
O:JA&L's 2023 SERIALS

THE DEPLORABLE



MICK MCGRATH

HOT BUTTON PRESS *Contemporary Issues*

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OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters



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Contemporary Issues

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The Deplorable

O:JA&L's 2023 Serials

THE DEPLORABLE

MICK MCGRATH

Installment 1

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PROLOGUE 2022

I have never liked the name Brock. It sounds boorish somehow. Too masculine. Like a character on *American Gladiators* – Turbo, Nitro, Blaze. It's not as mellifluous as I would like. (Is *mellifluous* the right word?) In plain English, Brock is ugly.

Parents are supposed to give their kids *confidence*, not humiliate them. *My* parents, then, fucked up right out of the gate, giving me a name like Brock, a name that would embarrass me throughout my childhood, my adolescence, though it occurs to me now, in my thirties, that there's nothing *wrong* with the name Brock and really it's just a hang-up I have. Still, I'd like it better if my name sounded pleasant. My older brother's name is Jonathan. I wish I'd been named something like that.

But, alas, I am Brock.

I have a taper fade, a hard part. It's a slick haircut that I get for twenty bucks at E.D. Bailey's right here in downtown Knoxville.

I have full lips, *Yellow Jasper Lips*, a Cupid's bow. They say the Cupid's Bow is attractive. Except a couple of years ago I noticed a bump on my lip. Not a big bump. Nothing noticeable. Unless of course you get really close to me. But, alas, I don't get close to anyone anymore. I have not gotten close to anyone in years – COVID was hardly an adjustment for me. I've been on my own for years now. I've been on my own for years and years and years and years and years – my whole *life*, really.

I am the cheese, the *bikikomori*.

I have a crooked nose. And these little bumps on my nose, too. (The beginnings of Rhinophyma, perhaps? Though I'm neither Irish nor Scottish?)

I have dark eyes, shelved away under a heavy brow ridge. I don't sleep well, so I look haggard *all the time*. I am *always* tired. Fatigued. Depleted. World-weary and not yet thirty-seven.

I am short, painfully mythologically short – if I ever get married, my bride will almost certainly be a sapiosexual, not that I consider myself a towering intellect or anything like that.

I have no friends. Incidentally, I sometimes wonder why people even have friends. Long-term nonreproductive unions with other individuals to whom we're not related. *Why?*

In 2019, I was doing well, drinking just once a week, usually on Fridays. I'd go to Downtown Wine & Spirits just a few blocks from my apartment, which is in the well-known Maplehurst Park neighborhood, and I'd pick up a magnum for twelve bucks and drink the whole thing alone. Call it depressing all you want, but I wasn't *hurting* anyone. Just having a good time in my APT. Drinking wine. Listening to Mozart's "*Così Fan Tutte*."

And I only did it once a week. The other six days, I behaved myself, drinking water with lemon, which mitigates bad breath. I ate fruits and vegetables. Lots of pineapple. I avoided bread, pasta, red meat...

In 2019, I was doing well. Losing weight. Getting rid of my disgusting Buddha belly. Looking good again in my button-down shirts. In January of 2020, right before the pandy, Dr. Davis told me I was healthy, that there was nothing to worry about. But then, alas, my drinking picked up again.

I drink almost every day now. My bedroom looks like a Tracey Emin installation, with empty bottles of booze everywhere, empty bottles of whiskey, empty bottles of wine, empty cans of beer...

And the alcohol certainly puts on the pounds. I've *vaulted* to 195 – though in my defense, I have been exercising and working out a bit and it's possible I've picked up a bit of muscle.

I'm thirty-six years old, and it's clear to me now that my little writing career is *not* happening. It is a fire that will not light, an engine that will not start...

I got my MFA in fiction writing at The University of Tennessee, here in Knoxville. Post UT, I struggled to find a job. Then came COVID. I've been living in Knoxville for six years now.

The University of Tennessee was literally a horror story: In our final semester, members of a radical youth organization called We Are Not Asking murdered one of our cohorts. You may recall this. It was all over the news in the spring of 2018. The murder sent shockwaves through the country. The campus was abuzz. *Everyone* was talking about it, the gory details: The assailant had stabbed the writer dozens of times all over his body. They'd cut his throat. They'd done it fast, like a speed assassin – the deadly rattlesnake, the poisonous dart frog.

I didn't know how to feel about it. I mean, it was disorienting, certainly, but I didn't feel *bad* about it. Like, I just didn't feel that bad about the whole thing. What can I say? It's not like Kip Masterson and I had been close friends or anything. I mean, it's not like we'd shared a foxhole. We'd gotten together a few times for drinks. That was about the extent of it. We'd shared a love of cinema, our *lingua franca*. But, in Year Two of our creative writing program, we'd had a falling out. In fact, I'd had a falling-out with *all* of my cohorts. I'd become the "program pariah," the hideous Quasimodo. And it should come as no surprise. These *were* the Trump years, after all. And I was the rich, white, heterosexual male.

I am, I readily admit, quite privileged. I was born into a wealthy family in Indian Village, a rich Detroit suburb. My father worked for Dow Chemical, a Fortune 500 company. My mother was his self-sacrificing helpmate. We belonged to country clubs. Our house appeared in one issue of *Architecture Digest*. We had a *Tabriz* in the foyer. A Testarossa in the garage. We summered in beautiful Traverse City, MI. We went skiing in Bozeman, MT.

My father and I were not close. He and my brother, Jonathan, were sports nuts, alpha chimps. I, on the other hand, was artistic. I liked poetry. I liked film and art.

Jonathan was tall and handsome. Meanwhile, I was short, topping out at five feet and four inches. ("They say Mozart was short," my mother used to tell me, encouragingly.)

My father showed Jonathan everything – how to hammer a nail, how to use a saw, “Righty tighty, lefty loosey”... He took Jonathan to Pistons games. I remember one night the two of them came home from a Michigan game laughing hysterically, saying they’d started a Mexican wave at the stadium, as if that’s anything to crow about, but they assured me it *was*, that it was actually quite fun, getting people in the immediate vicinity on board, then watching the wave take off, travel around the stadium, ripple across tens of thousands of spectators – “big things have small beginnings,” I said, cleverly quoting *Lawrence of Arabia*, but my father and Jonathan, philistines that they were, didn’t get the reference.

When Jonathan refused to wear his retainer, my father punished him. When I refused to wear my retainer, my father shrugged, saying, “That’s your choice, Brock. That’s your choice” – now, sadly, I have a mild case of snaggle tooth.

My father taught Jonathan to ride a bike. Meanwhile, I had to teach *myself* to ride a bike, falling multiple times, crying in the middle of the street, then trying again – rinse, lather, repeat – until, finally, *I got it!* When I was through, my legs were gravelrashed, but at least I could ride a bike now – a lifelong gift to myself.

The kids at school were sadistic. In the fifth grade, I knew two girls who were always calling me short, asking me if I slept in a bassinet. So I started calling them fat. Because they *were* fat. *A COUPLE OF GODDAMN PACHYDERMS!* And I even told one of them her belly button was as big as the Grand Canyon, and I kept calling the other one “Obese Witherspoon.” And then, one day, in front of the whole class, our teacher, Mrs. Wortendyk (a polydactyl) *screamed* at us, saying, “*I better never hear of any boy being mean to any of the girls around here!*” and it was clear my nemeses had snitched on me, and I thought it was a serious injustice, *A SERIOUS INJUSTICE!*, because *they* were the ones who’d bullied *me*, calling me “a teacup yorkie” all the time, a pocket bully. When my father heard about my “schoolyard cruelty,” he called me a little monster, “a tiny terror.” My mother said I’d disappointed her. My parents came into my bedroom one night, and my mother sat with me on the edge of my bed while my father stood by the door, his arms crossed at his chest. It was no joke, calling young girls fat. “You’d never forgive yourself if they committed suicide,” my mother warned, sitting with me, on my bed. “*And they could, Broccoli! They could commit suicide! You never know these days! You just never know!*”

Crying, I told my parents all about the “Siamese Uglies,” the “Two Medusas.” (I didn’t dare call them that in front of my parents, of course.) I told my

parents about all the shit I'd taken from them at school, but my mother assured me it was different. *Their suffering is more profound*, she might as well have said, though of course she'd never say *that* – not explicitly, anyway.

In high school, I got into drugs. At the occasional house party, people would give me strange pills, and I'd throw them down my throat as though they were Certs. *I didn't even know what they were!*

One day, I ate psilocybin mushrooms, sitting at the back of my English class, where we were studying *Beowulf*. I smoked pot in the high school parking lot, at 8:00 in the morning, then sauntered into homeroom philosophy. I kept beers in my locker.

My twenties were quieter – not exactly roaring. At twenty-three, a tad late, I got my bachelor's degree. At twenty-six, I got my first master's degree.

It was then, at the age of twenty-six, that I began teaching at a small community college in Northern Michigan. I did that for five years or so. Then I got bored and returned to school. *Enter Knoxville!*

I moved to Knoxville about six years ago, in the summer of 2016. I was thirty-one, then, and anxious to make some friends finally, having suffered social isolation for several years, teaching English, working on my fiction, toiling away in my book-strewn “mansard,” like *The Poor Poet* – that wonderful wonderful Spitzweg painting.

I was in Knoxville to get my second master's degree. A Master of Fine Arts this time. In creative writing. I wanted to be a fiction writer, like Cormac McCarthy, who, incidentally, grew up in Knoxville. We *all* wanted to be fiction writers. Me, and Drusilla, and Reine, and Kip. Kip who is dead now. I have to remind myself he's dead. *My God, Kip is dead!*

I keep tabs on Drusilla and Reine, my cohorts – astonishingly, they have not blocked me on Facebook, though on one occasion they accused *me* of murdering Kip Masterson. On Facebook, Drusilla says things like, “American women are the victims of a violent, oppressive, male-dominated patriarchy.” Meanwhile, Reine, who's black, will say things like, “The police are committing genocide, killing hundreds of African Americans every year, year after year after year.”

Every year, on the anniversary of his death, Drusilla and Reine post something weepy about Kip. Recently, Drusilla wrote, “Six years ago, my

friend and cohort, Kip Masterson, was brutally savagely murdered in his apartment. They never did find his killer. I miss you, Kip. It's a shame you had to be murdered instead of, say, Donald Trump. (Not my president.) Anyway, in peace, comrade. Rest in peace, Kip."

These posts get hundreds of likes. *Hundreds!*

Drusilla and Reine support Black Lives Matter. They want to abolish the police – not just defund the police but *abolish* them. They support reparations. They like Ibram X. Kendi. Robin DeAngelo... For them, any criticism of the *1619 Project* is racist persecution of its core author Nikole Hannah-Jones. Any criticism of the *1619 Project* is simply a refusal to teach history and therefore a *revision* of history.

Call me creepy all you want, but I've been "watching" Drusilla and Reine ever since we graduated four years ago, in 2018 – I'm a behaviorist, observing animals at complicated play. I saw the Facebook posts they made throughout the pandemic. I read what they had to say about Donald Trump, the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol building. Drusilla and Reine go on and on about the reverberations of slavery, black codes, Jim Crow, redlining... They go on about sharecroppers, eminent domain... "We gotta burn to learn," they said, in the summer of 2020, referring of course to the George Floyd riots, months-long nationwide protests involving as many as twenty-six million people, many of which devolved into looting and rioting, *and in the middle of a pandemic, no less!* Their posts get hundreds of likes. Hundreds of likes. Drusilla and Reine have friends. They have friends and friends and more friends. *Friends galore!* I, meanwhile, am alone. Have been my entire life.

An entire life alone. Think of it. *An entire life spent alone!*

I'm not going to tell you my life's story – none of that *Speak, Memory!* shit. I'm just going to tell you about the two years leading up to the murder of Kip Masterson, a few blocks along *Rue de la Brock*, if you will – a quiet and lonely street, quiet and lonely and bottom-of-the-ocean dark. I'm just going to tell you about my two years at the University of Tennessee. The whole *Megillah*. The whole *meshugas*. This madman stuff that happened to me down here in Knoxville. I wouldn't torture you with my epic saga, my entire multivolume autobiography. I'll just tell you about the two years I spent in grad school. My crazy MFA. My Damascus Christophany. We Are Not Asking, the radicals who terrorized Knoxville in the winter of 2018, though many students will claim they were not terrified at all, that in fact they felt safe for once, that they

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felt seen, that they felt heard, that they felt hopeful now that people were awakening finally, now that people were finally doing something about police brutality, systemic police racism and so forth.

It begins in 2016, in the fall semester.

CHAPTER 1
FIRING OFFENSES

One night, Kip and I were sitting at a four-top at The Tomato Head, awaiting Drusilla and Reine. The Tomato Head is a pizza place, but it's kind of swank, believe it or not, with nice wooden tables and cool Donald Judd chairs.

Sitting across the table from me, Kip was telling me about a short story he was working on. The story was about an autonomous taxi programmed to entertain out-of-towners, capable of involved conversations with homo sapiens.

"Think about it, Brock. Just *think* about it: As the autonomous vehicle becomes more and more autonomous, manufacturers will begin to think about entertainment. *Entertainment, Brock!* For instance, you'll be able to play chess on your way to work."

"It'd be cool if you could play *Age of Empires*," I said, sort of giggling.

"*Age of Empires*?" Kip said, bewilderedly.

"It's a video game," I explained. "About early civilizations."

"Oh," Kip said. "Well, Brock, what if the autonomous vehicle were an excellent *conversationalist*? Anyway, that's what my story's about, Brock. Right now, the vehicle's just driving through New York City. I used to live in Brooklyn. Anyway, there's a guy in the back seat. The autonomous vehicle is a taxi. The story is a two-hander, a *pas de deux*: The man and the car are having a conversation. About artificial intelligence."

"That's very meta," I said.

“I’m not sure where the whole thing’s going yet,” Kip said.

“It’s like *Knight Rider*,” I said. “Or *My Mother the Car*.”

“Hardly,” Kip said, irritably. “My story is art, Brock. Not some lame David Hasselhoff vehicle.”

The server – port wine stain on his face, white tuxedo shirt and black bowtie – approached the four top and gave me the Hefeweizen I’d ordered. He tried to give Kip his Whitmeyer’s, but Kip sent it back, saying, “Put that in a cross-and-olives lowball, please.”

“Do you mean highball?” I said, looking across the table, at Kip.

“That’s a Gibraltar glass,” Kip explained, looking up at the server. “The cross-and-olives lowball is handsomer.”

“Does the type of glass really matter?” the server said, standing over us.

“*Pardonnez-moi?*” said the epicure, losing patience.

“Give me a break, man. I’ve had a long day.”

Kip looked at me, then back at the server.

“Oh, you’re right,” Kip said. “Put it in a Collins glass, then. Whatever you like.” Kip looked at me as if to say, “*You believe this guy?*” Then he looked back at the server and said, “Don’t you know anything? The cross-and-olives lowball is *appropriate*.”

The server rolled his eyes. He walked off with his polished salver, the rejected drink on top of it.

Kip looked at me and laughed.

“A Gibraltar glass,” he said, shaking his head, snorting. “A fucking Gibraltar glass, Brock. You believe that?”

We came to The Tomato Head every Thursday after our fiction workshop. We ate pizza and drank wine. All the servers here wore crisp white tuxedo shirts, black bowties.

“You know, the University of Tennessee really ought to be paying us more,” Kip said, from across the table. “They’ve got a ton of money, Brock. A *ton* of money. Fucking rich white capitalists who aren’t doing enough to help the underprivileged. That’s what they are.”

“Our tuition *is* waived, Kip. And they’re giving us a stipend, about ten grand. Next year, it goes up to twelve.”

“Twelve grand,” Kip said, shaking his head again, resentfully. “Poverty-level wages, Brock. Fucking poverty-level wages.”

“You knew the terms before coming here, Kip. It’s not exactly a bait-and-switch.”

“Fucking assholes,” Kip said, grinding his teeth, shaking his head. “Giving us poverty-level wages like that.”

“We have no money, so we shall have to think,” I said, quoting Ernest Rutherford, smiling.

“Fucking assholes who aren’t doing enough to help the underprivileged,” Kip said, bitterly.

I looked down at the crisp paper menu in front of me.

“Did you know the chancellor makes six-hundred thousand dollars a year, Brock? *Six-hundred thousand dollars!* Meanwhile, we make dog shit.”

I looked at him.

“But I don’t think our stipend was meant to cover our expenses *in toto*, Kip. I think it’s meant as a gesture. A bit of help, you know? If you need more money, you should take out loans.”

“More loans?” Kip said. “I already have a master’s degree, Brock. I already *have* a master’s degree.”

“Yeah, so do I,” I said. “We have that in common, Kip.”

“*The point is I’m already up to my neck in debt!*” Kip exclaimed.

“Yeah, I hear that,” I said. “I hear you, Kip. Calm down, okay?” I looked around the restaurant, somewhat nervously, worried we were disturbing the

other patrons – I’m very considerate like that. “You know, I hate to say it, Kip, but one of the reasons Americans are *in* so much debt in the first place is the diversity officers.”

(I was thirty-one. I’d been getting a little more conservative with age.)

“Also, it’s the whole student loan culture,” I continued. “If the G stopped giving out loans, you’d see students eschewing the university for being too expensive – and universities lowering their rates in turn. It’s...like...classic capitalism.”

“Okay,” Kip said, shifting around in his seat. “Okay, Brock. But I happen to think diversity officers are vital. Um, I do think diversity officers are vital, Brock?”

I cleared my throat.

“Kip, how’s your apartment?” I said, changing the subject, though not for long.

“My apartment?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Your apartment, Kip. Didn’t you tell me you live behind Professor Gordon’s house? In his backyard?”

Professor Gordon was our fiction professor.

“Yeah,” Kip said. “I live in a little carriage house. An in-law apartment behind Professor Gordon’s Tudor. It’s about the size of a yurt.”

“Okay,” I said. “But you’re clearly making it work, Kip. With the stipend.”

Kip sighed.

“Yes, I suppose I am,” he conceded, which was quite reasonable of him, really. “My apartment’s nice, too. It has parquet floors, granite countertops, stainless-steel appliances...”

“See? *There ya go!*” I exclaimed, feeling vindicated.

“And Professor Gordon’s backyard is huge,” Kip said. “A Cessna could land there just about.”

I laughed.

“And the carriage house is all the way at the back, *away* from Professor Gordon’s Tudor, if you know what I mean. So I’ve got plenty of privacy, you know? Professor Gordon gave me a sweetheart deal – five-hundred bucks a month.”

I was jealous. If anything went wrong, Professor Gordon, a bachelor in his early forties, would hop to. Meanwhile, I was already having trouble with *my* apartment – to wit, the air conditioner – and getting maintenance to come overtook an act of Congress. “*For Christ’s sake, even the Swiss Family Robinson had air conditioning!*” I’d scolded Management one day, at the peak of my frustration.

Drusilla and Reine finally arrived at The Tomato Head. They came in and sat down at the four top, in the Donald Judd chairs. The server returned with Kip’s bourbon in a cross-and-olives lowball.

Drusilla and Reine ordered wine, looking up at the tired haggard server. Drusilla said she was starving, so we ordered an appetizer, stuffed grape leaves. Earlier that night, we’d workshopped Drusilla’s story “The Patriarchy.” It was about a struggling writer, a white male, who in a gust of jealous rage murders his ex-girlfriend, having stumbled upon her publication in *The New Yorker*. The workshop had called “The Patriarchy” “commandingly well-written” – whatever the fuck *that* meant.

Incidentally, a couple weeks earlier, Kip had submitted a story about a West Indian woman who crosses the Caribbean on an inner tube. It was called “God, the Underachiever.” We’d workshopped it a week earlier. Everyone had loved it.

“Shout out to Dru for ‘The Patriarchy!’” Reine cheered, sitting there, at the wooden Tomato Head table.

“Yes,” Kip said, looking at Drusilla. “That thing was a knockout.”

“So, Brock, when are *you* being workshopped?” Drusilla said, from across the table.

“In two weeks,” I answered.

“*Groovy*. What will you submit?” (Drusilla was always using words and phrases that were popular among the hippie subculture – *groovy* and *solid* and *far out*.)

“This story I’m working on, ‘A Lovely Megadeath,’” I told her.

“‘A Lovely Megadeath?’” Reine said.

“Groovy title,” Drusilla said, sarcastically.

“Cute,” Reine said.

“It’s about a virologist who goes mad and engineers a virus that he plans to unleash at the international airport,” I said.

“Delightful,” Drusilla said.

Reine was taking a selfie, puckering her lips. She sighed and said, “If only selfies were dollar bills, comrades.”

(All the kids at UT had started calling each other “comrade” recently.)

“‘A Lovely Megadeath’ is an unusual length,” I told Drusilla. “Somewhere in that no-man’s land. Between short story and novelette.”

“No *person’s* land,” Drusilla corrected me. “No *person’s* land, Brock.”

“Ugh, men are always writing long stories,” Reine said, snapping selfies, “imposing their *phalli* on the world.”

“Can’t wait to *not* read it,” Drusilla said.

Drusilla looked at Reine, and they smiled at each other wickedly.

“Gee, thanks,” I said to them.

“*Oh, we’re kidding!*” Drusilla groaned, reaching over and slapping my hand. “I’m just kidding, Brock. Lighten up, dude. Just messing with ya, man.”

“*We’re teasing!*” Reine exclaimed. “I *want* to read ‘A Lovely Megadeath,’ Brock. I really do.” She put away her cell phone. “I want to read your story more than anything else in this *world*, Brock. I’ll simply *die* if I can’t read ‘A Lovely Megadeath.’ I’ll die.”

“I’ll be calling the suicide hotline if I can’t read ‘A Lovely Megadeath,’” Drusilla said, looking at Reine.

“My life will simply be over if I can’t read ‘A Lovely Megadeath,’” Reine said, looking at Drusilla.

They looked at each other and snickered.

My MFA was not going well. For some reason, I was immediately disliked. Of course, hurt people hurt people, and Drusilla and Reine were certainly hurting, the objects (I would later learn) of intense cruelty, incessant high school harassment, which had traumatized them, changing everything about them, every subatomic particle. Drusilla was transgender. And Reine was tri-bi, meaning she was bi-sexual, bi-racial, and bipolar. Together, they had a lengthy gripe portfolio. Add to this that Reine’s older brother was gay and HIV positive. Drusilla and Reine were sufferers, in other words. They had not had it easy. I recognized that.

“Are those guys seriously wearing flipflops?” Kip said, staring at a group of men at a neighboring table. “*Ugh*, they should be wearing jeans and brown wingtips. Everybody knows flipflops are...like...*so* out of vogue. Really, they should be asked to leave.”

Kip, who was gay, was preoccupied with the men, but I couldn’t stop staring at Drusilla. She looked good tonight. She was wearing a tweed sport jacket and a white sundress underneath. A deep *plunging* sundress. With lots of *decolletage*. And I could see her fake tits, two Jupiters.

Drusilla had undergone gender affirmation surgery. She’d started feminizing hormone therapy when she was twelve, like Jazz Jennings or whatever. She’d gotten implants. Looking at her from across the four top, I wondered if she’d shaved down her cranium, her jaw, her brow bone. Drusilla was very...shall we say...*convincing*.

Reine was black, and she had a tight afro and nerd glasses. I thought she looked a bit like Lauryn Hill.

Drusilla and Reine were still in their mid-twenties. They’d gotten their bachelor’s degrees, and now here they were, at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Meanwhile, Kip and I were both in our thirties. We’d gotten master’s degrees *already*. We’d lived in the “real world” for a few years,

teaching college-level English. Now we'd become Volunteers. We'd traded in our teaching posts for discipleships.

The fatigued server brought Drusilla and Reine their drinks – Chateau du Jacques or whatever. Then the server went away, and Reine looked at Drusilla and said, “God, who was president when I ordered this drink, anyway?”

Reine took a drink of wine. Then, seemingly out of boredom, she turned to me and said, “So, Brock, what is ‘A Lovely Megadeath’ *about*? Like, what’s the underneath story, if you don’t mind my asking?”

I thought for a moment.

“I guess I don’t know,” I shrugged, looking at Reine.

“You don’t know?” Drusilla said, shocked. “You don’t know, Brock? Shouldn’t you give it some thought, Brock?”

“I dunno,” I said, lazily. “Like, I like the idea that maybe my subconscious is speaking through me. And maybe even *I* don’t know what the story is about.”

“Maybe it means you want to kill everyone,” Drusilla said. “Like Herman Kahn.”

“A Lovely Megadeath,” Reine said. “Clearly there’s some hostility there, Brock. If I could play amateur shrink, I’d say you’re an angry white guy.”

“Well,” Drusilla said, turning to Reine, “you don’t have to be a shrink to see that Brock is a white guy. His skin looks like a fucking tanning bulb.”

Drusilla and Reine snickered again.

“Maybe it’s up to the *reader* to figure it out,” I said. “Maybe it’s up to the reader to derive some weightier conclusion if he or she insists on having one.” I took a quick drink of Hefeweizen. “There’s something magical about that. That’s why fiction writing’s so magical. Because...like...your story is about something even when it’s not.”

“Oh, no,” Drusilla said, tut-tutting, shaking her head at me condescendingly. “No, no, no, Brock. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. The author should think of herself as an *architect*. Not an artist but an *architect*.”

“An architect?” I said, looking at Drusilla.

“*Oui*. The author has to have blueprints, schematics, *plans*,” Drusilla explained, gesticulating wildly. “She has to know *exactly* what she’s going to build before she shows up to the construction site on Day One and starts building. You can’t just make it up as you go along, Brock. You can’t just make it up as you go along.”

I thought this attitude was a bit stultifying – she was taking something magical and mysterious and fascinating and turning it into something ugly, almost bureaucratic.

“I agree,” Kip cheered, a tad boozy, pounding his fist on the wooden table, shaking the wine glasses.

“Easy, Kip,” Reine said, steadying the table.

“I, for one, am more analytical,” Kip said. He seemed proud of this. “For God’s sake, I could never just make it up as I go along. I’m too analytical for that.” He rolled his eyes at the idea of making it up as you went along. “I have an analytical mind.”

“Yeah. Brock doesn’t seem like the analytical type,” Drusilla said, looking at Kip, laughing, as if this were some acid remark.

“I’m *not* the analytical type,” I said. “I don’t think I’m analytical at all, in fact. I’m creative.”

“*Excuse me?*” Kip said, looking at me, shooting daggers.

“Creative,” I repeated, pivoting to Kip.

There was a short quiet here.

“Well, I’m creative, too, Brock,” Kip said. “Don’t get me wrong. I *am* creative. I just think I’m analytical as well.”

He took a sloppy sip of his Whitmeyer’s. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Anyway,” Kip said, “are the two things mutually exclusive, Brock? Can a person be creative and analytical simultaneously?”

I sighed.

“Oh, I kind of think they’re mutually exclusive,” I told Kip, nodding. “Creatives will be impulsive – not analytical or thoughtful. They’re emotionally unstable in many cases, full of *Thumos*. They’re unpredictable. I mean, look at jazz musicians like Charles Mingus. Creatives are wild as fuck, Kip. Wild AF. They’re bohemian, sleeping whenever they want, eating whenever they want... They drink too much. They don’t have regular jobs. I mean, look at Proust. Proust’s father begged him to get a job, but Proust couldn’t be bothered with employment, so preoccupied was he with his mammoth masterpiece, *In Search of Lost Time*, which many literaries now call a masterpiece.”

“Literaries?” Reine said.

“Creative people often struggle with substance abuse,” I continued. “They’re messy and complicated. They’re vulgar, uncouth, inappropriate, outspoken, animalistic... In many cases, they’re even criminals. Caravaggio and Gesualdo, for instance – *they committed two murders apiece!* I’m a huge fan of their work, by the way.”

“You mean the murders?” Reine said, suspiciously.

“No, I mean their *work*,” I told Reine, angrily. “I especially like Caravaggio, *David Holding the Head of Goliath*. I like ‘The Black Paintings,’ too.”

“That’s Goya,” Drusilla corrected me. “*The Black Paintings* is Goya.”

“Whatever,” I said, a tad embarrassed – for didn’t I claim to be an art lover? “Anyway, creatives are oftentimes troubled. *That’s* the point.” I thought for a moment, then said, “Look at Wagner.”

“Richard Wagner?” Reine said, seizing on that. “The nineteenth-century German composer famous for his four-opera cycle, *Der Ring des Nibelung*?”

She leaned forward in her Donald Judd chair.

“The guy was a genius,” I said, looking across the table, at Reine, “so brilliant in fact that when Gustav Mahler heard about Wagner’s death he ran through the streets of Vienna, screaming, ‘*The master has died! The master has died!*’ Wagner was a goddamn genius.”

“He was also an antisemite,” Reine said, sourly.

“Right,” I said. “He was also an antisemite, but that doesn’t mean I enjoy ‘The Ride of the Valkyries’ any less.”

“Wagner said Jews needed to experience an *Untergang*,” Reine said. “A ‘going-down’ or ‘going under.’”

“What does that even mean?” Drusilla said.

“Not sure,” Reine said, turning to Drusilla. “In all fairness, Wagner may have been referring to cultural assimilation. Still, it’s a chilling statement, given what we know awaited Jews in the twentieth century.”

“Didn’t Wagner also say Jews lack their own art?” Kip said, looking at Reine. “That Jewish composers just copy other composers’ work? To make money?”

“Something like that,” Reine said, looking at Kip.

“Piece of shit,” Kip muttered, shaking his head, holding his Whitmeyer’s. “Piece of fucking shit.”

“Sounds like Wagner should have been cancelled,” Drusilla said, looking around the restaurant, no doubt wondering what had become of our server, the stuffed grape leaves we’d ordered. “I don’t care how brilliant he was. He should have been cancelled.”

(Of course, this was 2016, and people would not start using the term “Cancel Culture” for another four or five years. Kip would be dead by then. Perhaps you’ll forgive me, sympathetic reader, if I take some artistic license.)

“Oh?” I said. “Excuse me, but if Wagner had been canceled, we might not have operas like *Twilight of the Gods*.”

“*Brock!*” Reine exclaimed, practically launching herself across the wooden table and grabbing me by the lapels. “*Wagner’s writings paved the way for the Holocaust, Brock!*”

They call this Godwin’s Law – in any political conversation, it’s only a matter of time before someone brings up Hitler and the Nazis.

“Wagner wrote his antisemitic essay, ‘Jewishness in Music,’ in 1869, and by the late nineteenth century an antisemitic political movement had coalesced in Germany,” Reine explained, “with people like Adolf Stoecker saying Jews

should drown on the high seas, and approaching the *fin de siècle*, Houston Stewart Chamberlain calling Jews a plague. By the time Hitler arrives in the twentieth century, he is perfectly comfortable in his antisemitism.”

“Are you saying Wagner *caused* the Holocaust?” I said.

“I’m saying Wagner made antisemitism more socially acceptable,” Reine said. “His writings are the...shall we say...rhetorical preparation for the Holocaust. Wagner really *needed* to be cancelled, Brock. He really needed to be cancelled.”

“We need to go back in time and assassinate Wagner,” Kip said. “Not so much Hitler but *Wagner*. He’s the primary target.”

“If Wagner hadn’t been indulged, the Holocaust might never have happened,” Reine said, looking at me.

Reine had torpedoed my argument. Perhaps Cancel Culture, as it would come to be known, wasn’t so unreasonable after all.

“Anyway, Brock,” Reine continued, “do you think brilliant artists like Wagner should just be pardoned?”

“Just give ‘em an imprimatur, because they’re brilliant artists?” Kip said, looking at me.

“No,” I said, patiently. “If brilliant artist like Wagner break the law, for instance, they should go to jail, to be sure. But if they say the n-word or something like that?”

“*Then they should be canceled!*” Reine roared. “*Anyone who uses the n-word is a fucking racist, Brock!*”

“I’m not so sure,” I shrugged.

“Oh?” Reine said, her eyes bulging behind her black nerd glasses. “You’re not so sure about that, Brock? You’re not so sure, eh?”

“Well, I don’t think someone who uses the n-word is *necessarily* a racist,” I explained.

Kip burst into laughter.

“*What?*” he said, looking at me. Then he looked at Drusilla and Reine. “You believe this guy? OMG, I cannot *believe* what I’m hearing right now.”

I looked at Kip and said, “Gee, Kip, I just think the mind is a little more mysterious than that?”

“Oh, please,” Reine scoffed. “*That makes negative sense, Brock! That makes negative sense!*”

“Brock, are you from the planet Stupid?” Drusilla said, squinting at me.

“Look, remember when Jonah Hill called someone a *faggot*?” I said, ignoring Drusilla.

“Um, yes,” Drusilla said, grinding her teeth.

“He apologized on the Jimmy Fallon show,” I said. “The apology seemed heartfelt. So we all just moved on. Why can’t we get back to that?” I took a quick drink of Hefeweizen. “Look, I just think if someone calls someone else the n-word, they should just apologize.”

“Just apologize, eh?” Reine said.

“Well,” I said, thinking, “I guess if they truly *are* a racist, they should maybe take a few sensitivity courses at their own expense?”

Reine guffawed.

“Oh, well, in that case,” Reine said, raising her voice a hair, hitting the table.

“That’ll just make everything groovy,” Drusilla said.

(Incidentally, sensitivity training *was* available at UT. In fact, first-year students were required to take these courses. Courses like “Debunking Race” and “(In)Justice in America.” Courses that trained students to be “less white.”)

“They should maybe commit to therapy, too?” I shrugged. “Pop the hood and find out why they have all this hostility toward black people, for instance.”

“And then just move on, eh?” Kip said.

“Well, yes,” I shrugged, looking at Kip. “They get to keep their jobs, believe it or not. They’re allowed to keep working, providing for their kids...”

“Brock, do you have any idea how it feels for victims of racism to see their assailants feted?” Reine said. “Do you have any *idea*?”

I thought for a moment.

“But why *shouldn’t* they be feted?” I said, throwing my hands up. “Why shouldn’t they be exalted for making great art?”

“Brock, you don’t understand racial literacy,” Drusilla said. “You’re not racially literate, Brock. You’re not culturally competent. Which begs the following question: How did you even get into this program?”

“You’re not black,” Reine said to me. “You couldn’t possibly understand, Brock. You couldn’t possibly understand because you’re not black.”

I rolled my eyes. I sighed.

“Oh, don’t give us that exasperated bullshit,” Drusilla said.

“Okay,” I said, looking at Reine, ignoring Drusilla. “But tell me something, Reine: Doesn’t that leave the door open for bogus claims of racism?”

“Bogus claims of racism?” Reine said, incredulously.

“Like, let’s say a white guy refuses to hold the door open for a black woman,” I said. “She claims that’s racist. People tell her she’s being unreasonable. She responds, ‘You’re not black. You couldn’t possibly understand.’”

“OMG,” Drusilla said, rolling her eyes, shaking her head. “For God’s sake, Brock. For God’s sake.”

“As if a black woman would ever make such a claim,” Reine said, disgustedly.

“Look,” I said, putting my hands up again, as if they were the police. “I just think it’s a mistake to cancel the Mel Gibsons of the world, ‘kay? Get rid of all the Mel Gibsons, and you’ll deprive the world of some great art. The survivors of Cancel Culture may be good little social justice warriors, but will they be as brilliant as Mel Gibson? Are they going to give us films like *Apocalypto*?”

“To be fair, *Apocalypse* is a masterpiece,” Kip said, looking at Drusilla and Reine.

“Brock, how can you *defend* Mel Gibson?” Reine said to me, with murderous hostility. “Seriously, how the fuck can you defend him? Mel Gibson used the phrase ‘pack of niggers,’ Brock. He used the phrase ‘pack of niggers.’” She said it slowly. The whole table got quiet for a moment. “A *pack*, Brock. As if we’re a bunch of animals.”

I thought for a moment.

“Yeah, well, he’s clearly very troubled,” I said, looking at Reine. “He’s clearly a very angry man. And underneath all that anger is pain and suffering, no? Hurt people hurt people?”

“*Ugh*, somebody get me a bucket,” Reine said.

“I’m beginning to think Brock’s a provocateur,” Kip said, looking at Reine.

“I am *not* a provocateur,” I said, angrily, looking at Kip. “I just think artistic people are troubled, okay? It’s the reason they’re artists to begin with. And don’t get me started on people like James Gunn. I just don’t believe people should be fired for...like...extramural...edgy humor.”

“Edgy?” Drusilla said. “James Gunn made jokes about pedophilia. You call jokes about pedophilia ‘edgy?’”

“They should apologize, maybe explain themselves. And then we should all just move on,” I said. “I mean, whatever happened to forgiveness?”

“Excuse me,” Reine said, and with tears in her eyes she got up from the table and went to the gender-neutral bathroom.

CHAPTER TWO
THE WOKE SHOP

Yes, yes, I quickly managed to become the pariah of the program. It didn't help that Trump was elected a couple months later, in November of 2016. Nor did it help when I submitted "A Lovely Megadeath" to the workshop, which the MFA-holes agreed was "breathtakingly creepy." Nor did it help when, in January of 2017, I submitted a story to the workshop called "Metacognition" about a white male in a long-term relationship with a black female that ends abruptly when he calls her the n-word during sex one night.

At the beginning of the story, the man and woman are having wild angry sex, with lots of dirty talk, and in the heat of the moment, he calls her the n-word. *It just slips out!* The protagonist compares it to Tourette's Syndrome, demonic possession... He doesn't understand it himself. *How could I have done this?* he thinks, absolutely gobsmacked.

In a trice, the woman gets dressed and packs her suitcase.

"Don't go," the protagonist begs, following her around their apartment, naked, crying, threatening to commit suicide, watching as his beloved girlfriend hastily packs her Gladstone, leaving him forever. "For God's sake, there isn't one subatomic *particle* of me that's racist! There isn't a racist bone in my *body*! Not a racist hair on my *head*!"

But he'd called her the n-word. There was no escaping it. They'd both heard it, clear as a bell. And to *think* as a young man he'd gotten into screaming matches with his father over the dinner table in their Indian Village house, about the plight of African Americans, saying blacks had been the victims of redlining, systemic racism... He'd *berated* his father. Absolutely *berated* the man. About the reverberations of slavery. About Jim Crow. Black Codes. Tulsa. Only to call his girlfriend the n-word several years later. What had happened to him? What had gotten into him? He'd been a proponent of

reparations. He was an Ibram X. Kendi fan. *And now, here he was, calling his girlfriend the n-word?* It didn't make sense. It didn't add up.

"Metacognition" was very stream-of-consciousness, with the protagonist doing a lot of ruminating throughout the story.

"Maybe a parasite got into my brain and rewired my thinking," the man hypothesizes at one point, though he knows that's grasping at straws, another Twinkie Defense.

By the end of the story, the mystery remains unsolved – though according to my cohorts, there was no "mystery" to it whatsoever.

"He's a racist," Reine said, definitively. "He's a scumbag piece of shit, Brock. Your protagonist is a scumbag piece of shit."

BUT, FOR GOD'S SAKE, I WAS TRYING TO SAY SOMETHING ABOUT THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE HUMAN MIND, REINE! IS MY GUY A RACIST SIMPLY BECAUSE HE USED THAT WORD? IS IT REALLY THAT SIMPLE, REINE? OR IS THE HUMAN MIND MORE MYSTERIOUS THAN YOU'RE GIVING IT CREDIT FOR?

Workshop was held in a big room on the twelfth floor of McClung Tower. Believe it or not, our classroom looked a bit like the War Room from *Dr. Strangelove*, with a large round table at the center, and a dozen or so metal chairs. A heavy *Aubusson* layered the hardwood floor.

In the War Room, Professor Gordon asked everyone what they thought of "Metacognition."

Reine said she didn't think I should be writing POCs.

"As a white male, you can't convey that," Reine said, looking at me from across the big, round, workshop table. "You couldn't possibly understand the WOC's lived experience, Brock. You couldn't possibly understand her lived experience."

"WOC?" I said.

“Um, woman of color?” Reine said, looking at me as if I’d said something supremely unintelligent. “Do you think maybe you need a racial literacy class, Brock? Do you think maybe you need a racial literacy class?”

Everyone laughed.

“You can’t understand the WOC’s lived experience at all,” Drusilla seconded. “Much *less* understand it to a point where you’re able to write it.”

“I don’t think white males should *ever* write people of color,” Reine said, looking at Professor Gordon.

“I agree,” Professor Gordon said. “I think Brock’s story is problematic.”

“Well, what about Kip?” I said, looking at Reine. “What about ‘God, the Underachiever,’ that story Kip submitted to the workshop last fall? The one where the West Indian woman crosses the Caribbean on an inner tube? Last I checked, Kip isn’t a West Indian woman.” I broke off. I waited for them to respond. “And that story’s in first-person no less,” I added.

“Gee, Brock. Way to throw me under the bus,” Kip said.

Drusilla and Reine laughed. Professor Gordon just sat there, leaning back in his throne – a Caesar watching gladiators in the Colosseum.

Incidentally, Professor Gordon was like Boullée, the French architect who had a lot of great ideas but in his whole life only managed to build *one* building – the exquisite *Hotel Alexandre*. Professor Gordon had written only one novel, and it’d been published more than a decade earlier, but it was a knockout, a literary sensation called *Jamal Had Nothing to Do with It*.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Reine said, sitting at the big, round, workshop table. “I *liked* your story, Brock. I *liked* your story.”

“I liked it, too!” Drusilla exclaimed. “All white people are racists. Even the ones we least suspect of being racists. Right on, comrade.”

“Exactly,” Reine said, looking at Drusilla. “White people don’t even *realize* they’re racists. If you’re a black female and you’re in a long-term relationship with a white male, don’t be so sure your guy isn’t actually a racist.”

(Drusilla and Reine sounded the same. They were like twins, finishing each other’s sentences in some cases. They were the Borg.)

“I liked it,” Reine shrugged, looking at me. “I *liked* your story, Brock.”

“Okay, Reine. But I think you misunderstood it.”

“I like the confluence of love and hate,” Drusilla slipped in.

“Yeah,” Reine said, looking at Drusilla. “Interesting observation, Dru.”

Professor Gordon just sat there, letting us go at it. No one would address the thing I’d said about Kip’s story, “God, the Underachiever.”

“I just wonder, though,” Reine said to me, “if you should bowdlerize the African American character, Brock.”

“*Bowdlerize?*” I said.

“Take her out,” Reine explained.

“I know what *bowdlerize* means,” I said. “But how am I going to take out the African American character? I mean, she’s such an integral part of the story.”

“Well, I don’t mean take her out,” Reine said, reversing herself, looking up at the ceiling of the War Room, thinking. Then she looked at *me* and said, “Like, I’m not saying she shouldn’t be a character in the story, Brock.”

“She should be an *Unseen* Character,” Kip said, helpfully.

“*Yes! Exactly!*” Reine said, snapping her fingers, looking at Kip. “Thank you, comrade.”

“Like Godot,” Kip said, looking back at Reine.

“*Yes!*” Reine said again. “An *Unseen* Character. That’s it!”

“We don’t *see* her at all. Or hear from her,” Kip explained, looking at me.

“Right,” Reine said.

“I like the idea that the protagonist has this...shall we say...*contretemps*...” Kip said.

“*Contretemps?*” Reine said, suspiciously.

“...and then the protagonist spends the rest of the story in a state of deep introspection,” Kip said, “wondering how he could have said such a thing, wondering what got into him. *I like that! Yes, I do like that!* But the thing is, Brock, we don’t need *her* for that. Know what I mean?”

“Really, comrade, a white male should *not* be writing POCs,” Reine said, sternly, looking at me, shaking her head. “It’s the equivalent of black face, Brock. It’s black face.”

“Totally,” Drusilla agreed, looking at Reine.

“I like the idea that this whole story is really just about *him*,” Kip continued. “The rich, white, heterosexual male coming to terms with his own racism.”

“By the way, Brock,” Drusilla began, “I thought the sex scene at the beginning was too explicit.”

I looked at Drusilla. She was looking at me from across the big, round, workshop table.

“Like, it was too pornographic for my money,” she said. “Too *much*, Brock.”

Professor Gordon nodded.

“Yeah. Brock really lingers on the sex, doesn’t he?” Professor Gordon said.

“Totally,” Drusilla said, disgustedly.

“Yeah. Maybe describe the sex in a cursory way,” Kip suggested, looking at me.

“Cursory?” I said, turning to Kip.

“One small paragraph,” Drusilla said, speaking on Kip’s behalf. “Two or three lines. Get in, get out.”

Kip smiled, cheekily, and said, “Pun intended, comrade?”

“But the sex is important,” I insisted, looking at all four them – Kip and Drusilla and Reine and Professor Gordon. “It’s important the readers understand they’re having this really hot, loud, angry sex. With lots of dirty

talk. Lots of cussing. Lots of calling each other ‘motherfucker’ and ‘bitch’ and ‘whore.’ That’s his defense, you see. He got carried away with the dirty talk.”

“Carried away with the dirty talk?” Reine said, squinting at me. “That makes negative sense, Brock. Dirty talk is one thing, but racism is something else. Anyway, you can get all that information in without *lingering* on the sex.”

“Yes, comrade,” Drusilla said, looking at Reine. “Yes.”

“Go fast when you think you should go slow,” Professor Gordon said, looking at me, leaning back in his throne. “Go slow when you think you should go fast.”

“Isn’t it *slowly*?” I said, looking at Professor Gordon.

“Anyway, dial the language back a couple notches,” Drusilla said, looking at me nauseously.

“Seriously, comrade, you don’t need all that...*description*,” Reine said.

CHAPTER THREE
CINEPHILES

I was further ostracized one night after workshop when Kip and I went to the Tomato Head. I hate to sound like such a martyr, but the fact is I was ostracized. I mean, I hate to sound so self-pitying, but I was indeed ostracized at the University of Tennessee.

Drusilla and Reine said they were too tired and would be “sitting this one out.” Reine said she had to work on her paper for a course she was taking called Global Cap Neo-Colonial Inequalities. My cohorts and I were, mind you, *required* to take lit. classes – we would take literature and write fiction concurrently. At least we wouldn’t have to teach composition, a responsibility a lot of *other* creative writing programs were foisting on *their* students in exchange for tuition, the stipend. Incidentally, this was a *de novo* creative writing program, and UT had yet to hire more faculty. At the time, Professor Gordon was the only instructor.

Before leaving McClung Tower, I’d used the computer lab on the eleventh floor to print some readings I needed for my Cinema class the following morning (we were allowed to take Cinema in lieu of literature), and I’d told Kip I would meet him at The Tomato Head in about half hour. Now I was sitting down at the four top. The server with the port wine stain on his face brought me a Hefeweizen, my usual drink.

“I’ve been waiting for almost an *hour*,” Kip said, looking at his Breitling.

“A bit of a SNAFU getting here,” I explained, pulling my chair in. “Forgot the free trolley doesn’t run this late. Had to take an Uber.”

Before moving south, from Michigan, I’d gotten rid of my car to save money on car payments, insurance, parking, gas... Now I took the free trolley everywhere, which was a real pain in the ass when it came to getting groceries, so much so that I found myself spending *piles* of money in restaurants (Stock

& Barrel, the Public House, Casual Pint), or ordering in, racking up plenty of credit card debt, plenty of *dough-rvi-me*, which defeated the purpose of getting rid of my car in the first place.

“Why *did* you get rid of your car, anyway?” Kip said. “Was it to reduce your dependence on fossil fuels?”

“I wanted to save money,” I explained.

Kip looked disappointed. He looked down at the menu in front of him.

“You didn’t feel like Soccer Taco?” I said.

“Excuse me?” Kip said.

“Soccer Taco,” I said again, enunciating.

“Soccer Taco?” Kip said, looking at me. “The Mexican place? The sports bar? Oh, that is so *déclassé*, Brock. That is so *déclassé*. A bunch of Neanderthals hooting and screaming at the television, watching the World Cup or whatever. A bunch of Homo Erectus watching...[gulp]...*sports*. And yet, I must admit Tom Brady *is* rather hunky.”

“Okay,” I said, looking at the menu.

“Anyway,” Kip said, “what readings did you need to print?”

I sighed.

“Oh, just some stuff Dr. Townsend put online,” I said, trying to remember. “Um, a few essays by Andrew Sarris. An essay by Pauline Kael. An essay by Slavoj Žižek.”

“Which essays?” Kip asked.

“Gosh, I didn’t even look at them yet,” I said, concernedly. “Just some stuff on Auteur Theory, I think. Some stuff about Serge Eisenstein, too.”

“And you need to read them for tomorrow?” Kip said.

“Yes,” I said, laughing. “My class isn’t until 1:00, though.”

“Eisenstein’s a genius,” Kip said. “Eisenstein was a fucking *genius*.”

He looked down at the crisp paper menu in his hands.

“You think so?” I said. “I’m not really into international cinema.”

There was a moment of silence.

“*Excuse me?*” Kip said, looking at me in mind-bending horror.

“I like *American* cinema,” I said. “Directors like Tarantino, Scorsese, Coppola, Kubrick...”

“And Mel Gibson,” Kip said. “You like Mel Gibson.”

“Yes, I do,” I said, unapologetically. “Love him, in fact.”

“Even though he’s a racist,” Kip said.

“That’s right,” I said. “Even though he’s a racist.”

Kip rolled his eyes.

“Anyway,” he said, “what about films like *400 Blows*, *A Tokyo Story*, *Wild Strawberries*, *The Bicycle Thieves*, *Exterminating Angel?*”

“I *kind of* like Peter Greenaway,” I said, trying to placate him.

“What about Kurosawa?” Kip said.

“Nah. I happen to think *High and Low* is amateurish,” I said.

“Amateurish?” Kip said. “Are you on bath salts, Brock?”

“It’s amateurish,” I said again, shrugging. “That scene where the protagonist realizes his son has been kidnapped. It feels...I don’t know...rushed or something.”

“Claude Chabrol?” Kip said. “Buñuel? What about Eric Rohmer, Brock? What about Antonioni, Fellini, Visconti, De Sica? *Really, how can you say you don’t like international cinema?*”

“I guess I like Pasolini?” I said, wondering if that would appease him.

“What about Goddard?” Kip said. “Truffaut?”

“I tried watching *Bande a Part*,” I said. “I thought it was dreck.”

“Ugh, you need to grow up, comrade,” Kip said to me, giving me a stern look – almost warning me. “International cinema is *way* better than American cinema.”

He lifted his cross-and-olives lowball and took a sip of Whitmeyer’s. Kip wasn’t long for the world. His death was coming at him like a meteor. In the winter of 2018, Kip Masterson would be murdered by his own creation.

Incidentally, Kip was simply wrong here. He was simply wrong. Ask any oenophile, and he or she will tell you that French wine is superior to American wine, *period*, no asterisk. A similar thing was happening here, with film: American cinema *was* superior to international cinema, just like German beer was superior to other beers, just like Swiss watches are better than other watches. But I could see Kip felt strongly about this, so I didn’t push the issue. *I wanted to get along! I wanted to make friends!*

“The cinematography, all those old studio emblems,” Kip said. “The nostalgia. The emotion. Black-and-white films feel...more...*emotional* somehow. Films like *Rocco and His Brothers*. Films like *400 Blows* and *A Tokyo Story* and *Bicycle Thieves*. The *emotions*, Brock. The drama. Old European films tend to be more dramatic, weepy. They’re romantic, beautiful. [A quick sip of his Whitmeyer’s here.] Meanwhile, American films are NASCAR, high-octane. It’s all *Fast and the Furious* Nicolas Cage bullshit.” This was becoming a dissertation. “What about Noe, Brock? What are your thoughts on Gaspar Noe?”

“Gee,” I said. “Don’t you think Noe’s films are...like...pornography, Kip? Porn-adjacent?”

Kip leaned forward and said, “How fucking dare you, Brock? How fucking *dare* you?”

For a moment, I thought he might throw his drink in my face. His Whitmeyer’s.

“Noe’s films are beautiful,” Kip said, through clenched teeth. “They’re fucking beautiful, Brock. Haven’t you seen *Love*?”

I had, unfortunately, seen *Love*. The first hour or so. Then I'd turned it off. In fact, *Love* is just what I'd had in mind when I'd called Noe's films pornography. *Love was pornography!* It was filth, smut. With several protracted love scenes, unstimulated sex. The sex was totally gratuitous, unwarranted.

Kip quoted a line from *Love*: "I want to make art out of blood, sperm, and tears," he said, quoting the central character. "That's my favorite line, Brock. That's my favorite line." He was getting choked up a bit. "I fucking love that line. I fucking love that movie."

I laughed at him, mockingly.

"What are *your* favorite films, then?" Kip said, suddenly brimming with hostility. "Go on. What are *your* favorite films, Brock?"

"*Die Hard*," I said, "*Apocalypse Now*, *There Will Be Blood*, *Vincent and Theo*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*..."

"*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*?" Kip interrupted, squinting at me from across the table. "Surely you jest, Brock. Surely you jest. That is so *déclassé*, Brock. Ugh, that is...like...so *déclassé*."

"It's a masterpiece," I said, smiling. "Go back and watch it again, Kip."

"*Again?* I'll have you know I have *never* seen *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*," Kip said, proudly. "Nor will I *ever* see *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*."

He took another sip of his Whitmeyer's.

"What people fail to realize about *TCM* is that it's actually not that bloody," I lectured. "It employs what I call 'the Dorsal Fin Theory.' In other words, it's what you *don't* see, Kip. The *implication* of violence that makes it truly horrifying."

"*You dolt!*" Kip said. "*You colossal dolt!* Don't you know the French director, Jacques Tourneur, originated that concept with his 1942 film *Cat People*?" He rolled his eyes. "And yet you can't be bothered with international cinema. Isn't that right, you humungous dunce?"

"It's genius," I said. "I mean, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is genius. It's such a ride. You can't take your eyes off it, Kip. You can't take your eyes off it."

It was true: *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was indeed a brilliant masterpiece. It may not have had ideology going for it, like *The Bicycle Thieves*, but it had all the aesthetics. It may not have been a statement about class, but it had writing, acting, cinematography...

“Who’s your favorite director, then?” Kip asked, super confrontationally. “Your favorite *director*?”

“Gotta be Renny Harlin,” I told Kip, just to fuck with him.

“Renny Harlin?” Kip said, outraged. “Renny fuckin’ Harlin? The director of *Die Hard 2* and *Nightmare on Elm Street 4*?”

“I love *Die Hard*,” I said, and I meant it. “The *original Die Hard*.”

Incidentally, for a long time, I’d been toying with the idea of a *Die Hard* *apologia*, not that *Die Hard* needed an *apologia*. I would “pop the hood” and analyze the film and make fresh observations about the “text” and maybe even publish an article in *Cahiers du Cinema* or *Sight & Sound* that would forever lift *Die Hard* out of that “cognitive-junk-food” status and raise it to the plane of “art film.” I was *obsessed* with *Die Hard*. I loved the production design, the *mise-en-scene*... Incidentally, experts say women tend to be interested in *people* whereas men tend to be interested in *things*. *Die Hard*, then, is unapologetically androcentric, with machine guns and C4 plastic explosives... I fucking loved *Die Hard*! It was a masterpiece.

“Brock, are you *trying* to make me mad?” Kip said. “Are you trying to make me mad, Brock?”

I laughed.

“Kip, I’m teasing you,” I said, smiling. “I really don’t have a favorite director, Kip. Though I do love Coppola. And Mel Gibson.”

“You’re a philistine,” Kip said, looking at his crisp paper menu again. “Jesus Christ, comrade. I can’t *believe* you don’t like Gaspar Noe.” He was shaking his head, smirking. “Wait ‘til I tell our comrades you don’t like Gaspar Noe.”

“*Excuse me?*” I said.

“Wait ‘til I tell Drusilla and Reine you don’t like Noe.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Kip?”

“I mean, how can you claim to be a cinematiste if you don’t like Noe?” Kip explained. “How can you claim to be an artist, Brock?”

“Have I *ever* claimed to be an artist, Kip?”

“You know, Brock, I wore a diaper when I went to see *Love*.”

“*A diaper?*” I said, “You have *got* to be kidding me, Kip. You’re putting me on.”

“No,” Kip said, shaking his head. “No, I’m not. Some friends and I did it together, back when I lived in Brooklyn. We all wore diapers when we went to see *Love*. Depends Adult Undergarments. It was a bit of goof. We were all movie mad, cinephiles, watching *Every Frame a Painting* religiously. We didn’t want to miss a frame, Brock. Not a single frame. Not one. That’s how important Noe is to us. A Noe film is an *event*. We’d been waiting to see his new film for months. And when it was released in theaters, we wore diapers.”

He got up from the table. He was so disgusted with my taste in film I thought he might leave The Tomato Head right then and there without paying his bill. But then I saw that he was only going to the bathroom.

Sitting at the wooden table, at The Tomato Head, I watched as Kip emerged from the bathroom. He was quite tall and trim, with wavy blonde hair, olive skin, and glittery blue swimming pools for eyes.

He was walking down the tight hallway. He crossed the dining room. As Kip homed in on our four top, he looked at the men at a neighboring table. He couldn’t stop staring at them. I wondered if he was attracted to them, but then I noticed he was looking at them disgustedly. When he sat down, I asked him what he was looking at.

“Those guys,” he said, horrified, keeping his voice down. “They’re wearing basketball shorts.”

Inconspicuously I looked over my shoulder, at the men in question. Indeed, they *were* wearing basketball shorts, the mesh kind. And t-shirts to boot.

I happened to be wearing a white t-shirt *myself*. Except I was wearing it under a heavy tweed jacket with a blue-and-white pocket square that vaguely resembled Wedgewood china. (I was delighted with tonight’s outfit, actually.)

“So plebian,” Kip said, looking at the men. “So plebian, Brock.”

“Oh, come on,” I laughed.

“Brock, this is *The Tomato Head*,” Kip explained. “The Tomato Head is kind of swank for a pizza place. Those guys shouldn’t be dressed like that, Brock. If they want to dress like that, they should go somewhere with peanuts all over the floor, you know? Or maybe they should go to your beloved Soccer Taco.”

“I do like Soccer Taco,” I said, unabashedly.

“I know you do,” Kip said, rolling his eyes.

“Gee, Kip,” I said.

“Bunch of rednecks,” Kip said, looking at the transgressors. “I mean, that’s so...like...low-rent. So *déclassé*. I bet they wear overalls, too. I bet they wear fucking overalls.”

He started laughing. He snorted.

I looked at Kip’s mini glen plaid, the heavy cream turtleneck underneath. Kip looked fabulous tonight. I must admit he looked fabulous.

“I happen to think every man should wear jackets and button-down shirts,” Kip said. “At all times.”

“You’re crazy,” I said.

“Wingtips or tassel loafers, dark Rick Owens denim.”

“*Rick Owens?*” I said, outraged. “Those jeans are...like...three-hundred dollars, Kip.”

“Knit ties, square at the bottom,” Kip continued. “*Rep* ties. In the winter, they should wear topcoats. Yes, camelhair is acceptable – I have a camelhair topcoat myself. And, yes, in the summer, men *can* wear shorts, but they have to have five-inch inseams, *no exceptions!* And polo shirts are acceptable, too, but no t-shirts, *ever*. No fucking way, Brock. To hell with t-shirts. T-shirts should never have been invented IMO.”

“I’m wearing a t-shirt right now, Kip.”

“Yeah, and you should go home and change *prestissimo*,” Kip said, looking me up and down, from across the table, snapping his fingers. “But at least you’re wearing a tweed jacket. Props there, Brock. Props there. *And, for God’s sake, at least you’re not wearing basketball shorts!*”

He looked over my shoulder, at the sartorially challenged men.

“And, while I’m at it, no graphic tees. *Yuck*. No Metallica tees, for God’s sake. I shouldn’t even have to say it. And another thing, Brock: People should stay away from loud colors. Like, have some *taste* why don’t you? Have some goddamn *taste*. No bright yellows or pinks. If you’re going to wear colors, they should be muted, pastels. But I do tend to hate things that are polychromatic. The bottom line is everyone should look more or less the same, Brock. Everyone should look more or less the same. Like they did in the forties.”

I laughed at him.

“And you think every man should dress this way?”

“What did I just say?” Kip said, frustratedly, raising his voice a hair. “Everyone should look more or less the same, Brock. Like they did in the forties.”

He took a sip of his Whitmeyer’s.

“Brock, do you see the way the undergrads at UT dress? Fucking sweatpants, Brock. It’s ridiculous. Buncha dopes. There ought to be a law, an ordinance, a policy, *at the very least recommendations in the student handbook!*”

“You’re funny, Kip.”

“Why, Brock? Why am I funny?”

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “You’re just funny.”

The truth is I was falling in love with Kip. I’m not gay or anything, but I found him adorable. Of course, I had no idea what was coming, what would happen to him. It was coming at him like a tidal wave. And Kip wouldn’t just be murdered – he’d be *tortured*, stabbed dozens of times all over his body. The medical examiner would find knife marks on all twenty-four of his ribs.

Anyway, I was falling in love with Kip. The truth is I was falling in love with him.

“Go on,” Kip insisted. “Tell me why I’m funny, asshole.”

“*Asshole?*”

“*Why am I funny?*” Kip said, impatiently. “*Why am I funny, Brock?*”

“Well,” I began, “for one thing, you insist on calling it ‘the cinema,’ whereas most of us would just call it ‘the movies.’”

Kip rolled his eyes.

“Well, isn’t there something *déclassé* about saying ‘the movies?’” he said. “Don’t you think that’s *déclassé*, Brock?”

“Or sometimes I’ll hear you calling it ‘the pictures,’” I said.

“That’s what Scorsese calls it,” Kip said. “Not that I’m into Scorsese or anything. I’m only into international cinema, of course.”

“You insist on saying ‘cycle,’ Kip. Whereas the rest of us would just say ‘bike’ – as in, ‘I biked to the movies’ or ‘I rode my bike to the movies’ or ‘I took my bike to class.’”

Kip rolled his eyes, yet again.

“Brock, I believe in effective written and verbal communication,” he said. “I’m a *writer*, Brock.”

“Yeah. So am I,” I reminded him.

“Now if I say, ‘I took my bike to class,’ some people might think I’m a *biker*. You see, Brock? Do you see the distinction?”

I laughed.

“Biker, Kip? You shop at Brooks Brothers, dude.”

CHAPTER FOUR
THE ATROCITOLOGIST

There is not much else to say about my first year at The University of Tennessee – it was rather uneventful, actually.

I was hectored further one night at The Library, another bar we liked. Somehow, it was discovered that my father had worked for Dow Chemical, and the Super Scolds called me and my family “war profiteers,” since Dow sold Agent Orange to the United States military during the Vietnam War. Kip said my family and I ought to commit mass suicide like the Goebbels family.

I’d had quite enough of this treatment, and when Kip said that, I seriously thought about cutting his head off right then and there, at The Library. I would stand there, on the table, like *Persens with the Head of Medusa* – one of my favorite sculptures of all time, incidentally – holding Kip’s head, listening as the blood plopped on the table *fortissimo*. I wanted to decapitate *all* of them, in fact. Reine and Drusilla, too. I would build a small pyramid out of their heads. I would shrink their heads and use them to decorate my Christmas tree. One night, I had a dream about my cohorts. I cast a spell on Drusilla and Reine and Kip, and within twenty minutes, they were overcome with unimaginable rage and started ripping each other to pieces like Mandingo fighters. I sat there watching. I smiled wickedly.

I spent my summer vacation at my older brother’s house in Franklin, TN, a rich Nashville suburb. Jonathan and his girls – his wife, his two young daughters, Ramesses and Nancypants – lived in a tony neighborhood called West Haven, a super zip I sometimes referred to as Elysium. The houses in this neighborhood were Georgians – some red, others palomino – with lantern wall sconces, white doors, and boxwood hedges at the front. The

houses were recessed, though not too far, behind black wrought-iron fences, estate gates.

That summer, I saw several fit moms in yoga pants, new mothers papooosing up and down the shady sidewalks, or in some cases pedaling Bunch Bikes brimming with their brood.

The West Havenites were world beaters, reading self-help books like *The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People*, *Psycho-Cybernetics*, *Mindset*. They ran marathons, triathlons like the Ironman. They researched study techniques and test-taking tips – the Spacing Effect, the Pomodoro Technique, the Leitner System. They read books like *Spark* and *Eat that Frog* and *How We Learn*, not to help *themselves* so much, but to help their kids achieve academic outcomes. They were highly competitive. They believed firmly in competence hierarchies. They believed in metacognitive self-regulation. They looked into breathing techniques, meditation, gratitude journals. All of this I've only imagined, of course. Except one day, sitting in a West Haven coffee shop, I did overhear a West Havenite male at a neighboring table. He was telling his young son, with cage-fighter intensity, that he needed to “read [his] teacher’s feedback, even if [he] got an A on the assignment.” The man was grinding his teeth, hard. He told his son, with intense coke-head focus, “You are a self-guided missile, a highly complex automatic goal-seeking machine that steers its way to a target by use of feedback data, servo mechanically correcting course where necessary. You’ve got to read your teacher’s feedback. You’ve got to course correct, zigzagging your way to the target. *Do you hear me in there?*”

Surely, the association fees were astronomical here, but to be fair, West Haven did have its own topnotch preschool and grade school, and the kids here would receive a classical education, or so I imagined, learning everything from Socrates, to St. Thomas Aquinas, to Francis Bacon, to Hobbes and Locke and Mill, etc., and they would wear blazers with crests on the breasts, tartan skirts, pleated pants, whiskey penny loafers, etc. Elysium had a resident’s club at the center – a gym, a double-decker tennis court, a verdant eighteen-hole golf course. The resident’s club had three pools, and one of the pools had a two-story water slide. It should come as no surprise, then, that Elysium had beautification ordinances. (Otherwise, why go to all the trouble?) The HOA ensured no one would paint their houses pink – freedom of expression had its limits, for God’s sake. Elysium was propitious, a state-of-the-art laboratory where children were *engineered* for success.

Kip would have *liked* Elysium – there were no overalls, no ragamuffins, no dreadlocks or Lynnyrd Skynnyrd beards, no Sex Pistols wannabes, no face tats or tattoo sleeves or Prince Albert piercings, non guynier, none of the “sartorially challenged,” as Kip liked to call them.

Except Kip would probably call it a Whitetopia. He’d probably call the West Havenites – if that’s even what they’re called – greedy capitalists, mossbacked conservatives in their lily-white Edenic neighborhood, with their horrible tennis whites, go-getters who aren’t doing enough to help the underprivileged.

During the day – while Jonathan and his wife, Melissa, were working and their two little girls, Ramesses and Nancy, were at day camp – I would drive Jonathan’s golf cart around Elysium. I’d go to the coffee shop across the street from the resident’s club. Or I’d go to the Mexican place, Oscar’s, where I would eat shrimp tacos; and I would drink *Dos Equis*, or *Pacifico*, even as early as 1:00, and I would drink as much as I wanted, since I was only driving the golf cart, something that didn’t go very fast and couldn’t do much damage if I drunkenly bashed it into someone’s parked Land Rover, and sometimes, in the middle of the day, I would go home and take a disco nap, a *siesta*, then return to Oscar’s and work some more on my fiction, stories like “A Lovely Megadeath” and “Metacognition.” How, incidentally, was I going to change “Metacognition”? Would I take Reine’s advice and “bowdlerize” the African American woman, the protagonist’s girlfriend, whom he calls the n-word one night during sex? *Should a white male refrain from writing BIPOC or ALAANA at all times? Was the story even viable? Was it offensive? Was it too offensive? Or were the wokesters once more stifling the creative afflatus?*

On a few occasions, I babysat for Ramesses and Nancy, my little nieces. My instructions: If the girls wanted to watch a movie, they could watch *The Sound of Music* or *Mary Poppins*. If it was a Saturday night, the kids could have bananas with organic peanut butter, but they absolutely *had* to be in bed by 9:00. “And please instruct them to use their egg timers as they brush their teeth,” Melissa said to me. “Oh, and Nancy can play *Red Dead Redemption* for two hours *maximum*. I mean it, Brock. *Two hours maximum! I don’t want her playing video games all night!*”

Nancy and Ramesses had never had a Coke. They’d never experienced fast food.

Ten-year-old Ramesses was in Mensa. Melissa had bragged that she was going to be wildly successful – she’d go on to attend Harvard and become an attorney and run for Senate and then maybe president. For now, though, Ramesses liked Legos. She enjoyed watching *Lego Masters* on Hulu. “The Louis Sullivan of Legos,” I called Ramesses.

Ramesses liked domino art. She enjoyed making elaborate domino spirals. In the summer of 2016, one year earlier, she’d built a domino spiral with 32,000 dominos. She worked on it all summer. She recorded the entire process on her iPhone and uploaded a time-lapsed video to YouTube – now she had a semi-popular YouTube channel.

One night, Ramesses and I were playing with balsa blocks in the playroom.

“*Limited as to the ground, business seeks the air!*” I proclaimed, sitting on the floor, with Ramesses, quoting Lincoln Steffens, a knickerbocker reporter in the early twentieth century.

It was a Friday night, and Jonathan and Melissa had gone to dinner, then to a revival theater where *Die Hard* was playing. I told Jonathan and Melissa how much I loved *Die Hard*. Incidentally, it was then that I told Jonathan about my cohort Kip Masterson, a strange fellow who’d given me such a hard time for my taste in film, my so-called “cultural chauvinism.” Together, Jonathan and I laughed about the Woke Rangers.

“I’m really interested in that period in American history,” I told Ramesses, sitting with her, on the playroom floor. “That period when Americans were going ‘skyscraper crazy.’” And then, excitedly, I said, “*Hey, Ramesses! Do you know one small invention that changed the world forever? One tiny little invention that changed the world forever? Elisha Otis’s safety mechanism! Elisha Otis’s safety mechanism!*”

“Spellbinding,” Ramesses said.

(She reminded me of my students back in Michigan. At the community college I taught at. She could be such a sarcastic little *twat*.)

“So...like...let’s say you’re standing in an elevator, and the suspension cable snaps,” I said. “Before Otis’s safety mechanism, the elevator would have plummeted to the ground and the people in the elevator would have fallen to their deaths.” I thought about Einstein. “But with the safety mechanism,

these little hook things would...like...reach out...and...like...grab the sides of the elevator shaft. And then the elevator would only fall a few inches or so. No fatalities.”

“Fascinating,” Ramesses said, flatly.

I laughed.

“*Well that’s my point!*” I exclaimed. “It’s such a boring technology, isn’t it, Ram?” I took a quick sip of wine. I could sometimes get drunk on my own observations. “And yet, think how it changed things, Ramesses. This stupid little invention. The company, Otis Elevator. *They changed the American skyline forever, Ram!* Now people felt *comfortable* riding in elevators, you see? So now we could build skyscrapers as tall as we wanted. *Hyper-scrappers! And people would go in them! It was the Dawn of the Vertical City, Ramesses! The conquest of the air!* I’m interested in that general period of American history – the Gilded Age, New Imperialism, American Renaissance, the ‘City Beautiful’ movement. I *love* Barnett Newman, those minimalist paintings with those single vertical stripes, a subtle reference to mankind’s vertical aspirations. Anyway, it’s funny the way tiny inventions like the safety mechanism change the world forever. Other examples include the stirrup, rudders...”

“Ugh, but anyone with half a brain can see why rudders would be revolutionary,” Ramesses said. “By the way, did you know modern rudders were invented by the Chinese?”

“Yes, I did know that, Ramesses. As a matter of fact, I did know that.”

“And the stirrup,” Ramesses said. “That’s easy, too. Before stirrups, a *cavalier* would...like...hit someone with a lance and be knocked off her own horse as a result of the impact.”

“*Her* own horse, Ramesses? *Her* own horse?”

“It doesn’t take a genius to figure out how the stirrup could change things forever,” Ramesses said, frustratedly.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right, Ramesses. I suppose you’re right.”

We were sitting together on the floor. In the big colorful playroom. Ramesses was sitting cross-legged, building a tower out of Balsa blocks. She was having fun, seeing how tall she could make it before the tower fell over – I thought it was a dumb game for such a smart little girl. She was wearing little moccasins,

Nike sweatpants. I was building the *Villa Rotundo* in Northern Italy. For a few minutes, Ramesses and I just played together in total silence. And then...

“Uncle Brock, do my mom and dad call you Broccoli?”

“That’s their nickname for me,” I said. “You know, kind of like how they call your sister Nancy pants.”

“Uncle Brock, why do they call you Brokester Brock?” Ramesses said.

“*Who* calls me that?” I said.

“My mom and dad,” Ramesses tattled. “They call you Brokester Brock. Behind your back, of course.”

“Hmmm,” I said. “Well, I suppose that’s on account of my impecunity,” I said, sadly.

“Impecunity?” Ramesses said.

“The state of having very little money,” I explained.

“My mom says you’re on a hardship program with Discover,” Ramesses said.

“You know, that’s really no one’s business,” I said.

“My mom says you’ve been using plastic cutlery for so long that you’re probably infertile by now,” Ramesses said.

I sighed.

“Well, they do say ingested microplastics are causing male infertility.”

“Uncle Brock, are you an author?” Ramesses said.

“Not yet,” I said.

“But you will be one day?” Ramesses said. “Like, when you grow up?”

“That’s my dream,” I said.

“But don’t you think you’re kinda old?” Ramesses said, squinting at me. “Like, don’t you think that ship has sailed?”

“I’m thirty-two!” I exclaimed.

“That’s middle-aged,” Ramesses said.

“Middle-aged?” I said. And then I thought for a moment. And then I realized she was correct. “Actually, you’re right,” I said. “I suppose thirty-two *is* middle-aged, Ramesses. Huh.”

“Uncle Brock, how come you’re not married? How come you don’t have a girlfriend?”

“I dunno,” I shrugged. “I just...you know...haven’t found anyone yet. That happens to some people. Nothing wrong with it.”

“Uncle Brock, have you published any stories or anything?” Ramesses said.

“Not yet,” I said. “But I’m working on it. I’m not worried. This is still anyone’s game, Ramesses. This is still anyone’s game. And, anyway, it’s quality, not quantity, you know?”

“Ugh, that’s such a cliché,” Ramesses said.

“In other words, maybe I’ll be like Donna Tart,” I said. “She’s fifty and has only published three novels but they’re all masterpieces. I happen to think that’s kind of baller, don’t you?”

“Baller?” Ramesses said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I think there’s something kinda baller about that.” And then I said, “Don’t *you* have any dreams, Ramesses? Like, maybe you want to be an architect one day?”

“Uncle Brock, did you know that *birds* are architects?”

“Or maybe you want to be an architectural *critic*, like Reyner Banham?” I said. “Or how about an *art* critic, like Hilton Kramer, or Ernst Gombrich, or Robert Hughes? Ever see that docuseries Hughes did, *American Visions*? It’s amazing, Ramesses. Or what about his Goya documentary? You know, I sometimes think critics are just as artistic as the artists themselves. Or maybe you’d like to be the next Iris Chang, author of nonfiction books like *The Rape of Nanking*?”

“*I want to be Taylor Swift!*” Ramesses exclaimed, looking at me, sort of bouncing.

“You mean vapid?” I said.

“*Taylor Swift is a genius!*” Ramesses said.

“Wouldn’t you rather be Nadine Strossen, former president of the ACLU?”

“Taylor Swift says I, too, can be a superstar.”

“Well,” I said, “it’s important to remember that celebrities are essentially companies. Companies try to appear altruistic, because according to research, consumers are more likely to buy products from companies that appear altruistic. So businesswomen like Taylor Swift try to appear altruistic. Because there’s *money* in appearing altruistic. And Taylor Swift wants to increase sales. So she tells little girls like you and Nancy pants they can be whatever they want. Because that’s an altruistic message. But the truth is you *can’t* be whatever you want. And Taylor Swift *knows* that. *She’s a goddamn liar, Ramesses!*”

(The truth is I’d had a bit too much to drink. My sister-in-law, Melissa, would have killed me for getting drunk in front of her daughters.)

“She’s not altruistic at all, you see? Taylor Swift is just trying to make money. Don’t get me wrong, Ramesses: Women *can* become evolutionary biologists, United States senators, Supreme Court Justices... But you can’t be Beyoncé, or Taylor Swift, or Meryl Streep. See the difference? You’re not going to be a superstar. There’s no chance of that, Ramesses. No chance. It’s a big fat lie.”

I took another sip of wine. I looked at Ramesses – her eyes were puddling now.

“Still, I say reach for the stars,” I said, looking at the tears in my niece’s eyes. “*Reach for the stars, Ramesses! Sky’s the limit! Conquest of the air, Ram! Conquest of the air!*”

“You know, you’re like civilization itself,” Ramesses said, bitterly, “constantly trying to put out the fire of magic in us.”

I tilted my head to the side and just looked at her for a moment. Such brilliant insights, even for a kid in Mensa. In fact, I sometimes wondered if the girl

was not a girl at all but a grown woman, thirty-five years old, a grown woman with a growth hormone deficiency.

“Civilization says go to work and punch the clock,” Ramesses elaborated. “Civilization says don’t ask questions or dream big. *You* are Civilization, Uncle Brock. *You* are Civilization itself.”

And then I got kind of angry and said, “*They* are lying to you, Ramesses. They’re lying to you, and they’re lying to little Nancypants down the hall there.” I gestured to the door to the playroom. “I’m not trying to stamp out anything. I’m trying to *help* you.”

It was then that Nancypants started having a conniption in her bedroom down the hall. Ramesses and I both heard it. I got up and went down the hall to check on my younger niece. I tapped on Nancy’s open door, letting her know I was there.

“Everything okay in here?”

Nancypants was sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor in front of her TV, playing *The Witcher 3*, another open-world role-playing game.

“*It’s almost impossible!*” she exclaimed, frustratedly. “*It’s almost impossible!*”

“You mean the game?”

“Getting the witcher armor,” Nancy explained. “You need the eyeball of an ogre, the tooth of a sea creature... You can’t even fuckin’ find...”

“*Whoa!*” I interrupted, as though Nancy were a horse. “*Easy there, Nance! Easy on the language there, Nancypants!* It’s just a game, right?”

Nancy turned to me slowly. She looked up at me and told me to fuck off.

On another occasion, Ramesses and I played Scrabble downstairs, at the dinner table. It was another Friday night, and Jonathan and Melissa had gone to a party somewhere in the depths of Elysium. Nancypants was upstairs, playing *Fallout 2*, her all-time-favorite open-world RPG.

“My teacher says men like you need to take your *feet* off our *necks*,” Ramesses said, sourly. “My teacher says women make seventy-seven cents for every dollar that men make.”

“How old are you again?”

“My teacher says men are cheating us.”

“Oh, that is such balderdash,” I said, drunkenly, and I took a sip of wine. “*Malarkey, Ramesses!* Listen to me, Ram. Listen to Uncle Brock for a moment, will you?”

“Why should *I* listen to *you*?” Ramesses said. “Are you the one in Mensa, Brock? Excuse me, but raise your hand if you’re in Mensa.”

Ramesses raised her hand.

“*Don’t be such a brat!*” I snapped. “Listen to me for a minute, will you? Women make less money than men because, generally speaking, they have different interests. Generally speaking, women are interested in *people*, whereas men are interested in *things*. Men are more likely to go into lucrative fields like engineering, whereas women are more likely to go into, say, early childhood education. To be sure, early childhood education *is* important. *Very* important, in fact. In fact, what would we do *without* those individuals? But it doesn’t pay well, Ram. Neither does feminist dance therapy, for instance. Or History of Consciousness, while I’m at it. Or Justice Studies. *Men are not cheating women, Ramesses! It’s a big fat lie, Ramesses! Another lie!*”

I could tell little Ramesses was getting angry.

“My teacher says rich, white, heterosexual males like you are the problem, Uncle Broccoli. She says *whiteness* is the problem. And not just whiteness as...like...a concept but literally white people. *White males.*”

“Your teacher told you that?”

“Excuse me, but which people slaughtered millions of Native Americans?”

“Well, actually, the Native Americans died mostly from European diseases,” I said. “It’s not that the white man was especially warring or murderous, Ramesses.”

“Which people slaughtered aborigines in Australia?” Ramesses said.

“Again,” I said, “*diseases.*”

“Which people enslaved Africans?” Ramesses said.

“You have me there,” I said, closing my eyes, putting my hands up. “The white man *did* enslave Africans for hundreds of years. But what people fail to realize, Ramesses, is that black people enslaved other black people after white people had *abolished* slavery. Two-hundred years ago, slavery was everywhere, Ramesses. It was all over the planet. Europeans enslaved other Europeans. Africans enslaved other Africans. Arabs enslaved other Arabs. Polynesians enslaved other Polynesians. And indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere enslaved other indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere. White people were the first people to *end* slavery.”

“Probably because they feared an uprising,” Ramesses said. “After the Haitian Revolution.”

“No,” I said. “It was the Enlightenment. It was the Enlightenment that set the stage for abolition.”

“Anyway, what did the Belgians do to the Congolese?” Ramesses said. “What did the British do in India?”

“What did Muslim slave traders do to the Congolese?” I said. “Tippoo Tib hunted Africans and put them in yokes. Was Tippoo Tib white, Ramesses? Was Tippoo Tib a rich, white, heterosexual male?”

“What did the Germans do to the Herreros?”

“What did the Nigerians do to the Ibos?” I shot back. “What did the Hutus do to the Tutsis? What did the Fulani do to the Hausas? What did the Zulu do to the indigenous peoples of southern Africa? What did the Zulus do to the British? Didn’t the Zulus hang British drummer boys up by their chins on butcher’s hooks and then disembowel them? Didn’t the Zulus kill the British POWs and take their mandibles as bearded trophies? What did the Japanese do to the Chinese at Nanking? *For God’s sake, do you know anything about the indescribable ruthlessness inflicted on the Chinese at Nanking???* Get this, Ramesses. Get this: Iris Chang committed suicide, so overcome was she by *weltschmerz* after writing *The Rape of Nanking*.”

I was getting worked up. I wanted to throw the Scrabble board across the room.

“Christ, what did Idi Amin do to the fucking Ugandans?” I said, drunkenly, raising my voice. “What about ISIS, Ramesses? ISIS beheading children in

northern Mozambique. What about the fucking Boko Haram? Anyway, look what the white man did *for* Africa, Ramesses. Look what the white man did *for* Africa. Africa and other places. Medicine, railroads, schools, expanded education, improved public health, the abolition of slavery, widened employment opportunities, the creation of basic infrastructure, women's rights..."

"Eurocentrism," Ramesses accused.

"*And when whites withdrew from Nigeria, things fell apart – just like things fell apart in Britain when the Romans withdrew. Anyway, ask novelist Chinua Achebe! He was there! In Nigeria! He was there the day the British withdrew from Nigeria! He was there, Ramesses! In Nigeria, they started killing each other the very day the British left. They started killing each other that day!* How do you explain that, Ramesses? How do you explain that? Colonialism is not innately bad, Ramesses. Colonialism is not *innately* bad. Like, it's not bad *per se*. In fact, colonialism could be understood as humanitarianism. *Yes, humanitarianism!* Okay, maybe King Leopold *did* get carried away, hacking people's hands and feet off, but colonialism is not *always* bad, Ramesses. In fact, East Africans were enslaving *other* East Africans deep into the twentieth century, right up until 1922, and it wasn't until the British colonized East Africa that the East Africans abolished slavery. The British and other western imperialists pressured Africa and Brazil and the Ottoman Empire to end slavery once and for all, even going as far as attacking slavers' vessels on the high seas, prompting the slavers to throw their human cargo, 'incriminating evidence' that it was, overboard. Of course, now, in this goddamn counter enlightenment, people don't know these things. Anyway, please tell me more about the 'white devil,' Ramesses. Yes, yes, please tell me more about the problem of whiteness, Ramesses, *YOU LITTLE BEE WITH AN ITCH!*"

"Well, which people were responsible for the deaths of millions of East Indians?" Ramesses said, not letting go of the rope, referring of course to the Bengal Famine.

"Oh, for God's sake," I said, rolling my eyes. "Are you even listening to me, Ramesses? *Are you even listening?*"

"Sixty million whites were killed by *other whites* under Stalin," said the little atrocitologist. "Six million whites were killed by *other whites* under Hitler. Uncle Brock, the sigh that is commensurate with the horrors of the Holocaust has not yet been invented."

"Oh, for God's sake," I said.

“That sigh that is commensurate has not been invented.”

“Where did you hear that, Ramesses? Where the fuck did you hear that, you precocious little shit?”

“There is no moan great enough,” she said, shaking her head in absolute horror, disgust at man’s inhumanity toward man. “The white man is *barbaric*, Uncle Brock. The white man is barbaric.”

“Okay,” I said. “Well, what about Saddam Hussein? What about Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge? Were *they* white, Ramesses? For God’s sake, history is one big hemoclysm, one big bloodbath. Going back, into history... What about the Assyrians? What about the Aztecs? What about the Mayans? What about the Incas? The Incas took over half of South America, Ramesses? *Half of South America!* The Aztecs built towers out of the skulls of the vanquished. So did Timur Lenk, the fourteenth-century ruler of Central Asia, known for his spectacular mass beheadings, his skull towers, skull minarets. Was Timur Lenk white, Ramesses? And, while I’m at it, what about the Native Americans? The Comanche *totally* had a history of conquest, Ramesses. *For God’s sake, the Comanche nearly exterminated the Tonks!* They nearly exterminated the Apaches, too. Were they white, Ramesses? *Were the Comanche white?*”

“No, but eighty-two percent of child pornographers are,” Ramesses said. “White males are heavily involved in child sex rings and child trafficking. White males founded NAMBLA.”

“Ugh, whatever, Ramesses. There’s no convincing you, is there?”

I rolled my eyes again. I wanted to put her in a box and ship her to Burkina Faso, which scored .60 on the United Nations Gender Inequality Index.

“Gee, Uncle Broccoli,” Ramesses said. “Maybe *this* is why you’re single. Maybe this is the reason you’re still single at thirty-two.”

“Yes, Ramesses, I think you might be on to something there.”

I rolled my eyes.

One day, I interrupted a fight between Ramesses and Nancy pants. Little Nancy had been reading *Winnie the Pooh* when her big sister, Ramesses, tyrant that she was, *snatched* the book out of Nancy’s tiny hands, saying, “*Milne is a*

racist, Nancy! He's a racist! On its face, *Winnie the Pooh* may be harmless, but if you look closely, you'll find the same unapologetic loyalty to imperialist values that you find in Milne's poetry. At one point in the book, it says Christopher Robin had spent the morning in his bedroom, going to Africa and back. I rest my case, Nancy. *Winnie the Pooh* is the work of Milne's colonial unconscious. It's the product of his colonial unconscious."

On another occasion, I played chess with Ramesses in the playroom – Nancy was entombed in her bedroom yet again, this time playing *Fallout 2*.

I'm embarrassed to admit this, but Ramesses often beat me at chess. I wasn't letting her win, either. I was better than she was at Scrabble, but she did often beat me at chess.

"My teacher banned the word *checkmate*," Ramesses told me, on the carpeted floor of the playroom.

"For God's sake, why?"

"She says it's too meanspirited," Ramesses told me. "Like, when you slam your piece down on the chessboard and say, 'Boom! Checkmate, bitch!' My teacher says that's too meanspirited. She says we're not allowed to do that anymore."

"Oh, for God's sake," I said. "It's everywhere I look now. It's everywhere I look."

"What is?" Ramesses asked me, looking up from the chessboard.

"Political correctness," I answered, shaking my head. "It's everywhere I look now. Runaway political correctness. Mission creep. Overcorrection."

"I dunno," Ramesses shrugged. "Banning the word *checkmate* makes sense to me."

"Not me," I said. "It's *good* to be competitive, Ram." I smiled, wickedly. "To eviscerate your enemies, ya know? To take no prisoners. To have no quarter. *Vae victis*. Come on, Ramesses! I mean, it makes your opponent work harder next time. It makes your interlocutor work *harder*. Nothing wrong with that. Life is not a fencing match – it isn't 'gloved fist and blunted foil,' Ramesses. Life is a fucking blood sport. You better get ready, Ramesses. Even you."

On yet another occasion, I took Ramesses and Nancy to the pool at the resident's club. Jonathan and Melissa were running a half-marathon through Elysium, and I'd once again been put in charge of the kids for the day.

We played Marco Polo for a bit. We had a contest to see who could hold their breath underwater the longest?

Later, Ramesses and I hung out in the pool while Nancy went up to the two-story waterslide. There were people everywhere, and I had to keep an eye on little Nancy pants because a few neighborhood bobbysockers had been kidnapped in recent years.

"My teacher says white supremacy is the water," Ramesses said.

"Oh, don't start," I groaned.

"White supremacy isn't the shark," Ramesses said. "White supremacy is the *water*."

I wanted to hold her stupid little head under the water until she drowned.

"Ramesses, are you being vexatious?"

"White supremacy is the water," my niece insisted.

"For God's sake," I said, keeping half an eye on the waterslide, wondering what had become of Nancy pants – she was taking a very long time.

"White supremacy is everywhere," Ramesses said, sort of bouncing up and down in the water, which came up to about her chest. "It's all around us, Brokester Brock. It's on every street corner."

"Behold, the new *Reefer Madness*," I said.

"But you can't see it," Ramesses said. "That's the thing, Brock. It's not something you can see with the naked eye. But white supremacy *is* everywhere, I assure you. It's everywhere."

"*Uncle Brock*, Ramesses."

"Huh?"

“Call me *Uncle Brock*. Please.”

“You know, my teacher says a group of freed slaves started a back-to-Africa movement,” Ramesses said. “She says they fled the United States, sailed across the Atlantic, and founded Liberia – only to disenfranchise the natives there.”

“*Ha!*” I said. “Well, what does that tell ya, Ramesses? What does that tell ya? The white man isn’t the only one who’s ever committed atrocities, Ramesses. *Boom! Checkmate, bitch!* That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. We’re all equal in our inferiority, if you will.”

“Yeah, but my teacher says the Liberians learned their brutality from the white man,” Ramesses said. “As former slaves, they’d been...like...*infected*. By white people.”

“Where is your sister?” I said, looking at the two-story waterslide. “I’m starting to get worried.”

“Like, they inherited their masters’ brutality, their masters’ sickness. Whiteness is the problem, Brock. Whiteness is *definitely* the problem.”

It was then that I saw Nancy pants. Sweet little Nancy pants, standing there, at the top of the waterslide, looking down at us, waving, smiling in the bright bright Elysium sunlight.

END: Installment 1

About the writer:

MICK MCGRATH has an MFA from the University of Tennessee. His writing has appeared in *Terror House Magazine*, *The Thieving Magpie*, and elsewhere. McGrath is the cofounder of [HEYOKA](#), debuting in 2023 as one of the few online journals that welcomes anti-woke content.

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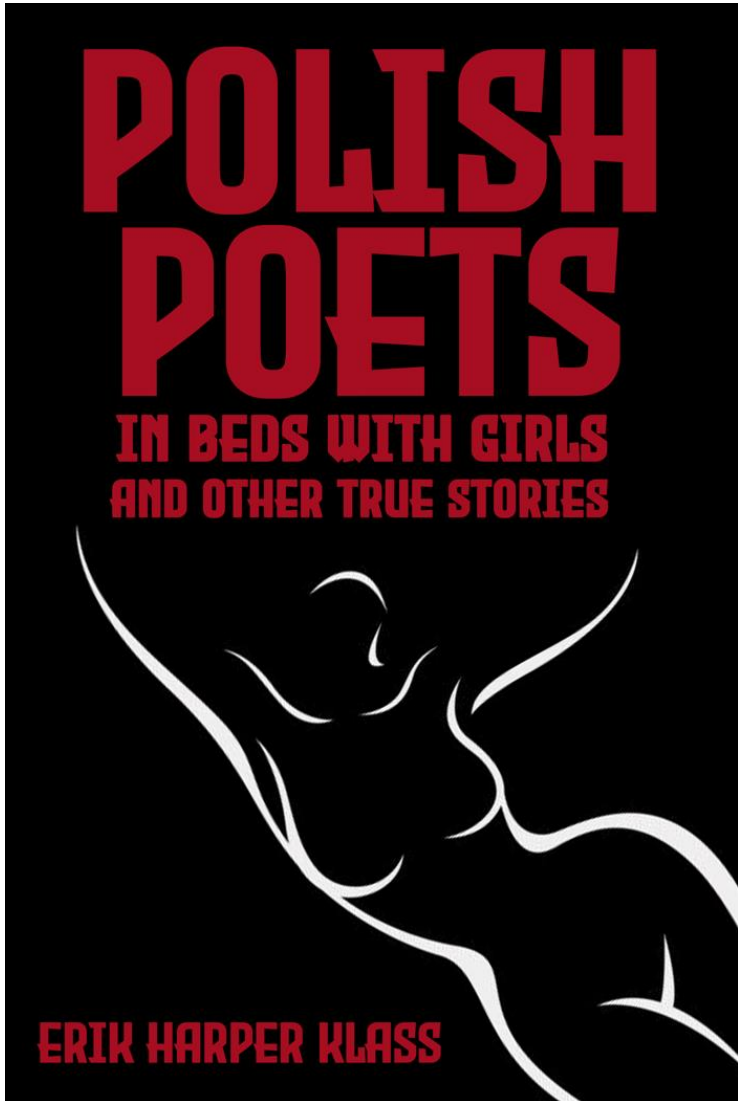
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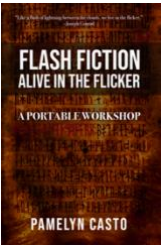
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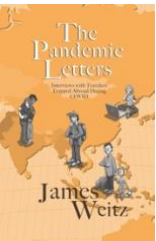


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