted like shit, it was full of grounds and made me gag. That must have been why the Arab behind the counter only changed me a quarter.

Justine was waiting in her car when I got there, music and windows up, engine idling, and she sat on her phone. When I knocked on the window, she practically jumped through the roof. She grabbed a small canister of pepper spray and turned to me, ready to strike, though there was still glass separating us.

She stepped out of the car. “Sorry,” she said. “I didn’t realize that was you.”

“It’s okay,” I said. I burped. “You nervous or something?”

“Around here? Fuck yes, I am, dude. This is where the murders happen,” said Justine, too loudly. I hated when girls called me dude. “And did you hear what happened the other night? At the Blowout?”

“No,” I lied. “What happened?”

“I don’t know if you know Carly, but one of her friends was walking out of Bumbo’s and were going over to the Pink Lady. They were walking down the street, all drunk or whatever, and on the way, a van pulled up and a men came out and grabbed them. They took them in the van then raped them.”

“Fucking Christ,” I said. “Do you know who it happened to?”

“No, only Carly knows them. But that’s not even the worst part. I mean, it is the worst part, but there’s more. Once they were done, the rapists branded them. With a hot iron. They marked them with a symbol.”

“Are you serious?”

“That’s what Carly said.”

“Wow. That’s intense.” I took a deep breath. “Honestly, I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing for you to say. This is what woman have to deal with every day. And every day men are silent.”

“There’s been other van rapes?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I was speaking allegorically. This is just what happens. That’s why I have these flyers.” She took a stack from the backseat of her car. They were homemade, but they still looked too nice, in that Justine had clearly put some graphic design elbow grease into them, I assumed she had a degree in the field. They looked more like art show flyers than ones warning women to protect themselves. The essential information was too small, and while the font was objectively tasteful, it didn’t scream urgency. “I figured we could split up, I could head east, and you could head west. I brought some staples and tape, but we can only pick on each, so which one do you want?”

This is not how I wanted to spend my day. “Well,” I said, “I think the tape ones would fall off too easily, don’t you? Stapling would be better. If you held them up, I could staple them for you.”

Justine thought for a minute. “I suppose that would work. We could keep each other company, too.”

“Exactly,” I said. Solidarity.”

“Solidarity,” Justine said, and raised her fist.

The streetlights were all wooden, and graveyards of staples past were stuck into them, along with gum and stuffed animals on a few that served as impromptu memorials for shooting victims. The first one was only a few steps up away. As Justine held it up, I noticed for the first time what it really said. There were stock images of criminals and hookers, so stereotypical I almost wondered if it was ironic. The text warned women that there was murderer in the area, to double check and carry protection at all times. Then there was a number for a local shelter that everyone surely already knew of and didn't call for good reason, and, hilariously, the number for the police and 911.

“Do you have a gun, Justine?”

“No, and I never will. I have a knife and pepper spray.”

“Maybe you should reconsider that position if this continues.”

“I'll make my own decisions, thank you.”

“Okay, just looking out, that's all.”

“If you wanted to ‘look out,’ maybe you can do some work on your own. Talk to men about rape culture. Listen to women. Check your toxic masculinity. Call it our when you see it happening.”

This was tiring. She was using buzzwords that were already dead and empty. “For sure,” I said. “I should do that.”

There was no need to keep our voices down in this neighborhood. Like so many others, it was mostly abandoned. So, as we walked around looking for more wooden light posts, we

talked. At first, we obviously talked about the subject at hand, but, thankfully, that didn't last long, and we soon moved onto other topics of conversation. Despite her reputation, or perhaps because of it, Justine was very easy to get along with. Once the pretenses dropped, she spoke freely and without caution. I brought up the quality of the posters and she admitted she'd been learning graphic design on the side. She said she didn't have a degree yet, but when she eventually reenrolled, she was considering English. She also wanted to be a writer. A poet, in fact. At one point, she took a camera out of her backpack. She'd recently been experimenting with photography, too, and, if we were lucky enough to run into some sex workers, as she put it, she wanted to take their portraits.

Justine's fascination with her camera depressed me in a way that felt familiar. She was so excited about it, so naive. There wasn't any detachment, any cynicism, any awareness on her part. Just pure sincerity. It made my heart hurt, like I pitied her in a way that only served to make me love her more. It reminded me of another girl I knew once named Megan. We had talked on and off, but never formed a real connection. The only fuel that was there for me, as I assume it was for her, was sexual attraction. We both wanted to have sex with one another. One night, we came close. She invited me over her house that she rented with some roommates, and we all shared stilted conversation over beer before she invited me down to her room, the ceiling of which was strung with lights that gave a soft glow to the crystals, sage, and other astrology knickknacks littered about that I had no real interest in. As was the game, she didn't invite me down to have sex per se, but on the pretense of showing me her stuff. The only thing that caught my eye was a guitar in the corner, a white knock-off Stratocaster that couldn't have cost more than eighty dollars. I asked after it, and she said she just picked it up. She was learning Pink

Floyd songs on it. Her dad had played guitar, she said. I noted the use of ‘had,’ but asked no further questions. At that, I had to go. I thanked her for showing me her room and left. On my way home, one of the roommates that was there texted me, telling me to come back, that Megan was disappointed we hadn’t done it, but I couldn’t. There was something in that cheap guitar that made my heart break—a hope without thought of consequence, a pure desire, a sincerity, that stopped me in my tracks. More crudely put, it killed any horniness I had. It was like I had an aversion to vulnerability, and any tangential feeling to that vulnerability was transliterated as pity in my heart, and that was one thing I couldn’t abide. It made me sad, yes, but it also made me ache. What I couldn’t think about was the elements of my own life that might have sparked this feeling in others. What did I do that evoked pity? What were my vulnerabilities that turned people away out of a loving disgust? I didn’t know. I preferred to think there were none.

She talked so much that I almost forgot about the fight I’d gotten into earlier. It was only when our conversation stalled for a few minutes that I felt my body ache again. I told her I needed to take a break for a moment, then made a big show of rubbing my torso until she asked me what was wrong. I told her it was nothing, just work stuff from earlier. Most people I knew only had a vague idea of what I did, which is how I liked it. If pressed, I told them I worked security and operations for a local business leader. This was enough for them to read between the lines. If I made more money, perhaps they would have asked more questions, but, in truth, I was only making enough to get by a little better than most.

“Are you okay,” Justine asked. “You know, I’ve taken massage therapist courses. If you’re aching, I could show you some stretches that might help.”

There we go. That's what I was looking for. Even though she delivered a flawless opening, I couldn't help but get a little annoyed at her. I was infinitely suspicious of people who knew too many things or had too many interests. Bruegel was the only exception to this rule. I was suspicious of him for reasons unrelated to knowledge. I told Justine that sounded like a fine idea, and she suggested going back to her place, or, if I wanted, grabbing a drink first. Drink first sounds fine, I told her. I offered to drive. I asked her if she was okay leaving her car in this area, and she grabbed some things out the trunk first and loaded them into mine. Yoga mat, some new age books, a duffle bag that rattled.

Justine was hungry, too, so we opted for a place that served dinner along with drinks. Her choice was a place in Indian Village, an upscale neighborhood that was starting to hop again after decades in despair. She said she knew the owners of this one joint, but when we walked in, no one seemed to know her. I knew the bartender, it turned out, from another place he worked at. I'd collected from him before. He gave me a terse nod when we made eye contact, but I signaled that I was here for leisure, not business.

The food was expensive and only half-decent. I ordered a roast chicken with dumplings, while Justine ordered this fucked up looking octopus thing with fresh, edible flowers. I don't think she liked it as much as she let on. Then, we drank for a bit and started fiddling with each other's hands from across the table. This, too, depressed me. Usually, when there is a spark between two people, nothing makes you swallow more than that first initial point of contact. When you dare bring your pinky clothes to theirs on a walk, and you make the first, fragile reach

out. It was a magical moment, really. But, with Justine, it came far too easy, and the conclusion was determined as soon as everything started. I almost didn't want to have sex anymore.

She was a bit of a lush, too. She drank quickly and her skin turned bright red. When she was drunk, apparently, she talked fast and loudly, switching topics with blazing speed. Mostly, she talked about herself, but at one point, she slammed her glass down, looked me dead in the eye and asked:

“What do you know about pedophiles, Kyle?”

I looked around. The tables around us had heard and hushed their voices. I looked up to the bartender, who raised an eyebrow at me. “What the fuck?”

“Pedophiles. Pedos. Kiddie ticklers. Child fuckers. What do you know about them? Have you ever met one?”

“Will you shut up? We're in a restaurant. And no, I've never met one. Don't make me smack your fucking mouth.”

“Yes, you have. I guarantee it. I bet you work for one. Child sex rings exist, you know. At elite levels. They engage in rituals, too. Satanic ones. I can show you things I've seen online if you want to come over.”

Oh God. This was Ryan in drag. “Are you trying to use pedophilia as a pick-up line?”

“First off, asshole,” she said, “who said I wanted to fuck you?” She leaned over to the table next to us. “Did you hear that? This fat pig thinks I want to fuck him?” The couple scooted their chairs over. Justine looked back at me. “Any maybe I do. But for you to assume so is

beyond the pale, good sir.” She laughed and took another sip. “But, really. Child sex. Have you heard anything like that? Amongst some of the bigwigs you know, Mr. Hot Shot?”

“We can’t talk about this here,” I said. I shot a panicked look to the bartender, my only ally, but he ignored me. I tried to remember if I’d done something to piss him off in the past, but came up with nothing. “We should go.”

“So, you *do* know pedophiles. You heard it here first, ladies and gentlemen. An aider and abettor, right in our midst.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, you stupid bitch. Shut the fuck up.” Now it was everyone’s turn to look at me. I took two hundreds out of my wallet, which was overpaying by at least fifty, but the price was worth it for ease of exit. I took Justine by the arm and led her outside.

“Goddamnit,” I hissed at her. “You can’t be fucking saying shit like that around me. People know me.”

“Oh, excuse me, I didn’t realize people *knew* you. Bastard.”

I stopped on the sidewalk. “What the fuck is your deal? What is this shit? Did you want to see me just to berate me?”

“No, you idiot. I wanted to see you to get some dick. Berating you is just an additional benefit.” Justine kept walking, though my car was in another direction.

“Come on,” I told her. “Let me drive you back to your car. I got something in the car that will sober you up.” She stumbled with me around the block, and I had to lower her into the passenger seat, like I was a date rapist. I looked around to make sure no one was watching, but

luckily the people who lived in Indian Village barricaded themselves inside their stately manors like they were castles, especially at night.

I took an Adderall out of my glove box and tried to slip it to her, but she passed out immediately. I doubted she would wake up by the time we got to her car on the other side of town, but it was worth a try. I played music to drown out her snoring. I chose synth-pop, and, for a minute, felt like a hero in a movie.

I saw the glass on the ground before I pulled up to her car. I could recognize the blue-green sparkle from a mile away. You got used to seeing it in Detroit, though that was likely the case for any city.

“Fuck,” I whispered under my breath. Justine was still sleeping, and I certainly didn’t want to wake her up to see this. I parked right next to it and let the engine idle with the high beams turned out. I opened my glove box again, banging Justine’s knees in the process, which still didn’t stir her, and grabbed one of Bruegel’s replicas he let me have. However, I wished I had my shooter at home. While it was true that guns were hardly necessary in business (organized crime, you might call it), random violence always required a bulwark.

I peeked in through her windows to see if anything was stolen, which would be surprising, since she cleaned out the whole thing before we left. The seats were all ripped up and the innards ripped out. The stereo was still there, but someone had smashed it with a hammer. They knocked off the steering console and cut all the wires. It was a total hatchet job, as if it was personal. For some reason, my chest tightened up.

I looked behind me and closed the driver door, which I'd left open. Justine was still sleeping. I got down on my knees and checked underneath, another one of Bruegel's tips I'd never had to put into action. I was looking for car bombs. I didn't see one, but, then again, I had no idea what I was looking for. I didn't know what a car bomb looked like.

"Well, fuck," I said to myself again. I looked at my phone. No texts from Bruegel, and no calls either. The only messages I'd got was one from my dad with some sports scores I didn't care about and a funny picture from Ryan. It was 11pm. I got back in the car and decided to take Justine back to my place. I'd let her sleep off the alcohol on my couch, then I'd let her figure out the rest in the morning. Her car was pretty nice, so she probably had more than adequate insurance. She'd be on her own for the headache of a police report that was sure to follow. A block away, back on the nominally main drag, I saw a hooker. She was old, overweight, and struggled even to walk the pose. God bless her.